

Irish Churches and Mosque – Towards A Model of Media Relations

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Masters in Communication Studies, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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ABSTRACT

Irish Churches and Mosque – Towards A Model of Media Relations

This thesis looks at current media relations practice as conducted on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church and members of the Islamic community in Ireland. It also asks what model of media relations is most appropriate for religious organisations. In the academic world, there has been growing interest in analysis of the intersecting fields of media, culture and religion, yet the practice of media relations conducted on behalf of religious organisations has not been closely examined. There is a great deal of literature in the broad area of religion and media, but far less about religious media relations, and less again about the situation in Ireland.

The thesis begins with a review of what has been written about the topic and related areas. It then addresses three questions. Firstly, what do religious representatives hope to achieve through a presence in the media? In other words, what do they see as the objectives of media relations? Secondly, what do media practitioners think about the avowed objectives of religious representatives, and what do they believe are the flaws in the way in which religious communities deal with the media? Thirdly, what aspects of interaction with the media do religious representatives perceive as adding to the difficulty of their task? Finally, the interviewees were asked to suggest ways in which the current, often unsatisfactory state of affairs could be improved. These latter suggestions form the basis for a model of media relations which is appropriate for, and takes into account the ethical demands of religious organisations. Fifteen interviews were conducted with representatives of the four main Christian churches and the Islamic community. In the main, these interviews were with press and communications officers, or with those who had significant responsibility for dealing with the media. In addition, six journalists who specialise in religion were interviewed, and one public relations consultant who has had significant input in this field.

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LIST OF THOSE WHO WERE INTERVIEWED FOR THESIS

Note: Some of those who are interviewed no longer hold the same position. In such cases, I have given the position of the person at the time of interview, and the dates when they held that position.

Imam Yahya M. Al-Hussein. Imam of the Dublin Mosque and Islamic Centre, and president, Islamic Foundation of Ireland, Dublin. Interviewed Mar 27th, 2002.

Ms. Rachel Andrews. Journalist with the *Sunday Tribune*, with a particular interest in social and religious affairs. Interviewed Jan 21st, 2002.

Fr. Bruce Bradley. S.J. Director of Communications, Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, 2001-2002. Interviewed Dec. 18th, 2001.

Dr. Jim Cantwell. Director, Catholic Press and Information Office, 1975-2000. Interviewed Mar. 26th, 2002.

Fr. Martin Clarke. Director of Communications for the Catholic Bishops' Conference and spokesperson for the Bishops, 1997-2003. Director Of Communications, Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, August 2003- Interviewed Dec. 18th, 2000.

Mr. John Cooney. Journalist. Former religious affairs correspondent for the *Irish Times*, and political journalist with among others, the *Irish Times*, *I.N.N.* and *Ireland on Sunday*. Also a historian and author of a biography of John Charles McQuaid. Interviewed Jan 25th, and Feb. 1st, 2002.

Rev. Roy Cooper. A parish minister and communications and press officer for the Methodist Church in Ireland. Interviewed Jan 8th, 2002.

Ms. Mary Curtin. Radio producer, RTE, who has worked extensively on religious programmes, in particular, the magazine programme, *Cross Currents*. On leave from RTE to work as Senior Communications Officer, Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, October 2002 - September 2003. Returned to RTE as producer, September 2003. Interviewed Jan 15th, 2002.

Fr. John Dardis. S.J. Director of Communications, Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, 1995-2000. Interviewed Oct 31st, 2000 and Dec. 7th, 2000.

Ms. Rabia'a Golden, formerly Rabia'a Murt Najjair. Women's Co-ordinator of the Islamic Foundation of Ireland. 2000 - 2002. Interviewed Nov. 21st, 2000.

Fr. Tom Hayes. Director of Communications for the Catholic diocese of Cork and Ross. Interviewed Oct. 18th, 2000.

Mr Pat Heneghan Executive Chairman, Heneghan Public Relations Interviewed Jan 17th, 2002

Fr Brendan Hoban A parish priest and also Communications Officer for the Catholic diocese of Killala He has a long-standing involvement in local radio as a presenter and in a local newspaper as a columnist Interviewed Dec 12th, 2000

Ms Valerie Jones Diocesan communications officer for the United Dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough in the Church of Ireland Interviewed Feb 23rd, 2001

Mr Joe Little Religious and Social Affairs correspondent with RTE news Interviewed Dec 12th, 2001 and answered follow-up questions by email on Jan 18th 2002

Mr Stephen Lynas Information Officer with the Presbyterian Church, based in Church House, Belfast Interviewed Jan 8th, 2002

Sr Elizabeth Maxwell Secretary General of the Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI) 1998-2003 Interviewed Nov 29th, 2000

Ms Janet Maxwell Director of Communications for the Church of Ireland, based in Church House, Dublin Interviewed Jan 29th, 2002

Dr Jim McDonnell Director of the Catholic Communications Centre for the Catholic Church in England and Wales, London Interviewed by email, Apr 9th, 2001

Mr Patsy McGarry Religious Affairs Correspondent, the *Irish Times* Interviewed November 27th, 2001 and answered follow-up questions by email, Jan 15th, 2002

Mr Fazel Ryklief Administrator, the Islamic Foundation of Ireland 1984-2002 Interviewed on Mar 8th, 2002

Mr David Quinn Columnist, the *Sunday Times*, 1997-2003 and editor of the *Irish Catholic*, 1996-2003 Religion and Social Affairs correspondent, *Irish Independent*, 2003- Interviewed Nov 28th, 2001

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

According to Clark and Hoover, 'Practising journalists and religious adherents gaze at each other across a wide cultural gap of misunderstanding.'¹ This thesis explores one of the areas where attempts are made to bridge the 'wide cultural gap', that is, media relations conducted on behalf of a church or a mosque. The research examines what the current state of religious media relations is in Ireland. It asks whether religious media relations needs improvement, and if it does, how might positive change be brought about? It looks at the aims and objectives of religious representatives who act as a link with the media for a religious institution as they attempt to communicate various messages and an underlying worldview on behalf of their organisations. It explores how journalists who report on religion on a regular basis perceive these attempts to communicate. It examines what the journalists perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of the churches and mosque concerned in terms of their expertise in and commitment to media relations. The relationship between journalists who cover religion regularly and religious representatives has frustrating aspects for both parties, which sometimes stem from the fact that these two areas of expertise have different priorities and constraints. Finally, suggestions made by the media relations personnel and the journalists as to how the current situation could be improved are drawn together to form the basis for a model of religious media relations. This model identifies in a systematic way both changes in attitude, and practical suggestions which could improve the professional relationship between journalists and religious media relations personnel.

What is the nature of this 'wide cultural gap between practising journalists and religious adherents'? It can begin with mistrust. Fr. Dermot McCarthy, Head of Religious Programmes in RTE television, describes the suspicion with which some Roman

¹ Clark and Hoover, 'At the intersection of media, culture and religion', p.15.

Catholics² view the media, who consider it to be like a 'pool of piranhas'.³ Veteran journalist Michael O'Toole says that '...a substantial number of clerics and religious who are approached by journalists are not only deeply suspicious and resentful of the media but alarmingly unskilled in the basics of media relations.'⁴ On the other hand, some members of churches, particularly in the Catholic Church, believe that there is a degree of bias in the treatment meted out to them. Church people may not be mistaken in their subjective assessment that there is some animosity towards them among the media. In the words of Professor Joe Lee, 'there is a streak of anti-religion in the media which just happens to manifest itself as anti-Catholicism, because Catholicism is the overwhelmingly dominant religion in this part of Ireland.'⁵ While acknowledging that hostility among some of the media arises 'partly from their experience of the sins and hypocrisy of individual clergy and partly from the perception of the way in which power has been wielded within and by the authorities of the institutional church,'⁶ Kenny writes that people in the Catholic Church sometimes underestimate the current popular level of antipathy which exists towards their church. This antipathy is often compounded by a lack of knowledge about the way in which the Catholic Church functions.

The 'gulf of misunderstanding' may be deepened because some members of churches and mosques exhibit a lack of understanding of the pressures and difficulties associated with working in the media. As will be seen later, some of the religious representatives, including Stephen Lynas of the Presbyterian Church and Fr. John Dardis of the Catholic Church, found that negative attitudes towards the media were quite common in their churches.⁷ There may be a perception of the world of the media as being a place with alien values. Even in an article which is generally positive about participation in the media, Fr. Paul Clayton-Lea borrows an old jibe and compares a person with a 'ministry' involving work with the media to a piano-player in a brothel, who sticks with the job

² Hereafter referred to as Catholics, the name by which they are most commonly known. The Roman Catholic Church will be referred to as the Catholic Church.

³ McCarthy, 'The church and the media', p. 23.

⁴ O'Toole, 'Church-media relations - a view from the doghouse', p.70.

⁵ Lee, 'Historian calls for accountability', p.1.

⁶ Kenny, 'Is the Irish media anti-Catholic?'

⁷ See Dardis. Oct 31st, 2000 and Lynas. Jan 8th, 2002.

because he or she occasionally gets to play 'Abide With Me.'⁸ The inference that work in the media is somehow akin to work in a brothel indicates the nature of the gulf which some members of churches and mosques see between religion and media.

During the time of research for and writing of this thesis, there were regular reminders that religion in Ireland provides a lively source of stories for the media. For example, in the wake of terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001, the position of the Islamic community in Ireland came into focus. It was a reminder that the religious landscape in Ireland is changing. While still small, the Islamic community is fast-growing. Later that year, Rev. Andrew Furlong of the Church of Ireland generated controversy by his assertion that Jesus should be consigned to the pages of history and that claims of the divinity of Christ were no longer relevant.⁹ His assertion was debated on the *Late, Late Show*¹⁰ and was the subject of long-running correspondence in the *Irish Times*.¹¹

Towards the end of the period of research, the Catholic Church in Ireland was faced with a major challenge to its credibility. A BBC2 documentary on the crimes of Fr. Sean Fortune in the Ferns diocese and elsewhere, *Suing the Pope*, was aired on April 2nd, 2002. Although it contained little which had not been revealed before with regard to Fr. Fortune's paedophilia and moneymaking schemes,¹² the public outcry that followed led to the resignation of Bishop Brendan Comiskey. A demand grew for openness and accountability concerning how cases of sexual abuse had been handled by the Catholic Church, and for assurance that children and adolescents should never be endangered in this way again. An emergency meeting of the Catholic bishops was called in Maynooth on April 8th, 2002. That emergency meeting was followed by a press conference, which was highly disorganised. It started late; it was almost aborted before it started when media personnel demanded that Mr. Gerard Kelly, a victim of abuse, should be allowed

⁸ Clayton-Lea, 'The piano-player in the brothel- a reflection on media ministry'.

⁹ See McGarry, 'Dean's episcopal authority removed'

¹⁰ *The Late, Late Show*, RTEOne, Jan 25th 2002.

¹¹ In January 2001, letters appeared on the Letters to the Editor page of the *Irish Times* almost every day, under the heading 'Dean and the Incarnation'.

¹² See O'Connor, *The Life and crimes of Fr. Sean Fortune*.

to attend and ask questions (Mr Kelly met instead privately with Archbishop Sean Brady and Cardinal Connell after the press conference and declared himself happy with the meeting ¹³) The bishops found themselves unable to give unqualified assurances that they would open all the necessary files in a proposed 'audit' of how the Catholic Church had dealt with abuse. This made them look as if they were still equivocating. Having been present at one of the bishops' debates as an invited guest, it was clear to me that there was a very real and anguished desire to 'do the right thing'. Equally, there were concerns about the right to due process for anyone who is accused, and a desire to protect the confidentiality of complainants who had no desire for publicity. Very few of these justifiable concerns were conveyed at the press conference, and the bishops were left looking evasive ¹⁴. Nor was there much respect shown for the legitimate needs of journalists who, after all, had been instrumental in causing the Catholic Church to begin to deal with issues it had been unwilling or unable to deal with itself, a fact acknowledged by some Catholic clerics ¹⁵. The media were left hanging around all day and no attention was paid to the fact that deadlines would be missed and that this would not help matters as journalists became increasingly tense. From another point of view, the hierarchy did themselves no favours by holding a press conference when they had not fully thought through the plan of action which they were proposing to embark on, that is, to appoint an independent person of high calibre to conduct an internal investigation as to how accusations of child abuse had been dealt with.

The announcement of an independent audit of the Catholic Church's response to child abuse headed by Justice Gillian Hussey in June 2002 may have appeared to assuage public concern. Yet in October, the broadcast of RTE's *Prime Time* programme, *Cardinal Secrets*, ¹⁶ led to a demand for a state inquiry. Once the state decided to introduce legislation for a new model of inquiry, which could potentially be used to investigate events in the Diocese of Ferns, Justice Hussey decided that her own inquiry

¹³ Report by J. Little on RTE One Nine O'Clock news Apr. 8th 2002

¹⁴ See Lord, 'Arm-wrestling, tears and evasion'.

¹⁵ See Pollak, 'Cardinal welcomes reporting of scandals'.

¹⁶ *Cardinal Secrets*, an RTE current affairs production by members of the *Prime Time* Team, aired October 18th 2002 on RTE One.

was no longer appropriate. Once again, the Catholic Church response appeared ill-thought out. Although these events within the Catholic Church occurred after the time in which research interviews for this thesis were conducted, they echoed and reinforced many of the themes that had emerged from those interviews. One of these themes is the need for the Catholic Church, in particular, to uphold the highest standards of truth and transparency in its communication.

Rationale behind choice of churches and mosque

The four main Christian churches, that is, the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church seemed an obvious place to begin a study of religious media relations as Ireland is a predominantly Christian country. When it came to other major world faiths, choices had to be made. Despite divisions, the Christian churches have a core of common beliefs and practices which makes discussion of their aims and objectives easier. Although the great world faiths share much in common, they also differ in many ways. To give just one example, 'social justice' can have quite a different connotation in Islam to what it has in Christianity. In Islam, social justice may centre around the question of usury, whereas in Christianity it can mean working to achieve justice, particularly for the poor and marginalised. Such difficulties of terminology would have multiplied with the inclusion of other world faiths in the research. The Jewish community with its long history in Ireland merited study, as did the growing Buddhist community. Eventually they were excluded because the inclusion of too many different faiths would have rendered this research project unwieldy and lacking in focus. The Islamic community is included not only because it is an active and growing community, but more importantly, it tends to be a focus of news more than other non-Christian faiths. This is in part due to ongoing interest in asylum-seeking and refugee issues, although only a minority of Muslims in Ireland fall into that category. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 in the United States, and the response to them, including the wars which have been waged, there has been an upsurge around the world in interest in what Islam stands for, which is reflected in media coverage of this faith. The Dublin Mosque and Islamic Centre at 163, South Circular Road, Dublin,

which is run by the Islamic Foundation, was chosen because it is a well established place of worship for the Shi'ia Muslim community in Ireland

Methodology

Research for this thesis was conducted using qualitative methods, principally face-to-face interviews ranging in length between an hour and two hours which were recorded and transcribed. There were three basic sets of questions, one for religious representatives, one for journalists and producers, and one for a public relations consultant. The questions in full as presented to the interviewees to be found in Appendix A. In summary, the areas covered in the religious representative interviews include the nature of their day-to-day work, the central values which they are trying to express, where communicating a sense of the sacred or transcendent fits in to that, how well or otherwise the media cover religion, whether it is appropriate to use techniques of public relations originally designed for use in the business world in religious media relations, how the scandals in the Catholic Church have affected the work of religious representatives, how high a level of expertise in media relations the spokespersons feel their own church or mosque has, and what they would like to see their church or mosque do differently. There was also a question covering whether the church or mosque concerned should have a role in media education, designed to foster critical consumption of media. However, the material which emerged from this was not included in the thesis as it proved to be tangential to the main thrust of the research, and merited perhaps a thesis in its own right.

The journalists and producers were asked questions such as what their work entails, whether religion should be treated in the same way or differently to any other news story, whether it is possible to cover any sense of the sacred or transcendent, how well or otherwise the various churches and mosque relate to the media, whether business-style public relations techniques are appropriate for use in religious media relations, what differences in values, if any, that there are between journalists and religious people, whether the accusation frequently levelled at journalists, that they are not sufficiently

informed about faith and religion, has any validity; and how well or badly they consider the scandals in the Catholic Church to have been dealt with.

Mr. Pat Heneghan, as a public relations specialist who has had extensive contact with the Catholic Church, was asked, about his own involvement in religious media relations; what he considers the central skill of public relations to be; whether the association of public relations with 'spin' in the public mind could damage the churches and mosque; how effective a mechanism the Catholic Conference of Bishops is when it comes to dealing with crises which of their nature demand rapid response; and whether there are fundamental differences of values between religious people and media. The interviews were structured insofar as each person was given a list of questions beforehand which were answered during the interview, but there was also time given to relevant areas which the interviewees raised themselves. For example, one of the first people to be interviewed, Fr. Tom Hayes, Director of Communications for the Catholic diocese of Cork and Ross, spoke at some length about the relationship between the theory found in Catholic Church documents on the media and the reality of working in the area as a Catholic priest with responsibility for media relations. Even though this was of value to the thesis, other religious representatives would not necessarily have had the same familiarity with Catholic Church documents, so it was not added to the list of questions for subsequent interviews.

Aside from taped interviews, some work was done by email. Dr. Jim McDonnell, who as director of the Catholic Communications Centre in Britain is based in London, agreed to answer questions by email. Mr. Patsy McGarry and Mr. Joe Little, religious affairs correspondents with the *Irish Times* and RTE respectively, were contacted by email, after their face-to-face interviews, with a request to answer specific questions on scandals in the Catholic Church. This resulted in substantial responses from both of them, which were very useful. A notable feature of this research is that everyone who was approached agreed to be interviewed, and everyone was very generous with his or her time. Some thirty hours of interviews were recorded, and the transcripts run to hundreds of pages.

Criteria for Selection of Interviewees

There is a full list of interviewees immediately before the table of contents. It was felt important that the individuals selected for interview to represent the churches and mosque should hold responsibility for communication with the media in a formal capacity for the various religious institutions. As a result, in the case of the Christian churches, the people interviewed are in the main either full-time communications and press officers, or part-time press officers. To give some examples, the Rev. Roy Cooper of the Methodist Church holds responsibility for media relations for his church but he is also a parish minister. Fr. Brendan Hoban is a parish priest who is in charge of media relations for the Catholic diocese of Killala. In contrast, Mr. Stephen Lynas of the Presbyterian Church is a full-time information officer working in an office in which five people are employed in the area of communication. Ms. Janet Maxwell is interviewed in her capacity as the Director of Communications for the Church of Ireland, a post that involves responsibility for not just media relations, but publishing, research and implementation of policy in the area of communications. Nine people are interviewed from the Catholic Church, which may seem disproportionate, but reflects the numerical strength of Catholics in Ireland. Again, some are full-time communications officers for a diocese or hold significant responsibility for church media relations. In the case of Fr. Martin Clarke, at the time of interview he was spokesperson for the Catholic Bishops' Conference, and therefore held a national brief. As Dr. Jim Cantwell had spent twenty-five years as Director of the Catholic Press and Information Office, it seemed important to interview him even though he is now retired. The three interviewees from the Islamic community are drawn from the Dublin Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre. The mosque does not have a full-time press officer, but two of the interviewees, Ms. Rabi'ia Golden and Mr. Fazel Ryklief, had at the time responsibility for this area as part of their work. The spiritual leader of this Islamic Community, Imam Yahya M. Al-Hussein, was also interviewed.

Journalists and producers who are, or have been in the past, religious affairs correspondents, or who have substantial responsibility for coverage of religion, were selected for interview, a total of six people. The small number reflects the fact that there are relatively few people who work regularly in this area in a full-time capacity.

Terminology

There are a number of terms which are used in the course of this thesis, including religious representatives, religious people, religious institutions, religious communications, religion journalism, religious media relations, and churches and mosque. These are familiar terms, but it is necessary to consider what precisely is meant by them in order to avoid ambiguity. Such terms are difficult to define, and a number of authors, as will be seen below, simply decline to do so. Some of the definitions chosen for the purposes of this thesis may seem somewhat arbitrary, as the terms could also be defined in other ways, but it is necessary to exclude some possible definitions in order to achieve clarity.

Religion

Before attempting to define *religious representatives* and *religious people*, it is first necessary to define religion. However, this is a concept which defies neat categories. Arthur acknowledges this, referring to the attempt to define religion as 'notoriously difficult' and therefore he declines to attempt a definition.¹⁷ Hoover suggests that defining religion is not useful, for two reasons. The first is that 'it is not clear that to do so would help to clarify or solve any of the dilemmas that underlie the basic challenge of covering religion'. The second is that the range of things which must now be considered as 'religious' is 'wide indeed and would defy any attempts at summation'.¹⁸ In a lecture which sets out the rationale behind the International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture¹⁹, Hoover accepts a very broad definition by Clifford Geertz. As an anthropologist, Geertz claims that 'something is religious if its adherents think it is.' Hoover presents this as an alternative to 'essentialist' definitions of religion, that is the idea that there is a fixed essence to religious activity and activities that must be present if something is to be defined as religious. He proposes that Geertz's definition is useful as

¹⁷ Arthur, 'Learning from failure - towards a rationale for religious communication', p.184.

¹⁸ Hoover, 'Introduction', p.15.

¹⁹ The International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture attempts to examine new and fruitful areas of overlap between the discrete disciplines of media, religion and culture, and to study the questions raised by this new area of scholarship.

a description of post-modern religion 'where the autonomous actions of individuals to select and appropriate symbols and practices into a new pastiche is constructive, meaningful and legitimate.'²⁰ He suggests that accepting this post-modern definition of religion transcends the need to define religion in narrow terms.

In contrast, in a way which Hoover might describe as essentialist, Emmanuel's favoured definition of religion includes the assertion that certain things are fundamental to many religions, such as sacred scriptures; mystical and religious experiences expressed through poems, hymns and writings; and a set of symbols and art forms.²¹ Warren examines another aspect of religion, which, drawing on Raymond Williams, looks on religion as a cultural system. He states:

As a culture with a specific vision of the world, the church, synagogue or mosque still exists within the wider culture and takes many of human values from the wider culture....A particular religious group then, while affirming its own specific vision of reality, must also affirm all the authentically good values to be found in the wider culture and be in active dialogue with those values.²²

Warren supports the idea of dialogue with the wider society, but also cultural resistance to norms in society where they conflict with the moral and spiritual code of the founder of the religious community. He believes that there are in effect two cultures in dialogue with each other, with the religious culture at its best providing a powerful critique of the oppressive practices of the wider culture.

While acknowledging the difficulties of definition, the term religion as used in this thesis is closer to the definitions favoured by Emmanuel and Warren. As used here, religion implies a culture within a culture, where the experience of the sacred is codified in sacred writings, rituals, moral standards and elements of communal experience. The religious

²⁰ Hoover, 'Media scholarship and the question of religion – evolving theory and scholarship'.

²¹ Emmanuel, *Challenges of Christian communication and broadcasting – monologue or dialogue?*, p. 56.

²² Warren, *Seeing through the media*, p.21.

culture is both in dialogue with the positive values of the world which it inhabits, and critical of the aspects of the wider culture which conflict with religious values. There are problems with this definition of religious culture, particularly because there seems to be an implicit assumption that media and religion occupy totally separate cultural spaces, the values of which are in conflict with each other. Given that there are religious people who work as journalists, this is a somewhat false division. Nevertheless, it describes something which many of those interviewed for the thesis refer to – that there are two worlds, one of religion and the other of media, which have at times different priorities and values.

Religious representatives and religious people

Emmanuel's insistence that there are distinctive elements to religion, and Warren's idea of a culture within a culture, serve to inform the definition of both 'religious representatives' and 'religious people'. 'Religious representatives' as used in this thesis has the connotation of 'religious professionals' – to give some examples, people who as clergy, members of religious orders, media relations professionals, representatives of the Islamic community and imams, earn their living from institutional religion or by representing the viewpoint of a religion. When referring to the Christian tradition, this does not exclude lay people who are actively involved in their church. (Islam does not categorise people as 'lay' in the same way.) The primary way in which religious representatives is used in this thesis is to refer to those who are interviewed, who tend to be either full-time or part time media relations officers, or to have responsibility for media relations as part of their job description.

'Religious people' as used in this thesis refers primarily to those whose identity is deeply bound up with membership of a church or mosque, to the extent that their relationship to the world is filtered through the codes and rituals of a specific institutional religion. There are other valid, and broader definitions of 'religious people', but it is used in this narrower sense here.

Religious organisation

'Religious organisation' as used in this thesis refers in the main to a specific Christian church tradition such as Catholic, Anglican, Methodist or Presbyterian, or to the Shi'ia mosque. In a secondary sense, it can refer to an organisation which is identifiably part of one of the traditions, for example, in the case of the Catholic Church, the Conference of Religious in Ireland, (CORI), which is the representative body of religious orders in Ireland, or the Conference of Bishops, which is the forum where the Catholic Bishops come together to create policy at a national level.

Churches and mosque

The word 'churches' usually refers to mainstream Christian churches, and in particular in the material drawn from research interviews conducted for this thesis, to the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church. The word 'mosque', depending on context, denotes either the mosque from which all the interviewees come, that is the Dublin Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre at 163, South Circular Road, Dublin or the broader tradition of Islam. In Islam, every mosque is autonomous, but there is an accepted orthodoxy which comes not from a hierarchical structure such as in the Catholic Church, but from adherence to well-defined interpretations of the Qu'ran and tradition. As such, it is possible to speak of Islam in a collective way, despite the fact that each mosque is autonomous and there are no hierarchical structures which connect them. When the term 'churches and mosque' is used, it refers to the four churches mentioned above and the Shi'ia mosque which are the subject of research in this thesis.

Church communications

This term is used to denote a broader range of communication than religious media relations. It may include parish newsletters or diocesan newspapers, religious programming such as slots on radio or television where the church has control over content, and publications, videos or audio-tapes produced by a parish, diocese or national church.

Religion journalism

‘Religion journalism’ is used in the sense defined by Buddenbaum, that is, to describe the work of those who report on religion for press, radio and television.²³ In this thesis, Buddenbaum’s distinction between ‘religious journalism’, that is, journalism designed to uphold the viewpoint of a particular tradition or denomination, and ‘religion journalism’, in which news about religion must conform to the same values as any news item, is accepted. It is seen in this way by the journalists who are interviewed.

Religious media relations

It is first necessary to explain why the term ‘media relations’ was chosen in preference to ‘public relations’. This is not just because the term ‘public relations’ has negative connotations for some religious people, as typified by Malcolm Muggeridge’s disparaging comment that public relations consisted of ‘organised lying.’²⁴ Public relations is a vast area, and ‘media relations’ deals with just part of that wide spectrum of activity. According to F.X. Carty:

Public Relations is just that, relations with the public, but in professional public relations the public is divided into many smaller publics or audiences. These include employees, the community, customers, consumers, suppliers, distributors, politicians, public servants, financial institutions, stockbrokers, shareholders, financial analysts, journalists and opinion leaders.²⁵

While many of these publics are more relevant to commercial public relations than church or mosque public relations, they serve to illustrate how very broad an area this term encompasses. Media relations is also a very wide term, which according to Carty covers relations with national and local media, press, radio and television, specialist trade press, as well as the production of newsletters, periodicals, or presence on the Internet.²⁶

²³ Buddenbaum, *Reporting news about religion*, p.91.

²⁴ Muggeridge, quoted in Carty, *Farewell to Hype*, p. V.

²⁵ Carty, *Farewell to Hype*, p. 1.

²⁶ *ibid*, p.29.

Arthur suggests that 'the media' generally refers to television, radio and the press.²⁷ This narrower focus is followed in this thesis and references to media can be taken to mean principally news coverage in the national press, television or radio.

Thorn gives a useful definition of press relations:

The planned effort to influence public opinion through good character and responsible performance, based on mutually satisfactory two-way performance.²⁸

The definition of press relations by Thorn concentrates on ethical principles and the development of two-way communication. This implies building relationships with those who work in the media. Also, by its emphasis on 'good character and responsible performance' it excludes any possibility of 'spin' or less than ethical methods. While Thorn refers only to press relations, what he says is equally applicable to news coverage on other media such as radio and television. In this thesis, Thorn's definition of the principles involved in press relations is adopted as a definition of media relations, by widening it to include radio and television. Therefore, 'religious media relations' refers to planned and systematic efforts to represent the viewpoints of churches and mosque in the media, in ways which are ethical and responsible.

Model

The word 'model' in the title of this thesis is used to denote both a set of principles which should underlie religious media relations, and practical measures through which these might be worked out. The model of religious media relations which emerges from this thesis is based on positive suggestions made by those who were interviewed. Given that almost all those who were interviewed are or were practitioners in either religion journalism or religious media relations, the suggestions which they make as to how the professional relationship between religious people and journalists could be improved

²⁷ Arthur, 'Introduction', p.1.

²⁸ Thorn, 'Religious organizations and public relations', p.131.

have a bias towards the practical. However, these are integrated with the insights which emerge from the literature, which are more theoretical in nature.

Structure

Chapter Two presents an overview of relevant literature and research. From being a 'blindspot' of media studies as Hoover called it in 1995, the study of religion, media and culture has burgeoned in recent years. However, the specific area of religion and media relations remains somewhat neglected. The number of publications devoted to this area has been small, and those written from an Irish perspective, fewer still. However, there are statements by the Christian churches, and to a lesser extent by mosques, on the general area of religion and communication. Some of the most important documents in this area reiterate the idea of dialogue as central to authentic communication. There has also been some good work done on the relationship between religion and news. This has been examined in a number of fora, notably one organised in 1995 by *Commonweal*, the American Catholic periodical. One of the major themes which emerges is the idea of 'clashing worldviews,' summarised by Siegenthaler when he describes 'two alien cultures, the media and religion – one rooted in a search for facts and the other grounded in a discovery of faith beyond fact.'²⁹ This motif of the clash in worldviews occurs again and again in discussions of religion and journalism, although some writers, notably Murdock, point out that the chasm may not be as wide as each side imagines. Culturally, religion and media may occupy the same space, and fulfil some of the same functions.³⁰

Twin Pulpits, which is a report of the proceedings of a conference in 1997 on religion and the media, is of particular interest in the Irish context.³¹ John Cooney's *No News is Bad News* from 1974 remains highly relevant, almost thirty years later.³² He wrote this book at a time of great expansion in interest in communication in the Catholic Church in the period during and immediately after the Second Vatican Council. Some of the

²⁹ Siegenthaler in *Bridging the gap- Update 2000* p 1

³⁰ Murdock 'The re-enchantment of the world', p 91

³¹ Conway and Kilcoyne (eds.) *Twin Pulpits – church and media in modern Ireland*

³² Cooney *No news is bad news*

warnings which he issues then, of the ‘lust for secrecy’ and the inability to be really open with the media, remain very relevant today.

Some of the findings of the research interviews with religious representatives are examined in Chapter Three. This part of the thesis concentrates on how religious representatives view their work, and what they hope to achieve by it. A central finding in this section is that religious representatives feel that a spirit of dialogue should guide their work in media relations, and that three factors are seen as essential to the creation of dialogue. The first factor is a commitment to media relations and the necessity for religious institutions to maintain an active presence in the media. While the religious representatives are convinced of the need for such a presence, some of the members of their respective institutions may not display the same level of commitment, or may be hostile towards the media, which is sometimes reflected in a failure to provide adequate resources. The second factor necessary for dialogue to take place is having good relationships with journalists and producers. This may be hindered by the structures of a particular institution - for example, when it is difficult to establish who has the authority to release information, or when major decisions regarding media relations are taken by a body which meets rarely. The need to be credible is the third factor, and there is frank acknowledgement that the Catholic Church in particular has problems in this area.

Within this framework of dialogue, what religious representatives hope to achieve can be grouped into four aims. One is the need to make the presence and viewpoint of the religious institution visible in public discourse. Some churches, such as the smaller Irish Christian churches, are conscious that many journalists may never even have met a member of their congregations. The mosque is anxious to counteract what it perceives as negative stereotyping of Islam. A second aim shared by many, but which is a particular focus of the Catholic Church, is the desire to be a voice for social justice, to represent those who do not have ready access to the media and who are marginalised and victims of injustice. Pre-evangelisation³³ or preparation for *da'wa* [Islamic term for witness to or

³³ Evangelisation is a Christian term, deriving from ‘evangel’, an archaic term for gospel. Evangelisation refers to attempts to preach or promulgate the Christian Gospels.

.. propagation of faith] is the third aim. Almost all the religious representatives interviewed felt that news media were not the place to promote an explicit sense of the transcendent or sacred, although there are exceptions to this. In general, though, it is seen as better to concentrate on 'preparing the ground', by creating a climate where religion and religious people were seen as reasonable. This might spark off further exploration by individuals who might then approach religious communities or be confirmed in a faith which was wavering. This is termed pre-evangelisation by Christians and the equivalent term for Muslims is preparation for *da'wa*. The need to uphold civic values is a fourth aim shared by all. These are values which are shared by people of all faiths or none, but which are in harmony with central religious values. They include a desire to resist the atomisation of society, and to build a sense of community where individuals can achieve their potential. Some stumbling blocks which exist within their own religious institutions and which make the achievement of these four stated aims more difficult are also outlined in this chapter.

Chapter Four examines the perceptions of journalists regarding the churches and mosque and how they relate to the media. The Catholic Church comes in for heavy criticism. There is great scepticism about the avowed aim of dialogue, and a claim that there is far more deliberate 'fudging' and evasion than genuine dialogue. There is also an acknowledgment that the damaging coverage given to sectarianism has made media relations more problematic and that this is more a problem for the Protestant Churches than the Catholic Church. The mosque is seen as a very new phenomenon in Ireland which is only beginning to find its feet.

The difficulties which religious representatives have with journalists are outlined in Chapter Five. While the religious representatives acknowledge the valuable and essential role which the media play, they have serious problems with the way in which certain stories are framed. They perceive that religion is frequently covered in terms of dissent and conflict, while other issues which are less contentious, but none the less newsworthy and of concern to religious people are, they believe, somewhat neglected. The difference between education coverage and religion coverage is noted in that the primary focus of

an education correspondent will not be just to uncover scandal, but to devote time to the serious education issues of the day. There is great unhappiness with the level of knowledge of religious affairs among journalists, particularly generalist journalists who may have little knowledge of religion. The most common analogy given is that of sending out someone who knows nothing about sport to cover a major sporting event. There are complaints about ideology about a secularist mentality which does not acknowledge the place or role of religion. It is also felt that insufficient resources are dedicated by media organisations to the coverage of religion. It should be noted that only some of the religious representatives make assertions regarding bias and lack of balance, but those that do are very exercised about it. However, many more religious representatives believe that there is insufficient knowledge of religion among journalists.

Chapter Six draws together suggestions from religious representatives and journalists regarding ways in which the conduct of religious media relations could be improved. These suggestions centre around four main areas. Firstly, there is a call for a change in attitudes towards the media by religious organisations. Secondly, more priority being given to religious media relations should result in more willingness to commit resources to it. Thirdly, practical suggestions are made regarding how communications offices should operate and how journalists should be trained. Fourthly, there is a call for collaboration, where possible, on issues of importance to both journalists and religious representatives, particularly in the area of public service broadcasting and the maintenance of standards in journalism.

The most important findings and suggestions for some future areas of research are set out in Chapter Seven. One of these findings is that there is a gap between what is set out in theory about the importance of communication in documents produced by the Christian churches, notably the Catholic Church, and the reality as shown by the paucity of resources invested in media relations. There is another gap between the ideals of informed journalism, and the lack of knowledge displayed by many general reporters sent out to cover religion stories. There is a conflict between the priorities of the churches and mosque, which are to maintain morale among their memberships, and to promote their

distinctive way of life, and the innate scepticism and deadline-driven nature of media, which also has to compete in a commercial environment. While there will never be complete overlap between the aims of the media and of religious organisations, and this is probably healthy, however, there are a number of practical and attitudinal changes which could make the current situation in religious media relations more satisfactory. The most important requirement is a change in mindset on all sides, which is characterised by a willingness to commit resources, but also to listen and learn from each other.

For future research, the Islamic community merit a thesis dedicated to them alone. There is also great scope for looking in greater depth at why the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is rated so highly by Irish journalists, and whether the fact that it is the majority church in Northern Ireland and a minority in the Republic of Ireland has any influence on this perception. Other places where religious media relations appear to function well, which were mentioned by some of those who were interviewed, such as the Catholic archdioceses of Denver, USA, and Milan, Italy, could also be examined.³⁴

³⁴ See Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002 and Hayes. Oct. 18th, 2000

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Writing in 1996, Hoover and Venturelli refer to religion as the 'blindspot' in media and cultural studies.¹ As Hoover puts it, religion was the 'stepchild of media studies', while media lingered 'at the periphery of religious studies.'² However, since then there has been what Clark calls an 'exponential growth in the intersecting fields of media, culture and religion.'³ While this may be true, very little of this 'exponential growth' has been in the area of religious media relations. Nevertheless, there are a number of areas that are related to religious media relations that are worthy of study. For example, there are many official statements from Christian religious organisations. These documents set out the principles that should underpin religious communication, although there may well be gaps between the theory as presented and the reality that is lived in the various religious institutions. Work has also been done on developing models of religious communications, which draw on the theological models of communication implicit in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Dulles lists five such models that are based on models of how the Catholic Church operates. The last of these, which he terms the secular-dialogic model provides a framework which is relevant to religious media relations because it mandates a dialogue with the world in which the Catholic Church can learn as well as teach, and can receive as well as give.

Secular models of public relations are also examined particularly where they shed light on the similarities and differences between what might be termed a business model of media relations and religious media relations. Religion and news is another related area, which is looked at both in terms of the shortcomings which religious people perceive in this area, and the authors who suggest practical ways of improving religion coverage.

¹ Hoover and Venturelli, 'The category of the religious: the blindspot of contemporary media theory', p. 251.

² Hoover and Lundby, 'Introduction: setting the agenda', p.10.

³ Clark, 'Overview: The Protestantization of research into media, religion and culture', p.7.

The question of 'clashing worldviews' in the context of news and religion, that is, the belief that the worlds of religion and media operate on very different principles and values, is examined at some length. Common complaints about coverage of religion by the media are dealt with, such as allegations of bias and lack of balance, of simplification of complex issues to the point of distortion, of treating religion as if it were politics rather than a discipline in its own right, and finally in this section, Steinfel's three 'I's' – ignorance, incompetence and insufficient resources.⁴ These three 'I's' are the most common complaints made by religious people about the coverage of religion.

The question of ethics is relevant, not least because it provides a standard against which it is possible to evaluate the efforts of religious media relations personnel and journalists. In this section, codes of ethics and general principles as set out by religious organisations are examined, as are some reflections by practitioners on specific problems in ethics. (Journalistic ethics in regard to Islam are dealt with in the section dedicated to Islam.) It becomes clear that whatever about clashing worldviews, there is a great deal of overlap in the ethical aspirations of religious representatives and journalists. As a further counter-balance to the idea of clashing worldviews, the work of some authors is discussed who believe that far from being in conflict with each other, that media and religion occupy the same cultural space. Some authors claim that the media have taken over some of the functions that were once carried out by the churches, such as providing meaning, ritual and a moral code.

Media coverage of Islam, including the question of whether there is a journalistic ethic specific to Islam, is considered in a separate section. The decision to deal with Islam separately stems in part from the fact that there are issues particular to Islam in relation to media treatment of religion, which include treating Islam as if it were identical with its extreme political and fundamentalist forms. The last area to be considered is the writings on religion and media produced in Ireland, and some of the books and articles which are most directly relevant to the question of religious media relations in Ireland are reviewed in this section.

⁴ Steinfels, In 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums', p. 15.

Christian statements on media and communication

The first area to be looked at in detail is official statements of Christian religious organisations. The Catholic Church has been by far the most prolific in the production of documents on communication. One 1997 compilation of 'basic documents' runs to some 21 major documents and thirty shorter World Communications Day pontifical statements.⁵ Since then, other important documents such as *Renewing the Mind of the Media*⁶ and *Ethics in Communications*⁷ have been issued. *Inter Mirifica*,⁸ which is a document of the Second Vatican Council, and the two Pastoral Instructions which followed it, *Communio et Progressio*⁹ and *Aetatis Novae*,¹⁰ separated by some twenty years, contain the theoretical underpinning for the work of Catholic communicators. *Inter Mirifica* is generally accepted as being the weakest document of the Second Vatican Council.¹¹ None the less, it introduced World Communications Day and spells out the duty of the faithful to contribute financially to communication.¹² It provides for a Vatican Commission for Social Communication¹³ and states that there should also be national offices for press, cinema, radio and television established everywhere. It emphasises the need for training and formation, especially of laypeople.¹⁴

In Ireland, in response to *Inter Mirifica*, the Irish Catholic hierarchy set up the Communication Centre in Booterstown, which had a professional TV studio, in 1967 at considerable expense. In 1970, the Catholic Press and Information Office (which operated independently of the Communications Centre), and a Research and Development Unit, followed, all under the aegis of the Church Commission on Communications. The late Fr. Joe Dunn, director of *Radharc*, who was the first director

⁵ Eilers, (ed.) *Church and social communication – basic documents*.

⁶ *Renewing the Mind of the Media*. United States Catholic Conference.

⁷ *Ethics in Communications*. Pontifical Council for Social Communications.

⁸ *Inter Mirifica*, Decree on the means of social communication, p. 283-292.

⁹ *Communio et Progressio*. Pastoral instruction on the means of social communication. p.293-349.

¹⁰ *Aetatis Novae*. Pastoral instruction on social communications on the twentieth anniversary of *Communio et Progressio*.

¹¹ See Cooney, *No news is bad news*. pp.52-53.

¹² *Inter Mirifica* 18.

¹³ *Inter Mirifica* 19.

¹⁴ *Inter Mirifica* 15.

of the Communications Centre, recounts its rise and demise, declaring that it was already in decline by the 1980s, although it did not close until 1992. Among the reasons for its decline was the failure to allocate an annual church collection to communications, even though this was provided for by *Inter Mirifica*. This failure meant that the education and training aspect of the Communications Centre was always under-financed. Eventually Veritas, the publisher and bookseller, was the only profitable part of the Catholic Communications Institute and the Centre was closed. Dunn also highlights a lack of commitment by the hierarchy, with the notable exception of Dr. Tom Morris, Archbishop of Cashel.¹⁵ Dunn, a Dublin diocesan priest who was appointed by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid to work on 'modern means of communication', terms *Inter Mirifica* a 'naive document'. He was made a consultant to the Pontifical Commission for the Means of Social Communication in Rome which had been charged with developing further the ideas contained in *Inter Mirifica*. The Commission was presented with a draft document prepared by Fr. Baragli, S. J., the drafter of *Inter Mirifica*. The consultants with experience in the media were unhappy with the draft, but none were prepared to say so publicly. Dunn made a short statement, saying that the draft was unsuitable, that there were people who could do better on the committee and that anyone who had a hand in *Inter Mirifica* should be excluded from drafting. Despite the 'shocked silence' that followed this undiplomatic intervention, his suggestions regarding drafting were eventually followed.¹⁶ *Communio et Progressio* was the result in 1971. Eilers states that *Communio et Progressio* is regarded as 'one of the most positive documents on social communication' and as the 'Magna Carta' of Christian communication.¹⁷

Communio et Progressio is notably different from *Inter Mirifica*, which had suffered from being the first document produced by the Second Vatican Council. *Communio et Progressio* reflects in its content the much more open approach to the modern world that is found in key documents such as the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*).¹⁸ There is a positive reading of the role of the media, and its

¹⁵ Dunn, *No vipers in the Vatican*, pp.275-293.

¹⁶ Dunn, *No lions in the hierarchy*, p.313.

¹⁷ Eilers, 'Introduction to *Communio et Progressio*', p.71.

¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*. Pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world.

ability to contribute to the common good.¹⁹ There is an assumption that Catholics, both lay and clergy, will be open to and eager to contribute to the 'great round table' which the media offers.²⁰ It concludes with practical suggestions for the setting up of press offices and official spokesmen for every diocese, bishops' conference and 'the more weighty Catholic organisations'.²¹ These organisations are to take into account the 'principles of public relations.' *Communio et Progressio* states:

It is not enough to have a public spokesman. There must be continual two-way flows of news and information.²²

The publication of *Communio et Progressio* met with almost universal approval. However, its insistence on 'legitimate secrecy' when 'necessity, professional duty or the common good itself requires it,'²³ caused some unease among journalists.²⁴ Following *Communio et Progressio*, there was an upsurge in the creation of diocesan communication offices and other communications efforts worldwide.²⁵ However, the initial burst of enthusiasm that followed the Vatican Decree and the Pastoral Instruction began to fade in many countries. Zukowski speaks of the 'dazzle of the shooting star' in relation to Catholic documents on communication. 'It is brilliant for a moment of time and many times only seen by the few who are truly looking for it.'²⁶

Aetatis Novae was issued in 1992. It is not as substantial a document as *Communio et Progressio*, but it is notable in that it contains a detailed pastoral plan for communications, which seeks to integrate communications into every aspect of ministry. The proposal for a pastoral communications plan is extensive, including an analysis of current practices and resources and suggestions for research and collaboration with media professionals. The response to *Aetatis Novae* may be gauged by the fact that when the

¹⁹ *Communio et Progressio* 16

²⁰ *Communio et Progressio* 19

²¹ *Communio et Progressio* 174

²² *Communio et Progressio* 175

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ See Cooney, *No news is bad news*. p. 56.

²⁵ See Cooney, pp.73 -74.

²⁶ Zukowski, 'Shifting the Paradigm', p.93.

organisation known as Unda²⁷ decided in 1995 to produce a book containing samples and analysis of pastoral plans worldwide, there were not enough pastoral plans in existence to merit a book of analysis. Instead, it had to write a book to help dioceses and organisations produce plans.²⁸ Nor has there been any attempt in Ireland to implement the kind of systematic analysis and planning suggested in *Aetatis Novae*. In summary, the documents issued by the institutional Catholic Church mandate a much more systematic, planned and open approach to media than is currently the reality in most of the Catholic Church.

The World Council of Churches²⁹ produced a 1983 statement³⁰ that focuses on credibility in communication. Credibility is a key issue for those who conduct media relations on behalf of churches or mosque. In common with the Catholic documents, this statement emphasises dialogue as a key to good communication.³¹ Various Protestant churches and international bodies have also issued statements, notably the Lutheran World Federation.³² Perhaps the most significant statement in ecumenical terms is from the World Association for Christian Communicators (WACC)³³ and is titled *Christian principles of communication*. Soukup declares that *Communio et Progressio* and *Christian principles* can stand for all the numerous statements made by various Christian churches and organisations, so seminal are they.³⁴ He claims that the significance of the two is that since they proceed from 'reasoning from the tradition' rather than from authoritative declarations, they invite those expert in communication into the kind of dialogue which they advocate.³⁵ In other words, the starting point is an invitation to

²⁷ Unda. International Catholic Association for Radio and Television, now incorporated into Signis, World Catholic Association for Communication (See www.signis.net)

²⁸ Sunderaj, 'Introduction to pastoral planning for social communication', p.9.

²⁹ The World Council of Churches is an international body representing mainly churches of the Reformed tradition.

³⁰ *Communicating credibly - declaration of Vancouver Assembly of World Council of Churches.*

³¹ *ibid.* p.7

³² *Facing the communication revolution - a Lutheran perspective.*

³³ WACC. *Christian principles of communication.*

³⁴ Soukup, 'What does the bible have to do with mass media, anyway? Communication studies, values and theological reflection', p. 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p.15.

examine the reasonableness of a proposition, as opposed to the kind of declaration that closes off all dialogue.

The WACC statement goes beyond the concept of dialogue to that of participation.

'Participatory communication may challenge the authoritarian structures in society, in the churches and the media, while democratising new areas of life.' It identifies the mass media with monological communication. 'They flow from top to bottom, from the few to the many, from the "information-rich" to the "information-poor".' ³⁶ In WACC's view, the media also have lessons to learn in how to engage in dialogue, and may actually block the process of communication, to the detriment of the poor.

Official documents are interesting because of the insight they give into formal church or mosque position on communication. Yet, a gap yawns between theory and reality. As Jorgensen puts it, 'A printed statement resembles a tree falling in the forest; there is no sound unless the churches have heard it.' ³⁷ For example, the three major Catholic statements discussed (*Inter Mirifica*, *Communio et Progressio* and *Aetatis Novae*) each contain well-defined proposals for press offices, not just for dioceses but for 'weighty Catholic organisations'. Yet CORI, the Conference of Religious in Ireland has no press officer. Most of the Catholic dioceses, with the exception of Dublin, Down and Connor, and Cork and Ross have diocesan press officers who are also bishop's secretaries, and who therefore carry responsibility for media relations along with many other duties. This indicates that religious media relations are not a priority.

Models of the church and secular-dialogic model

Official church statements are not the only source of influence on the work of those in religious media relations. The writings of Avery Dulles have been seminal in the theory of Catholic religious communication. In 1974, Dulles wrote an influential work about the models of the church to be found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. ³⁸ He

³⁶ *Christian principles of communication*, p.7.

³⁷ Jorgensen, 'Church statements on communication: their place in a process', p.30.

³⁸ Dulles, *Models of the Church*.

and others since then have drawn on the implications of each of these models for communication³⁹ The underlying thesis is that the image that the Catholic Church has of itself determines to some degree how it perceives the role of communications Dulles outlines five major models The first is the hierarchical In this model, communication proceeds from God, through the papal and episcopal hierarchy to other members of the church This model sees communication as essentially one-way The second model is that of the herald The key word is proclamation Again, this is primarily a one-way form of communication The third model is that of the church as sacrament This concentrates on the transforming effect of Christ as found in the sacraments and liturgy This is a highly technical model which never achieved the popular impact of the first two The fourth is the church as community or communion This is the model that explores the notion of dialogue, both between members of the church and those outside it Dulles proposes that there is yet another model to be found within the Second Vatican Council, which he calls the secular-dialogic model Here the notion of two-way communication reaches its fullest expression The 'world' is not seen as an arena only for Christian zeal and conversion, but the place where God is already at work In this perspective the church can learn as well as teach, gain as well as give, and join with others who are non-Christians and 'non-believers' to protect values which are important⁴⁰ This model has obvious implications for those who are engaged in media relations It emphasises a two-way flow of information and the primacy of relationships However, dissonance exists between this model of communications, which the Catholic Church accepts in theory, and what it practises in reality Orme Mills suggests that the working model of religious communications is that of the drainpipe He says

There has been an almost universal tendency inside the church to picture the communications media as drain pipes through which the water (in other words, the message) will flow down from above, to be absorbed passively by the earth (in other words, the recipients, by us) Obviously the flow of the water is all in

³⁹ See, for example Thorn 'Models of church and communication'

⁴⁰ Dulles 'Vatican II and communications'

one direction, the pipes have little effect on the flow and the earth has no control over the water's flow.⁴¹

Orme Mills argues that the 'drainpipe model' will only be abandoned in favour of an organic model of communication if the church's understanding of itself changes. He makes the distinction between such a shift in understanding and mere cosmetic changes. 'Successful PR is not the same as effective communication.' He sees public or media relations as one expression of a deeper model of communication, that of dialogue, and feels that public relations is only of value if it serves to promote dialogue.⁴²

Thorn compares various models of church communication to some of the best known models of communications theory. He discusses two competing models of church communication which were already present at the end of the nineteenth century, the monarchical and the communal.⁴³ As its name suggests, the monarchical model is one-way, top-down communication, or a proclamation model.⁴⁴ Thorn compares this proclamation model with Lasswell's theoretical frame for mass media relations, summarised as, '*Who* says *What* in which *Channel* to *Whom* with what *Effect*?'⁴⁵ Lasswell's model is limited, because it places the emphasis on the communicator and the message, and ignores the fact that the audience is not passive, but is affected by other factors in the environment, not least by primary groups such as family, friends and other social groups. He compares the communal model of church communication with Riley and Riley's model of communication that gives more weight to the receivers.⁴⁶ In particular, Riley and Riley found that primary groups function as the single most important reference in interpreting information and encoding it.

⁴¹ Orme Mills, 'The drainpipe model of communication', p.516.

⁴² *ibid*, p.524.

⁴³ Thorn, 'Models of Church and communication', p.93.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p.95

⁴⁵ Lasswell, (1948) In McQuaid and Windahl, *Communication models for the study of mass communication*. p.13-14.

⁴⁶ Thorn, 'Models of Church and communication', p. 86.

The [Riley and Riley] model's emphasis on primary groups should alert church communicators to another dimension; dialogue as a way of clarifying misperceptions arising from divergent means of understanding.⁴⁷

Facilitating this aspect of dialogue, that is 'clarifying misperceptions', is a key part of the role of a media relations officer, according to White. He says:

A first set of skills is summed up in terms of public relations, the representative who stands between the public sphere and the church sphere, translating back and forth across the lines of the public culture and the internal culture of the church.⁴⁸

Bluck, former head of communication for the World Council of Churches, proposes a model of Christian communication with five concepts at the centre – dialogue, content, intention, form and outcome.⁴⁹ In relation to dialogue, he says that 'the deepest challenge of dialogue at any level from personal to structural lies with the power that has to be shared before true communication takes place.'⁵⁰ Again, this has implications for media relations, as the mutual suspicion that can characterise the relationship between journalists and religious representatives may be an obstacle to any ceding of power or expression of vulnerability on either side.

Models of Public Relations

This section considers secular models of media relations and how they relate to religious theories and models of dialogue. Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations are perhaps the best known.⁵¹ These are: 1.) Agent/publicity model. 2.) Public Information model. 3.) Two-way asymmetric. 4.) Two-way symmetric. The first two models are one-way, involving in the first, persuasive or propaganda messages from source to recipient, and in the second, more neutral public information messages. In the third

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.87.

⁴⁸ White, 'Communication planning for church renewal', p.35.

⁴⁹ Bluck, *Christian communication reconsidered*, p.71.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.72.

⁵¹ Grunig and Hunt. In McQuaid and Windahl, *Communication models for the study of mass communication*, p.193-195.

model, the two-way asymmetric model, there is some feedback and feedforward, but the source dominates the relationship. The fourth model, the two-way symmetric model, stresses 'mutual understanding as a goal and involves genuine efforts to exchange views and information with the relevant public. This public relations model may be especially relevant when the aim is to solve problems and avoid conflicts, and where a lasting communication relationship is one of the requirements.' This last model advocates an ethical communication relationship based on a genuine desire to understand and to respect the freedom of the other. As such, the two-way symmetric model closely resembles Dulles' secular-dialogic model of religious communication.

Religious Media Relations

There are a number of publications that deal primarily with the practice of religious media relations rather than the theory. *Dealing [sic] media for the Catholic Church* is co-written by Russell Shaw, who was media director for the United States Catholic Conference [of Bishops] for many years. It provides perhaps the best and certainly the most succinct definition of religious media relations, 'Doing the right thing and being seen to do it.'⁵² He is an advocate of openness and transparency, and was instrumental in the opening of the U.S. Bishops' conferences to media coverage. He also instituted a comprehensive media briefing system for the U.S. media, for Synods of bishops held in Rome. He is sharply critical of those who feel that their membership of the church enables them to cut ethical corners, particularly if it involves deliberately misleading the media. He sees his role as 'facilitating orderly contacts, not acting as a buffer between the hierarchy and the media.' He is also critical of the media in some respects, particularly when they are ill-informed or biased, but recognises that they have a job to do. He suggests that resources are not the only issue in communications, and criticises the tendency of the church to throw money at ill-considered projects, while neglecting long-term planning. *Dealing media* is a very readable book, full of anecdotes that provide sometimes unflattering insights into the mindset of Shaw's episcopal employers. He also uses his own failings to illustrate what can go wrong in religious media relations.

⁵² Shaw, *Public relations and the church* I

Thorn examines the issue of church public relations in *Reporting Religion*. He says that images of the church, even when inaccurate or incomplete, can become fixed in the public mind if not challenged, and that therefore public relations is a necessity for the church. His definition of press relations, while less succinct than Shaw's, is also useful. It is 'the planned effort to influence public opinion through good character and responsible performance, based on mutually satisfactory two-way performance.' He sees that the 'media society poses three formidable challenges to churches, each involving a form of dialogue.' These are:

- 1.) [To] assess the impact of media on people and address the public about the results through words and actions.
- 2.) [To] correct and counter falsehoods and distortions which appear in news and entertainment content.
- 3.) [To] use media to communicate religious ideas and values to the faithful and the public.⁵³

This approach is somewhat reactive, although Thorn says that the best public relations is pro-active. He sees a special role for the church in what he terms 'public advocacy'. He claims that, 'The church is one of the few remaining voices for the public good amidst the special interest voices, and it needs high-quality public relations to make its voice heard and its message understood.' Like Shaw, he calls for the highest standards in ethics, and suggests that 'image' does not have to refer to something false, but instead could mean accurate representations of the church. Therefore, in his view, work that improves the image of the church can be not only ethical but also necessary, as it does not involve 'spin', but correcting an inaccurate record. Thorn's work lacks the vivid immediacy of that of Shaw, who refers to his experience of working in the area, but is useful as an example of a Catholic academic's perception of the value of public relations.

⁵³ Thorn, 'Religious organizations and public relations', p.131

Maier, like Shaw, is a media relations practitioner, in this instance as communications director for the Catholic Archdiocese of Denver. He has a central rule 'Never run from the media. Evasion implies guilt.' Relations between the church and media must go beyond damage control and crisis management. He urges those involved in religious communications to remain on guard 'against the risk of substituting the organisational realities of our work for the fire at the heart of our vocation – a missionary fire, a fire of love.' One of the most interesting aspects of Maier's thesis is his insight into how church communications can function in an ethnically and socially diverse area like Denver. A high-quality diocesan newspaper is mailed directly into every Catholic household. The Archbishop of Denver has a policy of openness. Journalists have his private number that they are free to use at any time, and as a result, Maier notes, they do not abuse it.⁵⁴

Hoover suggests that 'it is necessary for the churches to rediscover, revitalise, and possibly re-name an old, time-worn concept: public relations.' However, public relations is now a 'more subtle, negotiated art'. The media efforts of 'conventional churches' must act as a mediator between the public sphere and the institution. Controversially, at least from the point of view of organised religion, Hoover suggests that public relations must act as a conduit for the 'needs, and interests of the religious-media marketplace, to the religious institutions, so that whatever symbols or messages are conveyed are relevant, meaningful, and perhaps even effective.' He seems to be saying that religion must become market-driven, in the sense of responding to demand for particular forms of religious expression. He admits to some unease at the idea of ceding control over the symbols of the historic faiths to the media marketplace. However, given the changing nature of religious adherence, he believes that this view of what public relations is about must at least be considered.⁵⁵

The relationship between religion and news

News coverage of religion was the subject of a great deal of discussion during the 1990s in the United States. Among the publications which ensued was *Bridging the Gap* which

⁵⁴ Maier 'Communicating openly with the media' pp 65-69

⁵⁵ Hoover 'Religion in a media age'

draws on interviews with nearly 1,000 American journalists and clergy in order to establish 'the sources of discontent between religion and the news media.'⁵⁶ Also of note is *Commonweal's* seventieth anniversary issue,⁵⁷ which publishes accounts of three fora held in Boston, Chicago and New York, which drew together religious representatives and media professionals to discuss the issues which concerned them both. The *Nieman Reports* published *God in the Newsroom*⁵⁸ that looked at coverage of religion from a news perspective. Alice C. Shepherd covered similar territory in the *American Journalism Review*.⁵⁹ A consensus emerges from these documents, which can be summarised as follows. Religion is an important subject for Americans. There is a great deal of unhappiness about the way in which religion is covered. There are faults on both sides. Religious representatives can fail to familiarise themselves with the needs of the media, or can resort to unnecessary secrecy and defensiveness. On the other hand, journalists, editors and producers are often ill-informed about religion. There is not so much hostility towards religion, as a lack of information. Finally, the subject of religion deserves better coverage, and co-operation between religious organisations and media is in everyone's interest.

From an Irish perspective, All Hallows College in Drumcondra, Dublin, hosted an ecumenical seminar on religion and media in 1997,⁶⁰ the proceedings of which were published as *Twin Pulpits – church and media in modern Ireland*. It draws together many prominent individuals in the world of media and religion in Ireland, including bishops, religion journalists, editors and academics. There are discussions on the nature of news, the role of communication in religion, the role of the religion journalist and of the press officer. It also looks at the issue of dissent by members from orthodox doctrinal positions, and how the churches might handle this. Almost thirty years ago, Cooney published a study of Catholic media relations after the Second Vatican Council, which is

⁵⁶ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap: religion and the news media - Update 2000*

⁵⁷ 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums'.

⁵⁸ *God in the newsroom. Nieman Reports*.

⁵⁹ Shephard, 'The media get religion'.

⁶⁰ Conway and Kilcoyne, (eds) *Twin Pulpits*

still of relevance because many of the issues which he identified, such as a culture of secrecy in the Catholic Church, remain a source of contention for journalists today⁶¹

Clashing worldviews

One of the major recurring themes in the literature on religion and the news media is that of ‘clashing worldviews’, that is, the contention that those working in the media view the world very differently from those who are informed by a faith perspective. This difference is summarised by Siegenthaler as ‘one rooted in a search for facts and the other grounded in a discovery of faith beyond fact’⁶². These differences in the understanding of what truth is, according to Siegenthaler, are what causes ‘a chasm of misunderstanding and ignorance [that] separates those who pursue careers in the secular news-media field and those whose careers are in the world of religion’⁶³. Zagano sees it somewhat differently, as a clash between an emphasis on the subjective nature of truth, at the expense of the concept of objective truth. She believes that the general emphasis on subjectivism in American public discussion, both in and by the media, ‘reduces the ability of any person or entity to argue on behalf of the very existence of objective truth, upon which denominational discussion depends’⁶⁴. The phenomenon of scepticism as a journalistic trait is referred to, among others, by E. J. Dionne, columnist with the *Washington Post*. He says

This is a serious problem and a serious source of misunderstanding between journalists and people of faith, precisely because religious people are profoundly convinced [that] what they believe is true. The skepticism of the journalistic craft strikes them as wrong and even ungodly.⁶⁵

He goes on to say that St. Thomas could be the patron saint of journalists, presumably because in the Christian gospels Thomas is famous for his doubt and his contention that

⁶¹ Cooney, *No news is bad news*

⁶² Siegenthaler, ‘Introduction’ p. 1

⁶³ *ibid.* p. 2

⁶⁴ Zagano, ‘MediaChurch – the presentation of religious information via media’, p. 29

⁶⁵ In ‘Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums’, pp. 29-30

he would not believe that it was really Christ who had appeared to the disciples until he could put his hand into the wounds which Jesus had. Dionne also contends that journalism is the 'quintessentially Enlightenment profession', with a bias towards the rational and scientific which veers towards seeing religion as something which will be superseded as people grow more enlightened. He concludes with a plea that it be accepted that religion has an intellectually serious foundation'. Conway approaches the idea of 'clashing worldviews' from another perspective. He speaks of 'differing anthropologies', or visions of the human person. As one example, he says that in the Christian tradition of forgiveness, it is never appropriate to completely condemn anyone. He says that words like 'disgraced' or 'shamed' or 'crooked' almost replace people's Christian names when a scandal breaks. He believes that in a Christian anthropology, any account of wrongdoing must also include the concept of change, an invitation to conversion and the possibility of forgiveness. Compassion should be extended to everyone, whereas the media often give the message, 'These people are beyond redemption'.⁶⁶

Another source of the 'chasm of misunderstanding' is the perception that the world of the media has very different values from those held by religious people, compounded by, for at least some people, the suspicion that the media are biased against religion. Dulles sees a stark contrast between the priorities of religion and news. He writes

The media are oriented towards the ephemeral rather than the eternal, the visible rather than the invisible, the superficial rather than the profound, the conflictual rather than the unitive, and for all these reasons they tend to marginalise what principally interests the church.⁶⁷

These sentiments are quoted word for word by Bishop Tom Flynn, without attribution, in an address to the *Twin Pulpits* conference.⁶⁸ Unsurprisingly, this assertion attracted

⁶⁶ Conway, 'The Word that goes forth', p. 197

⁶⁷ Dulles, 'The Church and media - towards mutual understanding'

⁶⁸ Flynn, 'The church and the media', p. 24

some criticism. Kenny queries the bishop's contention that the media are oriented to the here and now rather than the eternal. He questions

What is this about? It sounds to me like journalists are being put in their place as mere hewers of wood and drawers of water. The clergy, on the other hand, don't care about the here and now.⁶⁹

He also challenges other contentions made by Flynn, for example 'that the church was the first medium with a mission for worldwide communications,' on the grounds that the bishop 'thereby asserts the anteriority and inevitable superiority of Catholicism over all other world-faiths and forms of communication', a claim which he says 'cannot stand up to serious scrutiny'. In a suggestion by Flynn that we should know the standpoint of those writing on religion, Kenny hears an echo of the church which 'for years made people afraid to speak their mind' which has sacked teachers for not having the right ethos'. Journalists return again and again to this repressive aspect of faith communities, particularly of the Catholic Church, and it is an important part of the collective self-image of journalists that in their reporting they are instruments in undermining the hypocrisies and abuses of institutions. For example, Cooney states that it is not the role of the journalist to be an apologist.

There is public interest in personality clashes, lifestyles, power struggles and pressure group activities in the churches. Journalists do the public a disservice by overlooking these and presenting the church as perfect societies. Such a view of impeccability is not only bad reportage, it is false theology.⁷⁰

This is linked to a difference in what constitutes news. As Dionne says, 'The Good News isn't, by any conventional sense, news'.⁷¹ Cokie Roberts of *ABC News* and *National Public Radio* concurs. According to her

⁶⁹ Kenny 'Whistling in the dark or a job for journalists in the Tower of Babel' p 21

⁷⁰ Cooney 'Putting the church in the limelight', p 520

⁷¹ In 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums' p 28

The fact is, that 365 days of the year, the churches are filled with believing, caring people. But we talk about the one time in ten years that there is a problem.⁷²

Bias and Balance

Some religious people see bias or hostility, not so much because of what is covered, but because of what is not. Peter Steinfels acknowledges that he had hoped when he took a job as religion correspondent with the *New York Times* that he would cover 'the way that ordinary people lived out their religious faith in their work and family lives.' That proved very difficult to do.⁷³ Dart and Allen found in their survey of Catholic and Protestant clergy in America, that a high percentage of clergy felt that religion news is biased and unfairly negative.

Clergy believe that the news media should inspire as well as report. But reporters and editors focus on keeping news stories factually based and fair; matters of opinion are assigned to the editorial and op-ed pages.⁷⁴

The question of balance is often a sore point for religious people, who perceive that the automatic search for an opposing viewpoint leads to distortions. Flynn asks whether it is necessary that when the Pope speaks some contradictory voice must be found for balance? Kenny, while acknowledging a dilemma which journalists refer to as 'equal time for Judas Iscariot,' says that the answer to the bishop's question is, 'Well, yes, actually, if there is another point of view held by people in our society.'⁷⁵ On the other hand, Dunn refers to the 'lionising of the dissident.' He writes:

Media put a high value on personal freedom. Those who criticise authoritative teaching are seen as being on the side of freedom, and the media cultivate them.⁷⁶

⁷² In 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums', p. 33.

⁷³ Steinfels, 'Constraints of the religion reporter', p.55.

See also 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums', p. 44.

⁷⁴ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap – Update 2000* p.6.

⁷⁵ Kenny, 'Whistling in the dark or a job for journalists in the Tower of Babel', p.22.

⁷⁶ Dunn, *No vipers in the Vatican*. p.319.

Zagano talks about the consequences of everything being treated as if it were a matter of opinion, so therefore something stated as truth will be 'balanced' with an opposing viewpoint. This, she says, often results in 'unprepared denominational authorities who are left to do public relations battle with media professionals.'⁷⁷ Bishop Donal Murray, Catholic bishop of Limerick, makes a similar point. When a bishop addresses a press conference on a controversial issue, he says that journalists will expect to meet a professional spokesman, fully briefed. Journalists will expect to have 'to probe and challenge to get behind statements which are economical with the truth.' He claims that the bishop's perspective is very different.

The bishop will be wishing he could be somewhere else...He will be feeling he has not had an opportunity to master the topic as he would have wished. He will not be thinking in terms of defending the power of an institution; rather he will be anxious to speak well for the church community to which he feels an obligation of loyalty. ...his biggest fear is...that people will be turned away from the truth that it is his responsibility to communicate.⁷⁸

The problem of balance is a difficult one for many journalists, and a source of resentment for people of faith, who see unfair prominence being given to those who disagree, at the expense of the majority who agree with a particular teaching. In *Bridging the Gap* a similar point is made by Muslim and Jewish leaders who see disproportionate time given to extremists, and not enough distinction made between them and the 'faith's majority.'⁷⁹ Roberts acknowledges the problem of balance:

Sometimes in the interests of fairness, we are unfair. We give the two sides equal weight when in fact...they don't have equal weight.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Zagano, 'MediaChurch – the presentation of religious information via media', p. 28.

⁷⁸ Murray, 'Communicating the faith in an era of rapidly growing faithlessness'.

⁷⁹ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.11.

⁸⁰ Roberts, in 'Religion and the media', p. 39.

Simplification and polarisation

Even the concept of 'two sides' can be problematic. Many of those interviewed for *Bridging the Gap* talk about the simplification of issues so that they appear to be about two opposing sides, whereas the reality is much more complex. Dart and Allen quote a Baptist as saying that he wishes the media would seek out more than just the 'radioactive people' on the extreme right or left of an issue.⁸¹ The tendency of journalism to report on religion as if it were politics also irritates some religious people. Dermot McCarthy, Director of religious programming in RTE television, speaks of 'imposing a political grid' on religion and viewing it in terms of 'a government and its opposition, [and] right or left opinions'. This, he believes, leads to religion being viewed in terms of the wielding of power, and the playing down of its key role of service.⁸² Browne, on the other hand, speaks of the enormous power the church wields, and its reluctance to face up to accountability.⁸³ Little acknowledges the need for investigative journalism, but says wryly that since Watergate, that '...many journalists feel a vocation to expose wrongdoing, even while they do not see the occasional flaws in their own behaviour.' He makes a plea for different styles of reporting which have more depth. He catalogues the constraints under which he works, including the need to tell stories in two minutes, which makes it difficult to cover complexity.⁸⁴ Maniscalco, director of the Office of Media Relations for the United States Catholic Conference [of Bishops], also makes a plea for forms of reporting other than the investigative, which he says are found in 'fields as diverse as sports, travel, science and the arts.'⁸⁵

'Ignorance, incompetence and insufficient resources'

Steinfels examines what he regards as the three greatest criticisms of the media's coverage of religion. He calls them the three 'I's': ignorance, incompetence and

⁸¹ Dart and Allen, p.37

⁸² McCarthy, 'Using the message, using the symbols', p.81.

⁸³ Browne, 'Inevitable tension', pp.135-137.

⁸⁴ Little, 'Reporting Church news', p.69.

⁸⁵ Maniscalco, 'Postscript', p.51.

insufficient resources.⁸⁶ He finds that the question of ignorance recurs regularly, with the most common analogy being that one would not be allowed to cover sport if one had no interest or knowledge of it, but this occurs often with regard to religion.⁸⁷ Elsewhere, Harries provides evidence of this kind of ignorance when she cites a colleague of hers who received a request for an interview with John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who died in 1791.⁸⁸ Journalists, too, have their complaints about the ignorance and incompetence of churches, principally that they are secretive and uncooperative and adept at blaming the messenger. For example, Cooney describes the cult of secrecy as the eleventh commandment and eighth sacrament of the Catholic Church.⁸⁹ Nor is his criticism confined to the Catholic Church. In the same article in *Doctrine and Life*, he also complains that the emphasis on consensus in the Church of Ireland renders it bland to the point of boredom, and suggests that the Methodists have a long way to go before they can be termed 'media-friendly'. Similarly, in an article entitled 'My Lambeth Hell', Gledhill, religion correspondent with the *Guardian*, says that although she is a practising Anglican, her experiences at the 1998 Lambeth conference almost caused her to lose her faith, so antagonistic and dismissive was the attitude she encountered towards the media.⁹⁰

It is clear that the 'chasm of misunderstanding' is real. Hoover examines the reasons why there is 'general dissatisfaction with the coverage of religion'. From his research it emerges that religious people are newspaper readers, who understand the news process fairly well and who 'see much that could fit in the newspaper, but does not.' These readers want to see religion 'mainstreamed' as opposed to 'ghettoised'.⁹¹ While admitting that there is much anecdotal evidence that the culture of journalism has a 'certain negative view of religion,' Hoover does not believe that the fault lies entirely in journalistic bias, or ignorance, or both. In what is perhaps the most interesting part of

⁸⁶ In 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums', p. 15.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Williams, p.42 and Maniscalco, p. 51, In 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums'. Also Dart and Allen *Bridging the gap*, p.5.

⁸⁸ Harries, 'Church and media – servants, not friends?', p.34.

⁸⁹ Cooney. 'Putting the Church in the limelight', p.515.

⁹⁰ Gledhill. 'My Lambeth hell'.

⁹¹ Hoover, 'The challenge of standards', p.200.

Religion in the news, Hoover examines the wider systems and structures which impact on journalists, such as the nature of religious culture in the United States, and being part of the realm of journalistic practice and the sphere of public discourse. As in Ireland, the United States appears to be at the end of the 'establishment era' with regard to religion, where churches received somewhat deferential and bland treatment. Instead, religion is now seen as being like other 'beats' in journalism. Hoover cautions that the fact that it can be treated like economics and politics does not mean it is identical with either of these categories and that what is unique to it can be ignored. He goes on:

Good religion journalism is informed but general. It does not advocate for any single position, and does not attenuate positions to the 'poles' of a given issue (thus adding to misunderstanding and conflict.)⁹²

Hoover also cautions about reducing religion coverage to the privatised and personal search for meaning, although there are good stories to be had in this area. *Bridging the Gap* also seeks to see what can be done about the perception of a gulf between media and religion. In summary, Dart and Allen find little justification for the idea that the news media are inherently biased against religion, but find that there are significant problems with lack of knowledge. They make a number of recommendations that would improve religion coverage. One is a recommendation to journalists to take religion seriously in the newsroom. 'Viewers and readers want more than glib superficial coverage of this fascinating topic.'⁹³ They also recommend increasing journalism resources, including assigning more specialist reporters. Journalists should have opportunities for ongoing education. Among their recommendations to clergy are that they learn what journalists consider newsworthy, be available to the media, commit greater financial resources to an effective communications office and take responsibility for correcting misinformation. Suggestions for academics include making academic research more available to the popular media, undertaking a major study on Islam and the media, and academic involvement in designing new training courses for both clergy and

⁹² *ibid*, p.217

⁹³ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*. p.6

journalists in order to enable both to participate better in the coverage of religion. A number of other authors have attempted to bridge the gulf through emphasising better training. Buddenbaum has written a useful primer for those covering the 'religion beat', which supplies brief overviews of the beliefs of major religious traditions, pointers for dealing with issues in religion and research on how various religious communities view the media.⁹⁴ Hubbard covers similar territory, in *Reporting Religion*, though in a less systematic way. His contributors deal with reporting religion in the secular press, the use of media by organised religion, and ethical issues.⁹⁵

Ethics

Given that the theme of 'clashing worldviews' is so strong, it is important to examine whether the basic standards of ethics demanded of both religious representatives and journalists also give evidence of a clash in values. (The question of journalistic ethics and Islam is dealt with in the section dedicated to issues concerning the Muslim faith.) The documents of the Catholic Church which deal with communications speak about the broad ethical principles which should guide both journalists and Christian communicators. Among the most important of these is *Ethics in Communications*, which was issued by the Pontifical Council for Communications in 2000. There are substantial passages on ethics in previous Catholic documents such as *Communio and Progressio* and *Aetatis Novae*,⁹⁶ and *Ethics in Communications* recapitulates the principles found there and adds some additional commentary. *Ethics in Communications* declares that the media do not require a 'new ethic'. Instead it requires the 'application of established principles to new circumstances'. The document commends the media for their contribution to society. Among the praiseworthy aspects of the media is the contribution that it makes to encouraging human dignity through the cultivation of 'a sense of mutual responsibility' and 'respect for other's freedom'. It also says that the media are important instruments of accountability. According to the Pontifical Council the media play an important role in 'turning the spotlight on incompetence, corruption and abuses of trust.'

⁹⁴Buddenbaum, *Reporting news about religion*.

⁹⁵ Hubbard, (ed.) *Reporting religion - facts and faith*.

⁹⁶ See *Communio et progressio*, 14-23. Also *Aetatis Novae*, 4-8

However, the media can also function in a negative way when it when it fosters hostility and conflict by demonising others and 'presenting what is base and degrading in a glamorous light, ignoring or belittling what uplifts and ennobles.' The document says that:

The ethical dimension relates not just to the content of communication (the message) and the process of communication (how the communicating is done), but to fundamental structural and systemic issues, often involving large questions of policy bearing upon the distribution of sophisticated technology and product (who shall be information-rich and who shall be information-poor?)⁹⁷

The document says that one fundamental ethical principle should guide discussion of the areas mentioned above. This is:

The human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communication; communication should be by persons to persons for the integral development of persons.⁹⁸

There is a presumption in favour of *freedom of expression*, but not an *absolute right* to freedom of expression when it conflicts with the common good. The document states that high standards are set for the church in its communication:

First and foremost, the church's practice of communication should be exemplary, reflecting the highest standards of truthfulness, accountability, sensitivity to human rights, and other relevant principles and norms.⁹⁹

Gunning examines the ethical parameters of public relations by looking at the various relevant codes of ethics. These include the Code of Athens, the Code of Lisbon and the

⁹⁷ *Ethics in Communications*, p. 21.

⁹⁸ *ibid*, p.22.

⁹⁹ *ibid*, p.28.

Institute of Public Relations (UK) Code of Professional Conduct. She says that there are seventeen principles to be found in these codes which apply to public relations professionals, but for the purposes of this study, three of these principles are particularly relevant. These are lifetime confidentiality, integrity and public interest. Lifetime confidentiality means that a public relations practitioner must maintain legitimate confidentiality even when no longer employed by a company. This principle recognises that there may be sensitive information which might damage a company which it is entitled to keep private, so long as it does not damage the public interest to do so. Gunning says that integrity is vital, because 'you are not only the public face of an organisation, you are also its conscience.' She sees public interest as a vital focus for the public relations person. She says:

If your primary focus is always on your client, it is possible that you might lose sight of what is in the best interests of the public. A natural desire to protect or shield the client might, somehow, take over. If, on the other hand, as these Codes demand, your focus is always on the public interest, there is no danger that you will, however inadvertently, do something that could be considered an improper activity.¹⁰⁰

There is a very strong human rights-based approach in the texts of the *Code of Athens* and the *Code of Lisbon*. For example, in the *Code of Athens*, the United Nations Charter of Human Rights is invoked as a basis for public relations. It says:

Every member of this association shall endeavour 1.) To contribute to the achievement of the moral and cultural conditions enabling human beings to reach their full stature and enjoy the indefeasible rights to which they are entitled under the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Gunning, 'Ethics', p.26.

¹⁰¹ *Code of Athens*. In Gunning, *Public Relations*, p.413

The *Code of Lisbon* reiterates these sentiments and deals more specifically with the obligations towards fellow practitioners, clients and the public interest. The NUJ Code of Ethics is briefer than the Codes that govern public relations, but if anything, the human rights emphasis is even stronger. For example, Section 10 reads:

A journalist shall only mention a person's age, race, colour, creed, illegitimacy, disability, marital status (or lack of it), gender, or sexual orientation if this information is strictly relevant. A journalist shall neither originate nor process material which encourages discrimination, ridicule, prejudice or hatred on any of the above mentioned grounds.¹⁰²

There are obvious similarities between these codes that apply to public relations practitioners and journalists, and the principles set out in *Ethics in Communications*. According to Cassidy:

The commonly accepted list of human rights which find expression in media codes of ethics has its roots in a vision of the dignity of human beings that is largely inherited from the Judeo/Christian understanding of the meaning and purpose of human life.¹⁰³

That may be true, but media codes of ethics are framed using a secular code of ethics, whereas the Christian churches believe that the human person's dignity comes from the fact that he or she is created by God. Although at first glance, the idea of a 'clash of worldviews' does not apply to the ethical principles which regulate the religious and media spheres because so many principles are held in common, evidence of a difference of worldviews remains when the underlying anthropology and philosophy is examined.

The principles of ethics are one thing; the practice may be very different. In a reflection on the role of ethics in religious public relations, Shaw, former spokesperson for the US

¹⁰² *National Union of Journalists Code of Conduct*. In Gunning, *Public relations*, p.423

¹⁰³ Cassidy. 'Media ethics in a liberal culture.'

Catholic Conference [of bishops] states that the Catholic moral tradition 'contains many general principles and specific norms relating to truthfulness, respect for the dignity of human persons and the like.' However he sees it as a lack that:

Specific applications of the principles and norms to the practice of public relations are virtually non-existent in authoritative – or even non-authoritative – Catholic sources.¹⁰⁴

For that reason, he chooses to look at two specific norms, that of upholding the truth, and avoiding unnecessary secrecy, in order to see how the norms work out in practice. With regard to truth, he believes that the public holds the 'church to a higher standard of truthfulness than they do the government of private business.' He also believes that there is a particular temptation for religious people, which he describes as follows:

Religious people consider their motives pure, their purposes noble; they want what is best – for God, the church, the world, absolutely everybody. From that it is a short step to believing that the end justifies the means.¹⁰⁵

This is a serious charge, but he illustrates it from his own experience with an 'exemplary Catholic who gave many years of distinguished service to the church.' This individual was an administrator with responsibility for the Conference of Bishops' budget. A journalist spotted a discrepancy in the budget; they were spending far more than they had taken in. How could this be? The 'exemplary Catholic' gave a complicated explanation justifying the figures and the journalist let it drop. Later, Shaw established that the church had investments which were ethical and above-board but which were not revealed in the published budget. The administrator had told a lie to a reporter for reasons that seemed justified to him because he was acting on behalf of the church.

¹⁰⁴ Shaw, 'Public relations and the Church I', p. 28.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, p. 31.

Shaw also speaks about secrecy, using the example of his long battle to get the U.S. Catholic Bishops to open their meetings to journalists.¹⁰⁶ He wanted them to open their meetings for essentially pragmatic reasons – the fact that the meetings were closed was annoying reporters for no good reason, and making it appear as if they had something to hide when they did not. Eventually, the Catholic bishops did allow journalists to be present at all but the most sensitive of deliberations. Shaw believes that there are legitimate areas that should be kept confidential, saying drily that:

The church is not a vast sensitivity session where everyone must tell everything about himself and be told everything about everyone else. Prudence determines whether in a particular case the balance falls on the side of community building disclosure or decent reticence.¹⁰⁷

Shaw expresses the view that it is not an impressive theory of morality which counts, but how that theory is applied in real situations where there are pressures to cut corners or to act less than ethically. He begins by saying that he has concentrated on negatives because he believes it would be wrong to ‘take lightly the potential for abuse in religious public relations.’ He goes on to say:

As with morality generally, so also here, moral goodness is not just a matter of great plans and lofty objectives, more importantly, it is a matter of repeated, concrete choices, made in the light of moral truth and often despite incentives to choose differently for the sake of expediency – to avoid trouble or to achieve quick results.¹⁰⁸

Mary Finan, managing director of Wilson Hartnell Public Relations, addresses what she says is the most common practical application of general moral principles, which is when should she refuse to help someone who wishes to use her services as a public relations

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 37-42.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p.34.

professional. She believes that the extreme cases are obvious, such as not providing services to help a drug-pusher to encourage children to accept his free samples. The problems arise elsewhere when, for example, a cause is ethically justifiable but unpopular in the eyes of the public. In these and other cases, where there may be doubt about accepting a client, she believes that this is the best advice to offer:

If I were to advise a colleague, the best I could do would be to recommend that he or she try honestly to sift out the rights and wrongs of a doubtful case.¹⁰⁹

In other words, there may well be cases where principles are clear-cut but the circumstances of a particular case are not. None the less, at the end of her speech, she returns to general principles, saying that the most important tenet is that 'honesty is invincible.' This emphasis is a strong common thread in the ethical principles and codes of both media relations personnel and journalists. The ethical codes of both the journalistic and religious spheres have more in common than what divides them, despite the fact that one is based on secular mores and the other has a religious foundation.

Sharing the same cultural space

As has been seen, there is a lot of common ground in the ethical principles of journalists and religious representatives. There are a number of writers who would go further than this. They believe that the gulf between religion and media is exaggerated, and instead that they occupy the same cultural space. Among them is Goethals, who says that '...TV, magazines and newspapers combine forces to offer what religious institutions themselves once provided indirectly: images of an ordered world; icons of exemplary individuals; models of what human life can and should be like, and rituals that help to unify people who are diverse - racially, ethnically, religiously.'¹¹⁰ Silk, far from acceding to the claims of religious people that those who cover religion are secular, instead declares that the press demonstrate religion-based values, which most Americans share.¹¹¹ The news is

¹⁰⁹ Finan, 'Public relations and ethics - a case study approach'.

¹¹⁰ Goethals, 'Media Mythologies', p.28-29.

¹¹¹ Silk, 'Unsecular media', p.142.

interpreted through a series of topoi, or moral frames or formulae. These are applause for good works, embrace of tolerance, contempt for hypocrisy, rejection of false prophets, inclusion of worthy religious others, appreciation of faith in things unseen, concern about religious decline. Others develop this theme that religion and media occupy the same cultural space. Hoover outlines a means of analysis, based on a cultural studies approach, which does not see media and religion as separate spheres, but opens the possibility that the media 'can also be seen to be providing the raw material for the intended or unintended construction of religious meanings among people'. He goes on:

Thus, the media open up to religion both in the symbolic production processes – that is in the symbols provided in media texts – and in the consumption and interpretation processes.¹¹²

In recent times, by moving beyond a narrow definition or understanding of religion, cultural studies scholars have found the interplay between religion, culture and media a fruitful area of research. For example, Clark is involved in ongoing work at the Center for Mass Media Research in Boulder, Colorado, which looks at how young people integrate religious meaning, often through eclectic use of popular media.¹¹³

Islam and the Media

While there has been an upsurge in reporting on, and writing about Islam in recent times, very little of it has been about religious media relations. There is, however, quite a sizeable body of work on the stereotyping and bias which is perceived to exist in the reporting of Islam. There is a lesser body of work on what constitutes Islamic journalism and what Islamic news values should be.

Islamic statements on media

The structure of Islam, where every mosque is autonomous and there is no central hierarchical structure, means that there is no real equivalent to documents and statements

¹¹² Hoover and Lundby, 'Introduction. Setting the Agenda', p.6ff.

¹¹³ <http://www.colorado.edu/Journalism/MEDIALEYF>

on media as produced by the Christian churches. However, some examples do exist, principally codes of ethics for journalists. For example, in response to the 'MacBride Report', *Many voices, one world: Towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order*¹¹⁴, the London-based Islamic Press Union issued the *Islamic media declaration*.¹¹⁵ This deals primarily with an Islamic code of ethics for the press and media, and hopes that Muslim governments and journalists will help to build 'a just and universally acceptable world information order.' The declaration is clear about the need for a free and critical press. It states:

Islam lays great emphasis on freedom of expression and human dignity. It not only gives people the right of dissent but makes it obligatory on them to protest against tyranny, injustice and oppression. Islam's precepts in this connection are specific and clearly spelt out in the Qu'ran and the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. (Peace be upon him.)¹¹⁶

Given the common perception in the West that Islam is oppressive to women, it is interesting to note that the *Islamic media declaration* is particularly emphatic that those in the media who 'make unsubstantiated allegations against women are liable to severe punishment.'

Stereotyping and bias in coverage of Islam

Said is perhaps the most well-known critic of coverage of Islam by the media. He cites the influence of what he terms Orientalists, those who claim specialist knowledge of the East, but who present it as 'exotic' and 'other' in a way which distorts reality. Secondly, he criticises those who equate the political aspects of Islam with the religious aspects and who fail to distinguish between the two. He writes:

¹¹⁴ *Many voices, one world: Towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order*. Unesco 1979.

¹¹⁵ *Islamic media declaration*.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 29

‘Islam’ defines a relatively small proportion of what actually takes place in the Islamic world, which numbers a billion people, and includes dozens of countries, societies, traditions, languages and of course, an infinite number of different experiences. It is simply false to try to trace all of this back to something called ‘Islam’, no matter how vociferously polemical Orientalists – mainly active in the United States, Britain and Israel – insist that Islam regulates Islamic societies from top to bottom, that *dar al-Islam* is a single coherent entity, that church and state are really one in Islam, and so forth.¹¹⁷

He condemns the conflation of Islam and fundamentalism, which is ‘generalisation of the most irresponsible sort, and could never be used for any other religious, cultural or demographic group on earth.’ Lawrence makes a similar point. He says:

In recent decades the emphasis of scholars, journalists and policy makers alike has been almost exclusively on Islamic fundamentalism. The result has been a deficit in understanding the actual nature of Muslim social and cultural values in the modern period. For there is no concerted, uniform movement called Islamic fundamentalism.¹¹⁸

Murphy claims that there are ‘four distinct but complementary levels’ of the current revival of Islam. He says that these are, firstly, ‘pious Islam’ – the increased personal religious devotion seen in millions of Muslims in recent decades. He goes on to say:

The second level, political Islam, is the one which draws the headlines. But political Islam spans a wide spectrum. At one end are Islamists with a messianic mission to convert the world to their militant version of Islam. They use violence to that end. The prime example is Al Qaeda. At the other end of the spectrum are

¹¹⁷ Said, ‘Introduction to the Vintage edition’, p.xvi.

¹¹⁸ Lawrence, ‘The Shah Bano Case’, p.149.

peaceful political activists, with a more tolerant brand of Islam, who reject violence.¹¹⁹

He goes on to list the third level of the Islamic revival as 'cultural Islam', which has concerns about secular Western culture eroding Islamic culture. Finally, he describes 'theological Islam', where ordinary Muslims are wrestling with the question, 'What is Islam's role in the public life of a modern Muslim society?' Murphy concludes:

It is frightening that some in the United States are taking a simplistic view of this internal struggle within Islam, equating the faith itself with its most radical, violent and anti-Western adherents.¹²⁰

Complaints about stereotyping of Muslims are common in essays on Islam and the media, including the charge of 'Islamophobia', or irrational, ill-founded fear of Islam.¹²¹ For example Shaheen claims that while coverage of some ethnic groups in the United States has improved, coverage of Muslims reinforces the most negative stereotypes.¹²² Poole has undertaken considerable research on media and British Muslims. She concludes that coverage of Muslims in Britain resembles coverage of blacks twenty years ago. She writes:

Findings in this area show that coverage has been minimal, predominantly negative and highly stereotypical with minorities depicted as foreigners who have and cause problems that then have to be sorted out by the authorities.¹²³

She says that coverage is improving and points out that there is a tendency in media to stereotype and to present issues as controversies, so such problems are not specific to Muslims. Her book *Reporting Islam* was due to go to press in September 2001, but was delayed for another nine months because she wished to look at the impact of terrorist

¹¹⁹ Murphy, 'The War on terrorism', pp. 9-10.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹²¹ Bunglawala, 'Demonising Islam'.

¹²² Shaheen, 'Reel Arabs and Muslims', p. 89.

¹²³ Poole, 'Framing Islam', p. 176.

attacks on the US on September 11th on British media coverage. She concludes that the events have moved Islam more to centre-stage: previously at the margins of coverage in British news media, it now has 'an uncomfortable familiarity.' She believes that manipulation of the image of Islam for consumption by non-Muslims is being undertaken 'to mobilise the masses for political gain', in other words, to attempt to influence public opinion in the direction of acceptance of government policy which may not be acceptable to followers of Islam. She says:

By continuing to refer to 'Muslim and Islamic terrorists' the perpetrators are seen as products of a fanatical strain of Islam.¹²⁴

This reinforces a common complaint of Muslims, that the conflation of terrorism and Islam is extremely unfair.¹²⁵ Nor is this confined to English language media. A study of German media by Teheranian concludes that 'coverage of Oriental countries is mostly confined to the very narrow surface level of political events, and other sectors of life - such as culture, entertainment, or social affairs - are almost entirely neglected.'

Teheranian endorses the idea of dialogue in intercultural relations, but insists that dialogue must be rational, avoid domination and 'refrain from the kind of stereotyping that attributes, for example, the strange behaviour of the Taliban to the entire Islamic world.'¹²⁶ He acknowledges that while the media can be a source of 'cultural stereotyping' they can also be a source of 'cultural cross pollination and enrichment.'

Like other writers on Islam, he accepts the reality of acts of terrorism and violence, and the flaws in many Islamic societies, but asks that this not be taken as representative of all of Islam.

¹²⁴ Poole, *Reporting Islam*., p.4.

¹²⁵ See Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*. p.11 where Muslim leaders claim that sensitive treatment of Islam is outweighed by 'instances of sensational, error-filled coverage'. See also Buddenbaum, *Reporting news about religion*, p. 111, who reports that Muslims frequently complain about the use of 'Muslim terrorists'.

¹²⁶ Teheranian, 'Islam and the West: hostage to history?', p.217.

Islamic journalism

Schleifer also indicates that stereotyping is not confined to Western journalism, but is also found in Islamic journalism. He claims that there is what he calls 'reverse secularism' which seems to find that 'religion is worthy of reporting only in the political domain, and a political domain of confrontation'. It is not entirely clear why he terms this 'reverse secularism' as opposed to secularism. His point may be that even Islamic journalists can treat Islam in the way in which secularists do, as being of interest only in relation to politics. He says that it is easy for the Islamic journalist to 'become side-tracked into the same sort of surface reporting of organised political life in the Muslim world which characterises the secular press.'¹²⁷ Like other Islamic commentators such as Shaheen, he objects to the 'reduction of Islamic phenomena to narrowed-down political phenomena.' However, he somewhat undermines his own argument for less secular reporting when he looks at what it is possible for the media to represent about Islam, and concludes that it is impossible for television to convey 'the invisible aura of spiritual grace.'¹²⁸ Further, he states that much of the acceptable canon of modern journalism is as unacceptable to Islam as the 'interest-based core of modern banking.' (Islam forbids the taking of interest.) This point is elaborated on by Siddiqi, who claims that 'whether Muslim or non-Muslim, the media are more interested in conflict, contention, disorder, and scandal than in peace, stability, continuity and moral conformity.'¹²⁹ This, he feels, is in conflict with the Muslim principle of *amar bi al-Maruf wa nahi an al-munkar* or commanding right and prohibiting wrong. He goes on:

This implies that it is the responsibility of every individual and the group, especially the institutions of social and public communication, such as the press, radio, television and cinema, to prepare individuals and society as a whole to accept Islamic principles and to act upon them.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Schleifer, quoted in Siddiqi, 'Ethics and Responsibility in journalism – an Islamic perspective', p.43.

¹²⁸ Schleifer, 'An Islamic perspective on the news', p.173-174.

¹²⁹ Siddiqi, 'Ethics and responsibility in journalism – an Islamic perspective', p.44.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Siddiqi's understanding of the role of the 'institutions of social and public communication' raises a question about what Buddenbaum considers to be the difference between 'religion journalism' and 'religious journalism.'¹³¹ Religion journalism treats religion as news, to be covered in the same way as any other news, while 'religious journalism' is designed to promote the viewpoint of a particular religious organisation. From Siddiqi's point of view, such a distinction is part of a Western tradition of 'pluralistic individualism.' It does not sit well with what he describes as the 'central force in the Islamic moral system' which is the concept of 'Tawhid – the supremacy and sovereignty of one God.'¹³² Given the sceptical outlook of most Western journalism, this would appear very strange to many of them. Such differences in outlook between secular cultures and religious cultures are the very questions which, according to Murphy, are currently being debated in Islamic societies, and which have as yet reached no fixed conclusions.¹³³ For the purposes of this thesis, it is only possible to note that there are questions being raised as to what Islamic journalism might be, which appear to be reaching different conclusions than those reached in the West about the role of journalism.

Irish Literature

As has been remarked before, very little has been written directly on the question of religious media relations. From an Irish perspective, there are a number of publications that warrant mention. The first, perhaps, is veteran journalist John Cooney's book written in the immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, which deals with the communications policy of the Catholic Church.¹³⁴ *No news is bad news* looks at what Cooney terms the 'Copernican revolution' following the Council. He states:

¹³¹ Buddenbaum, *Reporting news about religion*, p.91

¹³² Siddiqi, 'Ethics and responsibility in journalism – an Islamic perspective', p.44.

¹³³ Murphy, 'The war on terrorism'.

¹³⁴ Cooney, *No news is bad news*.

The Council therefore marked the end of an era of a defensive attitude on the part of the Catholic Church to the world. Catholicism was now prepared to communicate with, rather than anathematise the secular world.¹³⁵

He sees this as a move from 'Rome has spoken and there will be no further discussion' to an exciting period of real consultation with the laity. The book is published in 1974, in the period of enthusiasm following the Council, although Cooney is cautious enough to recognise that the Catholic Church in Ireland has a long way to go.¹³⁶ For example, he points out that secrecy is not a thing of the past, but remains the norm, particularly in the Curia.¹³⁷ He examines the Vatican Council *Inter Mirifica*, and the document that followed it, *Communio et Progressio*, in some depth. In particular, he looks at the mandate that *Communio et Progressio* gives for well-planned and resourced church communications.¹³⁸ He also gives a picture of the ideal media officer:

The media officer has to be both knowledgeable in church affairs and teaching and in the practice of journalism. It is important that he [sic] be respected by journalists for his honesty and professionalism and that his advice and expert opinion on communications matters should be accepted by churchmen. He must have standing in the church if his professional expertise is to be fully exercised. Also, the media officer should not just be an agent for the hierarchy but should be at the service of all sections of opinion in the church so that wide-ranging and representative thought in the church is reflected in the media office.¹³⁹

Cooney's portrait of the 'ideal media officer' is quoted by Shaw, former communications officer with the US Conference of Bishops, who says that 'it is worth quoting because it is so rare' [to find such a portrait in print]. Shaw approves of the description up until the injunction that the media officer should serve 'all sections of opinion.' Shaw believes

¹³⁵ Ibid, p.19.

¹³⁶ Ibid,p.18.

¹³⁷ Ibid.p.96.

¹³⁸ Ibid,p.54-64.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p.100.

that the media officer should be aware of such currents of opinion and keep his superiors similarly aware, but his immediate responsibilities are to his superiors and to orthodoxy.¹⁴⁰

Another veteran, the late Fr. Joe Dunn, the producer and director of *Radharc* religious programmes for RTE, also writes about media and media relations, albeit in a more oblique way, as it is at a tangent to his main work of producing programmes. None the less, as the first priest appointed by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid from the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin to study television, at a time when Dunn, and indeed most other people, did not possess a TV set,¹⁴¹ he has some valuable insights into the development of church and media relations in Ireland. His books are written in an anecdotal style, but also contain sharp commentary on what he perceives as the strengths and weaknesses of the Catholic Church.¹⁴² In general, he feels that the area of media receives low priority in the church, as other areas are given higher pastoral priority.¹⁴³

Fr. Martin Tierney wrote a kind of 'how-to' manual in 1988, titled *The media and how to use it*. The title gives an impression of a very instrumentalist view of the media, as if they are just waiting around to be used, but the book itself is more nuanced. Tierney discusses the developments in modern media, and the various documents issued by the Catholic Church and WACC. However, he also includes a chapter on the reality of media relations as conducted by the Vatican, in which he describes the 'ungenerous treatment' meted out to journalists which 'generates justifiable anger.'¹⁴⁴ He acknowledges that much of the theory in relation to media relations has never been put into practice, and the latter half of the book is devoted to how to make use of opportunities presented by the media, such as taking part in interviews on radio or television, or for a newspaper, and also on such basics as how to produce press releases.

¹⁴⁰ Shaw, 'Public Relations and the church 11', p.59.

¹⁴¹ Dunn, *No tigers in Africa*, p.2.

¹⁴² See, for example, his recounting of the history of the Communications Centre, which was set up in response to *Inter Mirifica*. In Dunn, *No vipers in the Vatican*, pp.275-293.

¹⁴³ Dunn, *No tigers in Africa*, p.140.

¹⁴⁴ Tierney, 'Media relations - Vatican style', p.65-74.

Twin Pulpits, edited by Fr. Eamonn Conway and Fr. Colm Kilcoyne, was the outcome of a summer school on church and media held in All Hallows College in Dublin. In the preface it states:

All Hallows College hosted the Conference in order to promote open, honest and frank discussion between two of the key players in the shaping of modern Ireland, media and church, twin pulpits which in recent times have been largely at cross purposes.¹⁴⁵

The summer school brought together media relations professionals, journalists, editors, members of the hierarchy and representatives of several Christian churches to discuss in a series of workshops the relationship between church and media. Among the topics covered are: the contribution of church and media to society; whether the appropriate image for the relationship between media and religion is servant or friend; how the working relationship can be improved; how free the religious press is; what the situation is like for church and media in Northern Ireland; and concludes with inquiring how the dialogue between church and media can be moved forward. *Twin Pulpits* provides a forum for people to hear others' point of view. In a sense, it sets out the ground, analyses the difficulties and opens up possibilities for change. However, any conference can only be a beginning. Oliver Maloney puts it well:

On close examination, the visions of society which responsible church people and journalists favour would not, I suggest, be all that far apart; the core values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are admired by most Irish journalists.... I find it useful to remember that harmony refers to a state in which tensions are maintained in balance; it does not mean the absence of tension. That seems to me to be a realistic aspiration for the relationship between media and church in the years ahead.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Conway and Kilcoyne, 'Preface', p.5.

¹⁴⁶ Maloney, 'Learning from each other', p.195.

Conway and Kilcoyne followed *Twin Pulpits* a year later with *The Splintered Heart*. Where *Twin Pulpits* had looked at the relationship between church and media, *Splintered Heart* looks at the relationship between the artist and the church. It contains a contribution by Colum Kenny, which looks at the modern Tower of Babel that our culture has become, and at the challenge that it provides for the journalist. Kenny defines journalism thus:

In the context of journalism (it seems to me) religious journalism is that which tells the truth about a matter of relevance to the human spirit. It is a liberating exercise in prophecy, a proclaiming to the world that the truth is accessible and the truth will set us free. It is not pietistic repetition of archaic formulations of faith, or, far less even, the amplification of propagandist press releases or the reassuring message of bankrupt reformulations of what once passed for faith.¹⁴⁷

Kenny also has few words of comfort for those who would see public relations as a panacea for what ails the Catholic Church. He writes:

Let them not put their trust in spokespersons and media-handling by professionals but in faith. Let them consider the possibility that they presumed to build their own 'tower with its top in the heavens' to make a name for themselves and that the Lord now wants them scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.¹⁴⁸

This is echoed later in this thesis by those who say that 'spin' and 'slick media handling' is the antithesis of good communication. A number of the journalists interviewed comment favourably on Stephen Lynas of the Presbyterian Church, who is not only a competent media relations professional, but also a person of faith.¹⁴⁹ Kenny's injunction not to put too much faith in media-handling is also echoed by Pat Heneghan, an experienced public relations consultant who declares that public relations has only a

¹⁴⁷ Kenny, 'Whistling in the dark or a job for journalists in the Tower of Babel', p.16.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.23.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002 and Little. Dec. 17th, 2001.

‘minor and supportive role’ in spreading the gospel message, and suggests instead that words and actions by ordinary believers are far more important. He says:

Let that daily witness, not some clever marketing strategy, be our most powerful form of persuasion.¹⁵⁰

F.X. Carty, who is a public relations practitioner and a lecturer in the subject, deals briefly with the Catholic Church in Ireland. Carty states bluntly his belief that ‘Christian communication involves propaganda.’ None the less, he has some useful pieces of advice:

The official church should come up front, and pre-empt its critics. If there is bad news, let it be the first to declare it, and get in its case before the attack.¹⁵¹

Carty presents Bishop Eamonn Casey, who did not face his critics when it emerged that he had had a son following an affair with Annie Murphy, as an example of ‘how not to do it.’ He also does not believe that the church should stay out of politics. He says:

It never has, and does not today, whether it be in South America, the Philippines, Poland or Ireland.¹⁵²

Tom Inglis advances the provocative thesis that the media have supplanted the traditional role of the church as moral guardian, and have displaced the church as the conscience of Irish society. He writes:

Journalists have moved easily from being reporters, to being commentators, to being moral gurus on all aspects of social life.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Heneghan, ‘The church and the media – can they be friends?’, p. 94.

¹⁵¹ Carty, ‘The Roman Catholic Church’, pp.192-196.

¹⁵² Ibid, p.196

¹⁵³ Inglis, ‘Irish civil society – from church to media domination’, p.63.

Inglis contends that the church's inability to master the language of the media has hastened its decline in influence. While acknowledging that the 'grace' bestowed by media can be superficial, he does not query the fact that like the church of old, the new moral guardian, the media, may be quite uncomfortable and defensive when its own mechanisms come under scrutiny.

The relationship between church and media has also been covered extensively in Irish journals and religious periodicals. To give some examples, in *Doctrine and Life*, Cooney comments on the various Irish churches and concludes that while the spirit of the Second Vatican Council has not yet made its way to the Irish Catholic Church, the other churches have a long way to go, too, before they can be deemed media-friendly.¹⁵⁴ In another article, veteran journalist, the late Michael O'Toole, sums up his feeling that the church has little time for journalists, by concluding that journalists are confined to some kind of ecclesial dog-house from which it is difficult to emerge.¹⁵⁵

Michael Breen contributes an article to *Intercom*, where he says that there is a great need to expend resources on the improvement of preaching, and also on the involvement of lay people in media relations on behalf of the Catholic Church.¹⁵⁶ He looks at the question of coverage of scandals in an article in *Studies*, where he pays tribute to the valuable work done by the media in forcing the church to come to terms with the issue of child abuse, but is also critical of where the media has been unbalanced, or given the impression that this is exclusively a problem caused by clerics.¹⁵⁷ Kenny looks at the roots of antipathy to the Catholic Church in an article in *Reality*,¹⁵⁸ and has also addressed the issue of church and media extensively in his *Sunday Independent* column.¹⁵⁹ Given the fact that Bishop Brendan Comiskey resigned because of his handling of clerical sex abuse

¹⁵⁴ Cooney, 'Putting the church in the limelight'.

¹⁵⁵ O'Toole, 'Church-media relations - a view from the doghouse'.

¹⁵⁶ Breen, 'How Church communication can be improved'.

¹⁵⁷ Breen, 'The scandals and the media'.

¹⁵⁸ Kenny, 'Is the Irish media anti-Catholic?'

¹⁵⁹ See among others, Kenny, 'Hierarchy must climb down and face the laity - the Sean Fortune scandal' 'Bishops doing too little to save church for priest and people'.

scandals in the Catholic diocese of Ferns, an article which the bishop wrote in the *Furrow* some years ago acquires a certain poignancy. It concludes with these words:

John Paul 1, 'the smiling Pope', whom the world took to its heart though his pontificate lasted only thirty days, expressed his conviction that St. Paul, had he lived today, would have been a journalist. I was going to say that, had I myself been alive today, I would have been one too. In spite of all its downsides, the media are the new rooftops of the world from which we must always preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God forgive us if we don't.¹⁶⁰

The Church of Ireland journal, *Search*, has also featured articles on church and media. Among them is one by Patsy McGarry, which is heavily critical of that church's handling of Drumcree. He wonders why, if the Church of Ireland welcomes all comers, how it can justify banning journalists from services at Drumcree? He also warns that sectarianism is a major challenge for the Church of Ireland.¹⁶¹

Summation

There are a number of clear themes that emerge from the literature. A relationship with the media, which is open and based on mutual respect, is mandated by the official documents of the Catholic Church and of other religious organisations. While the theoretical underpinning for a relationship of dialogue with the media is present in official documents, the perception remains, not least among the practitioners in journalism and media relations who were interviewed for this thesis, that a wide gulf of misunderstanding between the worlds of religion and media still exists.

Some authors hold that religion and media occupy the same cultural space. There is much that is insightful emerging from the cultural studies approach to religion, but the religious people and media practitioners still hold that there is a 'clash of worldviews' or a 'gulf of misunderstanding' between the worlds of media and religion. Common perceptions by

¹⁶⁰ Comiskey, 'Twenty years with the Irish media', p.613.

¹⁶¹ McGarry, 'The Church of Ireland and Drumcree. A view from the media'.

religious people about coverage of religion by the media are that there is a significant degree of bias and lack of balance, of simplification of complex issues to the point of distortion, and of treating religion as if it were only of interest insofar as it resembles or touches on politics. Journalists, who in turn perceive religious people to be unnecessarily secretive and defensive, dispute these perceptions. Common ground is found in the ethical principles that underpin work in both the journalistic and media spheres. Islam is perceived to face different challenges to Christianity, principally because it is so often identified solely with extreme versions of the Muslim faith, while more moderate manifestations of this belief system are ignored.

The themes that emerged from the review of the literature strongly influenced the research undertaken in this thesis. The central questions examined in this research concern what the religious representatives believe their main objectives in religious media relations to be, and the journalists' perception of how well or otherwise those aims are achieved. The religious representatives also speak about what they perceive to be the flaws in the way in which religion is covered by the media in Ireland. The problems of the fledgling Islamic community in Ireland are looked at with reference to the experience of some Muslims in other countries. Finally, suggestions to improve religious media relations are examined and it is interesting to see that in part at least, these suggestions echo what is found in the literature on this topic.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CHURCHES AND MOSQUE – A RATIONALE FOR MEDIA RELATIONS

Introduction

This chapter draws primarily on the findings from the fifteen research interviews that were conducted with the religious representatives. The central questions that were asked in the interviews concern what the religious representatives hope to achieve by their presence in the media. They were also asked about the values that guide their work, whether media relations is central to the core mission of their religious organisations, and whether there are limits to the kinds of public relations techniques which a religious representative can use. The findings that emerge from the interviews are explored in the light of the relevant research that has been set out in the literature chapter. There are several areas of consensus among those who were interviewed. An important one is the need to conduct their work in a spirit of dialogue. Three factors are seen as essential to the creation of a spirit of dialogue. Firstly, given the fact that the media play such a central role in society, it is believed that it is vital for religious organisations to be actively present in the media. This may seem obvious, but within their own organisations, on occasion, there is a failure to grasp the importance of media relations or even hostility to being involved in this work. This is sometimes reflected in a failure by religious organisations to allocate appropriate levels of resources. Secondly, there is a conviction that good relationships between journalists and religious representatives are central to any successful communication. This may be hindered where the structures of a particular organisation inhibit its ability to respond rapidly to needs of the media. Thirdly, there is an acknowledgement that today, people accept or reject propositions on the ostensible merits of the argument and no longer automatically accept the authority of institutions. In this environment, the credibility of the communicator and of the organisation that he or she represents is of central importance. There is frank acknowledgement that the Catholic Church in particular has difficulties with credibility in the wake of a decade or more of scandals. The factors which influence dialogue as set out by the religious representatives are very close to what is found in the secular-dialogic

model of communication as presented by Dulles.¹ A spirit of dialogue is perceived to be the guiding principle of the religious representatives' work, and this perception is examined in more detail later on in this chapter. A model of communication as dialogue describes *how* the religious representatives wish to communicate. But *what* are they trying to communicate? What are the objectives they hope to achieve by presence in the media? There are four specific aims that emerge from the research interviews with the religious representatives. They are summarised below, and dealt with in more detail later.

1. Making the presence and viewpoint of the churches and mosque visible in public discourse

There are a number of facets to this aim. In the case of two of the smaller churches, the Church of Ireland and the Methodists, the religious representatives are aware that it is possible that many Irish people, including journalists, might never have met a member of these churches. As a result, presence in the media is important as a means of keeping the church visible and enabling it to make a contribution to Irish public life. The Islamic community is even smaller, and it feels that it is battling against stereotypes and inaccuracies regarding its beliefs; so redressing perceived imbalances in the reporting of Islam is among the aims of Islamic representatives. Helping to raise the morale of Catholics who see their church apparently overwhelmed by scandal, and highlighting positive aspects of the church, are important aims for the Catholic Church representatives.

2. Being an advocate for social justice

This objective is found most clearly expressed in the interview with Sr. Elizabeth Maxwell,² secretary general of the Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI), which is the representative body of religious orders in Ireland. The definition of 'social justice for

¹ Dulles, 'Vatican II and communications'.

² She will be referred to in the text as Sr. Maxwell, to distinguish her from Ms. Janet Maxwell, Director Communications for the Church of Ireland.

all' offered by Hans Kung is accepted by CORI and is reproduced in one of the publications of CORI's Justice Commission.

The right to a secure life, equitable treatment, the opportunity to earn a fair living and provide for their own welfare, the definition and preservation of their differences through peaceful means, participation in governance at all levels, free and fair petition for redress of gross injustices, equal access to information and to the global commons.³

CORI has made a conscious decision to concentrate resources on work with, and advocacy on behalf of, the poor and marginalised. According to Sr. Maxwell, CORI's ultimate motivation is to spread the Gospel. In its public communication, particularly in the area of social justice, this motivation is more implicit than explicit, except for the fact that the organisation is identifiably representing religious orders. This is an example of how one religious organisation chooses to lobby, including the choice to work with the media, on behalf of an issue which represents a core value for it.

3. Pre-evangelisation and preparation for *da'wa*

Evangelisation may be defined as the attempt to spread the message of the Christian gospels and to appeal to people to 'convert' in order to live their lives according to that message. While there is no exact equivalent in Islam, the Arabic word *da'wa*, which has connotations of witness to, or propagation of faith, describes a somewhat similar concept. Explicit evangelisation or *da'wa* through the media is agreed to be rare. In this aim, the primary focus is on pre-evangelisation or preparation for *da'wa*, in other words, on establishing the credibility and reasonableness of the religious organisations in a way which might then lead someone to investigate further. Imam Yahya M. Al-Hussein, president of the Islamic Foundation of Ireland and Imam [spiritual leader] of the Shi'ia Muslim community at 163, South Circular Road, Dublin, says that he feels that

³ In Reynolds and Healy, *Social Partnership in a New Century*, p.59.

‘reversion’⁴ largely happens at the personal level [as opposed to through the media].⁵ Although it may not lead directly to ‘reversion’, the Islamic representatives believe that receiving coverage in the media is useful in conveying the fact that Islam is a way of life rather than a religion. This way of life covers everything from how and when you eat, to how family life should be conducted.

4. Upholding civic values

This aim is linked with the desire to help in building a society where positive values are upheld which can be shared by people of all faiths or none. In some cases this is linked to upholding standards in broadcasting or journalism, because having a forum where issues can be debated in depth helps to create a space where religion can be treated seriously. In other cases, it involves helping to promote the common good so that individuals can achieve their potential in the context of a caring community.

Working in a spirit of dialogue

While acknowledging the need for involvement in the media, and in some cases the difficulties of that involvement, it is clear that the interviewees do not regard media in an instrumentalist fashion, as a ‘means of getting the message out.’ Instead, they identify communication based on dialogue as central to their role. As mentioned above, the ‘communication as dialogue’ model has three important aspects.

Presence and activity in media

There is a belief among the religious representatives that since so much communication takes place in and through the media, religious organisations have a responsibility to maintain an active presence there. Within the religious organisations, there may be a failure to grasp the importance of media relations or even hostility to being involved in this work. This is sometimes reflected in a failure by religious organisations to allocate appropriate levels of resources. The belief that presence in the media is vital is reflected

⁴ ‘Reversion’ is the Islamic term for ‘conversion’, stemming from the idea that people ‘revert’ to an original state of understanding of the reality of the one God which up until the time when they turned to Islam had been obscured.

⁵ Al-Hussein. Mar 27th, 2002.

in what Fr. John Dardis S.J., Director of Communications for the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, 1995-2001, says:

If we have a mandate, 'Go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news of the gospel!', and if we have that mission statement as an organisation, then we have to take the media seriously. It just is not a choice. ⁶

Ms. Valerie Jones, communications officer for the combined Church of Ireland dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough, makes a similar point.

Media is part of mission for the churches.... We just don't realise that the way to proclaim the gospel is through the media, that this is one of the ways of evangelisation. ⁷

Al-Hussein is a member of a Muslim community which is still becoming established in Ireland and is very small, some 19,000 people. He points out that it is not always easy to engage in dialogue.

We wish we could do this, to be in dialogue with people through the media, if we could have the chance. But most of the time the media want their own issues... probably this is the same with other churches and other religions, that they will not give them the chance to talk about what they want to say. ⁸

Although he sees practical difficulties that constrain dialogue, he still supports the idea of conducting media relations in this spirit.

The media play an important role in how the public access knowledge about religion. Horsfield expresses the view that 'we now see all other social collectives including

⁶ Dardis. Oct 31st, 2000.

⁷ Jones. Feb. 23rd, 2001.

⁸ Al-Hussein. March 27th, 2002.

religious faith, through the lens of our enculturation in media.’⁹ This idea is reinforced by Poole’s work on how non-Muslims access information about Islam in Britain. She finds that the media are the primary source of information.¹⁰ The important role, which the media plays as a purveyor of information and attitudes about religion, might be expected to encourage an attitude of, if not approval, at least respect among religious people. However, sometimes there is little support for the work of the religious representative among members of their religious organisations. The religious representatives may be operating out of a model of communication as dialogue, while the members of the religious organisations whom they represent may have very strong suspicions of the media. For example, Stephen Lynas, Information Officer for the Presbyterian Church, recalls:

Shortly after I started work one person said to me, ‘How do you find working with that bunch of twisters?’ meaning the media. Now, the lack of willingness to engage has meant at times that they [Presbyterians] have been misreported and misrepresented. It’s to try to encourage them to engage more and to look upon journalists and reporters as people who can actually be useful and helpful.¹¹

This point is reiterated by Dardis:

I would get frustrated meeting church people, you know [adopts tone of other person] ‘You know, the media, is anything possible? Sure they never give you anything positive anyway, and is it worth it? We shouldn’t bother.’ Have we missed something here? Why is this a question? This is the twenty-first century. We have had Vatican II, the call for a dialogue with the modern world. Media is *the* place where all this dialogue happens.¹² Like it or not, that’s just where the questions of the modern human person, man or woman, are filtered, and sometimes ‘filtered’ is the word, to institutions like the church, or the judiciary or

⁹ Horsfield, ‘Changes in periods of media convergence’, p.177.

¹⁰ Poole, ‘Media representations of British Muslims’, p.238-240.

¹¹ Lynas. Jan 8th, 2001.

¹² cf. Martin-Barbero, ‘Media as a site of resacralization’, p. 108.

the government. So if we are involved in what Vatican II called us to be involved in, a dialogue with the modern world, we need to be in the media and have questions brought to us by the media and be answering those questions.¹³

Fr. Brendan Hoban, communications officer for the Catholic diocese of Killala, who is also a parish priest, says his fellow clergy sometimes query the value of what he does in media relations and church communications.

I was full-time [as a communications officer] for about six or seven years and clergy were saying directly to me that it was a waste of money... Clergy haven't a great sense of the importance of this work, so you are very much on your own.¹⁴

Some of the representatives believe that this failure to understand and appreciate the nature of their work means that adequate resources are not assigned to it. For example, Dr. Jim Cantwell, who was Director of the Catholic Press and Information Office (CPIO) from 1975-2000 and who is now retired, says that there was always a battle to convince the Catholic bishops of the need for communications, so when expenditure needed to be cut media relations was always the first area to be targeted for cutbacks.¹⁵ Jones, in the Church of Ireland, feels that the people 'who control the purse strings' do not have an adequate understanding of media and so do not fund it properly. Rev. Roy Cooper, who is press officer for the Methodist Church, and also a parish minister, has campaigned for some years to get a full-time person appointed to the post, because he believes that it is impossible to respond in the time-frame demanded by media when you also have another full-time job. He even had a battle to get a mobile 'phone. He says:

I fought for two years to get a mobile 'phone. I literally had to embarrass people at a conference by saying, 'Mr. President, the inmates of Long Kesh have a

¹³ Dardis. Oct. 31st, 2000.

¹⁴ Hoban. Dec. 12th, 2001.

¹⁵ Cantwell. Mar. 26th, 2002.

'phone, my kind of thing is two cups with a bit of string between them.' So I mean, that's the humorous side but that's the reality.¹⁶

Fr. Bruce Bradley, Director of Communications for the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin from 2001-2002, feels that a similar lack of support for media relations is reflected in the way his office is funded, concluding that:

I don't think it's seen as a central function of the church's functioning in Dublin.¹⁷

For the period 2001 to 2002, the Catholic Dublin Diocesan Communications Office had a budget of E94, 4610. ¹⁸ This paid the salaries of a director, two full-time communications officers, and a secretary. It funded the day-to-day running of the office, and also approximately one-third of the cost of producing *Link-Up*, the diocesan magazine. The Dublin Diocese has 1,041,100 Catholics, two hundred parishes, five auxiliary bishops, and numerous church organisations like Crosscare, Accord and Catholic Youth Care. ¹⁹ The budget for the Communications Office of the Catholic Diocese of Cork and Ross is E26, 000 annually, which pays the salary of the director and a part-time secretary. This includes payment for the director's time spent producing and editing the diocesan newspaper, and giving support to parishes, especially in the production of print material.²⁰ The Catholic national communications office has an annual budget of E125, 000, which covers a director, a communications officer and secretarial services.²¹ The office has overall responsibility for twenty-three dioceses, even though each of these dioceses has someone nominated usually the diocesan secretary, who, among other functions, acts as a link with the media. The director also speaks on behalf of the Bishops' Conference, and the Communications Office provides an information service, answering queries about

¹⁶ Cooper. Jan 8th 2001

¹⁷ Bradley. Dec. 18th, 2001

¹⁸ Source: Letter to diocesan priests in Dublin, giving breakdown of figures from Share Collection. See also <http://www.dublindiocese.ie/share/shareframeset.htm>

¹⁹ Source: <http://www.catholiccommunications.ie/Dioceses/dublin.html>

²⁰ Email correspondence with author from Fr. Tom Hayes, dated June 26th, 2003.

²¹ Email correspondence with author from Brenda Drumm, communications officer, dated June 27th, 2003.

everything from Mass times, to how one obtains permission to marry outside one's own parish.

The idea that the level of funding reflects the importance placed on the work is referred to by some authors. For example, White writes:

If the church sees a particular form of communication as important in a given cultural context, then motivating the faithful to support this communication- whether this be building cathedrals or establishing television stations - becomes central in Catholic culture.²²

However, Shaw, former press officer to the U.S. bishops, believes that it is not money or resources which is the most important, but a change in attitudes. He says:

Still, money is not the essence of good public relations. Truthful content faithful to the Christian message is vastly more important. In fact, it appears that quite a bit of money regularly is wasted on useless or even harmful church-related communication.... But it remains true that church public relations should receive the money it needs to get the job done.²³

In other words, money is not as important as a commitment to ethical communication, even though a certain minimum of funding is required to operate efficiently. The Islamic Foundation is constrained in terms of funding because it is small. As Rabia'a Golden [formerly known as Rabia'a Murt Najjair] who is Women's Co-ordinator of the Islamic Foundation says, it is difficult to be organised until you can afford to pay a full-time person.²⁴ At the time of interview, responsibility for media relations was split between several people in the Islamic Foundation, each of whom had other jobs as well. On the other hand, Fr. Martin Clarke, Director of Communications for the Catholic Bishops' Conference and spokesperson for the Catholic bishops, feels that matters are improving

²² White, 'Mass media and culture in contemporary Catholicism', p. 588.

²³ Shaw, 'Public relations and the Church II', p. 61.

²⁴ Golden. Nov.21st, 2000.

from the point of view of resources, and the fact that he is the first Bishops' spokesperson who is not a bishop and that he has a well-resourced office represents progress.²⁵

Good relationships between journalists and religious representatives

Good relationships between religious representatives and journalists are seen as the second major factor that is essential to dialogue. Fr. Tom Hayes, Director of Communications for the Catholic diocese of Cork and Ross, talks about the central role of relationships and the necessity for there to be trust between people if dialogue is to work. He states:

To operate in the kind of dialogic fashion that's called for by the gospel and by the church's own understanding of itself on paper, the context for it ought to be a relationship which is governed by the same dynamics that the Gospel suggests. In other words, respect, fair play, justice, understanding, forgiveness, patience, charity and generosity. If you don't have a relationship of trust with people with whom you're attempting to communicate in today's world, your communications enterprise is gone.²⁶

Hayes comments on the theoretical change in the model of communication after the Second Vatican Council. *Inter Mirifica* is the Council document which deals specifically with communications, but is generally acknowledged to be a weak document.²⁷ As documented in Chapter Two, the Pastoral Instruction that emerged after the Council, *Communio et Progressio*, has a far more developed vision of communication. Hayes says:

²⁵ Clarke. Dec. 18th, 2000.

²⁶ Hayes, Oct. 18th, 2000.

²⁷ See Cooney. *No news is bad news*. p.49-53, for background to the production of *Inter Mirifica*, and the general agreement that it was 'arguably the poorest' document of the Council. Dunn, *No lions in the hierarchy*, p.312. Dunn says that 'the bishops were dissatisfied with the schema presented for their approval, and only agreed to accept it on condition that a further "pastoral instruction" be prepared after the Council.'

Eilers, *Church and Social Communications*, p.57. The document 'received the highest number of No-votes of any document of the Second Vatican Council.'

So officially on paper *Communio et Progressio* moved fundamentally away from *Inter Mirifica* and said that the critical dynamic in communication has to be dialogue, not proclamation.... The communications thinking in the *Communio et Progressio* document would have espoused a dialogic model of communication with the world, which doesn't undermine anything of the church's sense of mission or the church being the 'body of Christ' or anything like that. In fact, it works very well with it.

However, he points out that while a change may have happened on paper, in many ways the reality is that the church still operates from a proclamation model. He says:

Therefore, if you have somebody working in the communication area it's 'to get your message out' and they'll even use that language which in most other sectors of society is now redundant... That's partly why you get a lot of agitation when a media outlet asks the tough questions. You get people in the pews jumping up and saying, 'You shouldn't be putting the bishop under that much pressure'. Of course, you shouldn't if you believe that the bishop's job is to proclaim the gospel and not to take questions. But that said, on paper at least the church has opened the possibility for alternatives.

He says that investing resources in 'getting your message out', in the sense of setting up a press office and hoping to tell journalists what to print, is worse than useless. Like many of those interviewed, he says that the key to communication is the building of relationships, in particular with media practitioners. He states:

If I don't know a journalist who calls asking a question, and if the journalist doesn't know me and if it's our first time to engage, it makes the issue far more complex because the question that's in the back of both of our minds is 'Can he or she be trusted?' Whereas in the case of people that I would frequently talk with, the conversations are shorter, (not necessarily less respectful, in fact they're more

respectful as a result) because we don't have to go through the ritual of establishing territory or boundaries or understanding.

Cooper speaks of one of the most rewarding aspects of his job being the fact that he has built a 'bridge into the media' which enables him at times to show that the church is not just a 'stark institution'. He states:

I'm not saying that because I'm a great friend of A, B or C I expect them to automatically use the story, because they're under constraints from their editor. But for me it's letting them see that the church isn't remote.²⁸

Dardis identifies dialogue as occurring in many different ways. One of the ways in which he visualises his role as a director of communication is as acting in a kind of 'broker' role, which involves explaining the church to the media and the media to the church.

You're talking to the media about the church and explaining, be it indulgences or whatever, and then you are talking to the church people about the media and saying, 'Listen, here is where they are coming from. They just have genuine questions here which might seem obvious to you but...' So you are explaining in both directions.²⁹

In the literature, White refers to this as the 'representative who stands between the public sphere and the church sphere, translating back and forth across the lines of public culture and the internal culture of the church.' Without such people, White alleges, 'Too often the church becomes defensive and even hostile towards the mass media.'³⁰

The question of potential conflict between the model of communication as found in official documents, which the religious representative is trying to emulate, and the reality

²⁸ Cooper. Jan 8th, 2001.

²⁹ Dardis. Oct 31st, 2000.

³⁰ White, 'Communication planning for church renewal', p.35.

of the model from which a religious organisation operates at other times, or indeed most of the time, can arise. Jim McDonnell, Director of the Catholic Communications Centre for the Catholic Church in England and Wales, says:

My idea is that the church has a rather limited and basic notion of communication. It tends to think in terms of the transfer of information and the proclamation of truth. Its basic model is that of the presentation of propositions to the audience for their assent. [Whatever the theory] it tends in practice to forget that communication is the building of a relationship and the attempt to co-ordinate meaning between the participants.³¹

This ties in with what Hayes says earlier, that the church is still operating out of a model of communication as proclamation. The proclamation model is essentially one-way and monological. It is designed for use in structures where there is 'top-to-bottom' communication. The other model - that of communication as dialogue - is proposed for use with the media. The contradiction is inherent.

Within the Catholic Church, there is another difficulty that arises from the fact that structures that look from the outside to be monolithic may in fact not have a coherent form that facilitates communication. Savage explores this idea in the aftermath of *Suing the Pope*³², a documentary on the Catholic Diocese of Ferns and how it had handled the issue of child abuse. Savage contends that the fact that each diocese is effectively autonomous and answerable only to Rome means that there is little or no possibility of effective action right across the Irish Catholic Church when it comes to a crisis. The 'Bishops' Conference is a relatively weak mechanism, which has no right to impose a programme across all dioceses. Added to this, each religious order is effectively independent. So while the Catholic Church is presented as a monolith, in fact it is a very dispersed organisation.³³

³¹ McDonnell. Apr. 9th 2001.

³² *Suing the Pope*, BBC 2, transmitted Apr. 2nd, 2002.

³³ Savage, 'Bishops lack management skills and support'.

When Clarke, spokesperson for the Catholic bishops, is asked whether the somewhat cumbersome mechanism of the Bishops' Conference makes his job difficult, he disputes this:

I think it is also important to recognise that my job is certainly not just limited to Conference [of bishops] decisions. I don't have to get clearance for everything. My job is perceived much more as representing the Irish church or the thinking of the bishops on a whole range of things so the inadequacies of the Bishops' Conference insofar as they exist are certainly not a stumbling block or a barrier in any way.³⁴

Clarke may feel that the structure of the Catholic Church does not affect his role at national level. However, other Catholic representatives think that what they perceive as the structural weaknesses of the institutional church do have an impact on how they can carry out their work. For example, Hayes speaks about the frustrations of his role as a communications officer at diocesan level:

The hardest aspect of the job is frustration with the institutional church that insists on making the same mistakes over and over again in terms of not taking on board the need for a communications strategy. That bites [sic] from a national perspective, from a diocesan perspective, and locally as well. It's no consolation to say that there'll be a spot on the martyrs' list for you.³⁵

He goes on to say:

If we're expecting the Irish church to use the mechanism of the Bishops' Conference to reach out and build relationships in society it hasn't happened yet, and I don't see it happening either, easily.

³⁴ Clarke. Dec 18th, 2002.

³⁵ Hayes. Oct. 18th, 2000.

Regardless of the limitations of the structures within which he works, Hayes says that he remains committed to a model of dialogue, which he sums up as 'not communicating to control, but to serve'. This commitment is representative of many of the interviewees.

Credibility

The third factor in the promotion of dialogue is the acknowledgement that given the reality of pluralism, audiences accept or reject propositions on the ostensible merits of the arguments, and no longer on the authority of the institution making the statement.

Credibility is therefore vitally important for the religious representative and his or her organisation. The scandals that have affected the Catholic Church over the past decade or more are seen as having major repercussions for the church. An important part of *being credible* is how you present your message. In the interviews there is an acknowledgement that the public will not accept being preached at, but will take or leave what they see or hear from the media according to how it fits with their experience.

Lynas recognises that 'we are trying to talk to both Christians and non-Christians.' He states:

All we want to do is to be there showing concern for people, not pre-judging them. We have to recognise that people...can take that opinion and say 'Yes, I like that,' or they can reject that opinion.³⁶

Hoban has presented radio shows for a decade or more on local radio. While this is not part of his job as communications officer, it has led him to reflect on the difference between *communication in a liturgical or parish situation and communication in the media*. He says:

Your audience [on radio] isn't your audience in a church or in a parish. It's made up of whoever just happens to be listening in. There would be a lot of people

³⁶ Lynas, Jan 8th, 2001.

there who never go to mass, people who will never hear a sermon, people who maybe wouldn't regard themselves technically as Christians or as Catholics. You would, in that sense, push out the boat a little more to try to get them to consider things in an oblique kind of way. In other words, you wouldn't preach at them, but at the same time through the work that you do, you would be floating ideas that they might pick up.³⁷

McDonnell has written that since the 1970s there has been a decline of trust in and a questioning of the credibility of social institutions generally. He says that institutions and their representatives now find themselves living in the 'x-ray environment' created by the modern news media; an environment in which they are constantly subject to intense and often hostile scrutiny. Under such a persistent media gaze institutions have had to face up to the fact that they can no longer take their authority or credibility for granted. He believes that for an institution like the Catholic Church this realisation has come slowly and been particularly hard to bear. He quotes Andreas Schedler:

Credibility represents an essential component of any institutional arrangement worth its name. Our everyday language contains a whole array of distinctions that express the difference between credible and non-credible institutions. Most of them follow the theatrical, or should we say Platonian imagery of reality versus façade. They contrapose real, substantive, and effective institutions against hollow, apparent, formal, fictitious ones, in essence, genuine institutions against shadow institutions, institutional caricatures, empty shells.³⁸

McDonnell points out that for the Catholic Church it is crucially important that the gap between the ideal and the actual, the appearance and reality, should be as narrow as possible, because credibility is easily lost but won with difficulty. He goes on to say

³⁷ Hoban. Dec 12th, 2000.

³⁸ Schedler, in McDonnell, 'Desperately seeking credibility: English Catholics, the news media and the church'.

Over the past two decades, the church has had to endure increasing revelations of just how far some of its representatives have fallen from grace. The emergence into the public eye of the whole sad topic of child sexual abuse has been particularly difficult for the church. Even though most child abuse takes place within families, it has been the exposure of child abuse by clergy that has often captured the news headlines and which has seemed especially shocking. In modern society, the most damaging allegation that can be made about an institution or its representatives is that it connived at and covered up sexual abuse.³⁹

Lynas comments on this loss of credibility by the Catholic Church. He thinks that some of it has come about because the structures of the church enable scandals to be covered up and people moved from place to place. He says that in the Presbyterian Church, congregations are responsible for interviewing and selecting their ministers, which means that scandals which affected the Catholic Church are unlikely to happen there. He goes on:

By our nature, I mean with the General Assembly, ...we would have great difficulty in sweeping things under the carpet. The Moderator is not saying, 'You will move from there to there'. The Catholic Church in its arrangement can move people about.... I think that's the sad thing about the Catholic Church, I mean they got found out in terms of... well, whether it's right to say blatant lies, I don't know, but not being open and honest enough; and indeed maybe not protecting some of their parishioners, particularly children, which is the main reason that they have lost all credibility.⁴⁰

Clarke, spokesperson for the Bishops Conference, says the 'big damage' done to the church in the last decade has been in terms of credibility:

³⁹ McDonnell. 'Desperately seeking credibility: English Catholics, the news media and the Church'.

⁴⁰ Lynas. Jan 8th, 2001.

The pendulum has swung from a situation where everything that was said by the church was credible and acceptable and believable and right, right through to the other extreme now where people say that because the church is saying something it is suspect. Now I think the thing that we have to work on above all in the whole media and communications area is the restoration or the recovery of credibility. And credibility is very different to that nasty word power; credibility is something where people's freedom is respected.⁴¹

McDonnell believes that church leadership has to face up to and acknowledge its problems, for example, in relation to the failings of the present system of recruiting and training clergy. He says:

Only if the [Catholic] Church starts to do that will it begin to speak to its publics in ways that they can understand. People are suspicious of institutions, they hate 'spin' and they want to see evidence of honesty and transparency. It is difficult for an institution that has never had to account for its actions to be pushed into the spotlight and be forced to explain and justify what it does. But that is the real world and the church has to accept it.⁴²

Among the religious representatives, then, there is acceptance that credibility is an important factor in promoting a spirit of dialogue, and that the Catholic Church has some way to go before its credibility is restored.

Presence in the media – four important aims

The objectives which religious representatives hope to achieve by presence in the media are fourfold.

1. Making the presence and viewpoint of the churches and mosque visible in public discourse

⁴¹ Clarke. Dec. 18th, 2000.

⁴² McDonnell. Apr. 9th, 2001.

This is an important aim that emerges from all the interviews with the religious representatives, although each religious organisation has a slightly different emphasis. When it comes to communication with the general public through the media, the situation of the small Islamic community in Ireland is different to that of the Christian churches. The community has limited resources with which to be pro-active towards media. Also, it feels somewhat at a disadvantage in an overwhelmingly Christian atmosphere. Golden believes that this bias is inevitable in a situation where most journalists have been raised as Christians, whether or not they practise their faith. She believes that the media has been irresponsible in its coverage of Islam from time to time, although she says that she herself has been fairly treated. However, she wonders if journalists are more favourably disposed because she is Irish, and, 'Therefore, they're not seeing me when they talk to me as being all that different?' As an example of how she thinks that the media are irresponsible, she cites one instance where she believes that they were indirectly responsible for a number of racist attacks. During television news coverage concerning asylum seekers, there were repeated shots of a Muslim woman. She states:

The next day I had several reports from women in our community of racist attacks because the news item was, 'Irish taxpayers are paying up to one hundred pounds per night just to house these people in bed and breakfasts'.⁴³

Golden feels that such coverage was 'very stupid and dangerous.' Objectively, it is very difficult to prove that a single broadcast could have had such an effect. However, it does highlight a concern of the Islamic community, which is that coverage of Muslim issues can be sensationalist or can focus on stereotypes. Golden mentions a personal experience:

It's a kind of sensationalism... I just happened to mention on a programme that my daughter married young and within a day I had had five calls from five different newspapers and radio programmes wanting to ask 'Oh, was she twelve

⁴³ Golden. Nov. 21st, 2000.

when she got married?' It was all; 'Can we get something juicy here?' and they weren't really interested in the true Islamic side of it and why they [her daughters] wanted to do that.

Her work often involves her in attempting to redress perceived imbalances. She says:

They will contact us when Ramadan is coming or [when] a Muslim family has been in trouble here or a husband has hit his wife... But any other man, they don't categorise them as being a Catholic or as being a Christian or a Protestant, but when a Muslim man does something wrong, immediately he's a Muslim man and it's identified. And that is a bit unfair in that sense. But apart from those things the media don't really bother contacting us.

She feels particularly strongly about reports of the alleged subjugation of Islamic women. For her the wearing of the veil represents a kind of freedom from being treated as a sexual object and is therefore liberating. As her contact with the media is necessarily limited, Golden feels that it is important to spend time counteracting negative stereotypes and presenting a different face of Islam, allowing the faith to be seen apart from politics and particular cultures. She believes:

Because I mean the faith is, away from custom, away from culture, away from tradition, the faith itself is untouchable by anybody.

In a very different way, Jones faces the problem that there is sometimes a lack of knowledge of the Church of Ireland. She acknowledges that they are 2% of the population, some 75,000 people in the whole of Ireland, and there may be 'whole counties where there are young people who have grown up and never met a member of the Church of Ireland.' She says:

You have to take that on board and I shouldn't be just expecting them [journalists] to know all the 'ins and outs' of what we believe. You have to prepare the

material, you have to be ready to explain and you have to put it across in an attractive way so they can understand it; and that's another part of the job.⁴⁴

She speaks of inaccurate perceptions. For example, she was asked to speak at the Cumann Merriman summer school on the topic of ancestral faith and she spoke in Irish, only to have a woman express surprise that a Protestant could speak Irish. She says that there are many other such prejudices which are very difficult to break down, including the idea that all members of the Church of Ireland are rich and middle class. She believes that lack of knowledge is prevalent in the media. She gives examples of Church of Ireland people being asked things like, 'Do you celebrate Christmas?' She goes on to give another example:

This happened on a big media occasion in Christchurch cathedral. The RTE person turned to me and said, 'You have Holy Communion!' Now admittedly she wasn't a religion correspondent. She was someone who had been sent in that day but she actually turned to me and said that.

Cooper faces similar difficulties in promoting awareness of his church, which has even fewer members than the Church of Ireland. He says:

We have roughly sixty thousand members, roughly fifty five thousand in the north of Ireland and five thousand in the Republic. My job really isn't like the other press officers who are full time. I'm a parish minister. My job basically is trying to get the church's views out into the market place. I am also a person who would be contacted by the media for the names of clergy or lay people who might have a point of view on a particular topic.⁴⁵

Although he emphasises the need for co-operation between the churches, he also says:

⁴⁴ Jones, Feb.23rd, 2001.

⁴⁵ Cooper, Jan 8th, 2001.

At its lowest common denominator, we're saying, there's a little group called Methodists. Here's what they stand for.

The issues involved for the much bigger Catholic Church are very different, not least because of a decade or more of scandals. Dardis comments on the reasons why Archbishop Connell [now Cardinal Connell] wanted to set up the Press Office:

I'd say if you'd asked the Archbishop, why do you want this press office, he'd have said, 'There's lots of positive things happening which are not being acknowledged, and there are lots of difficult things happening which we need to be able to talk about'.⁴⁶

Dardis goes on to talk about the importance of keeping up the morale of Catholics. He speaks of members of his family reading newspapers and seeing nothing but allegations of wrongdoing by church people with no comment or input from a church spokesperson.

Their confidence and faith was eroded. If they see somebody's making a reasonable fist of trying to answer those kind of questions, trying to explain the other perspective in a reasonable manner; they feel that that they can be proud of something. In terms of keeping the people you have, there's a certain amount of evangelisation.

From the interviews, it is clear that there is a growing awareness of the need to communicate that which is positive, or to provide an alternative viewpoint when media coverage is perceived as being one-sided or inadequate. Sr. Maxwell as secretary general of CORI, has many responsibilities of which relations with the media are only a small part. Each religious order is an autonomous entity responsible for its own communication. She speaks on behalf of the representative body, CORI. She acknowledges a shift in the way in which both the religious orders and CORI relate to the

⁴⁶ Dardis. Oct. 31st, 2000.

media. She says that it is part of the spirituality of the orders to work quietly and humbly, so media relations were not emphasised in the past. She goes on:

It would also be true to say that thirty, forty years ago our works spoke for themselves and we didn't even have to publicise what we were doing because everybody knew.⁴⁷

It would come as a shock to many, she believes, to realise that there are still twelve thousand women in religious orders in Ireland. She continues:

In more recent times I think religious orders are realising that they've got to stand up for themselves in the media, whether it's about the disposal of land or property or whether it's about their commitment to certain projects. For instance, I mentioned recently on radio that the Sisters of Mercy have nineteen addiction centres in this country, and one in Ballyragget in Kilkenny is the first and only instance of a teenage addiction group centre in Europe. ... We always imagine that people know these things just because they're there, but they're not known nationally, although they might be known locally.

Of all the aims being considered here, putting forward the church or mosque's version of events comes closest to what we associate with traditional public relations - promoting what is believed to be positive about an organisation. Lynas even uses the term 'brand' in relation to Presbyterianism, which is a term more often associated with marketing.

We have a very strong brand in Presbyterianism, and I don't think we capitalise enough on that.⁴⁸

Use of the term 'brand' may jar in terms of religious communication, but Lynas is speaking of a church that prides itself on diversity and democratic structures. He quotes

⁴⁷ Maxwell. Nov. 29th 2000

⁴⁸ Lynas. Jan 8th, 2001

somewhat wryly the Rev. John Dunlop once describing Presbyterianism as 'democracy gone mad': his point is that it is sometimes difficult to get a 'corporate image' because of the stubborn independence displayed by Presbyterians. However, he is very anxious to defend the 'brand' of Presbyterianism and not to allow it to be sullied in the public eye. He speaks of the necessity to balance the needs of individuals against the needs of the organisation, and to act in a humane manner. He concludes:

But what I will not ultimately do is let the credibility of the organisation suffer.

This comment is made by Lynas in relation to a saga that ran for a long time in British and Irish tabloid newspapers. It was about a Presbyterian minister whom the tabloids took to calling the 'Romeo Rev.' This Presbyterian minister had arrived from Scotland already divorced, because his wife had left him for another woman. He married again, after some time divorced his second wife, and requested permission to marry for a third time. Although the Presbyterian Church does not oppose divorce, in this instance it was decided that if he re-married it would damage his standing and usefulness as a minister and that he should not receive permission to continue to minister. The minister in question approached a tabloid offering to sell his story. Lynas says:

The difficulty was that it then reached a point where you say we have done as much as we can for this minister. I had to make a decision to protect the credibility of the organisation.

So 'clear water' was put between the so-called 'Romeo Rev.' and the Presbyterian Church as an organisation. Talking about 'brand' and the need to maintain credibility by distancing an organisation from a misbehaving minister raises the question of whether there are limits for religious organisations in the way in which they can use public relations techniques. Public relations in the classic sense may be defined in terms such as the following:

Public relations practice is the planned and sustained effort to establish goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.⁴⁹

Or somewhat more elaborately:

Public relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action, which will serve both the organizations and the public interest.⁵⁰

These two definitions may be said to encompass the self-understanding of the profession of public relations. In the first, the aim is not to 'sell' an organisation but to build understanding. The second definition concentrates on analysis of current situations in order to advise leaders and plan programmes that are in the public interest. Thorn offers a different definition of press relations for use in religious communication.

...the planned effort to influence public opinion through good character and responsible performance based on mutually satisfactory two-way communication.⁵¹

This definition has a strong emphasis on ethical behaviour. However, the public and popular conception of public relations is somewhat different. Thus, the concept of 'spin', of putting the best possible gloss on situations, sometimes at the expense of truth, is commonly associated with public relations.⁵² This type of public relations is illustrated by an anecdote told by Liz Harries, then press officer for Archbishop Robin Eames of the Church of Ireland, at a seminar in All Hallows in 1997. She spoke of being present at a summer school in Mayo with the high-profile P.J. Mara and Bernard Ingham, press

⁴⁹ Definition developed by the Institute of Public relations, London. In Jefkins, *Public relations techniques*, p.7.

⁵⁰ Developed by an international conference of public relations organisations held in Mexico City in 1978, and hence known as the Mexican statement. In Jefkins, *Public relations techniques*, p.8.

⁵¹ Thorn. 'Religious organizations and public relations', p.238.

⁵² See Ewen. *PR! A social history of spin*.

officers to An Taoiseach Charles Haughey and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher respectively. She says:

During a question and answer session, I asked both how far they would go to protect their bosses. One replied, 'If my boss said, "Jump" I would ask not "How high?" but "How far?"'. And the other laughed and said 'As far as it takes'.⁵³

Almost all those interviewed for this study regard public relations 'spin' of that kind as particularly inappropriate for religious organisations. There is however, a desire to use the tools provided by public relations in an ethical manner to advance the aims of the religious organisation concerned. In Jones' case, she says that there were some things to be learnt from the world of professional public relations. She states:

Public relations is seen as 'spin' and that its practitioners are a gang of liars. In some ways, though, the church could learn a lot from public relations because a lot of it is simply good manners. When somebody has done something, [it involves] praising them, rewarding them and thanking them, telling their story. It's not all bad.⁵⁴

Ms. Janet Maxwell, Director of Communications for the Church of Ireland, sees public relations as primarily a set of analytical tools, which allows one to go beyond the emotion and heat of a situation, and then to select the appropriate means of response. She sees anything less- such as 'spin' - 'as such an inappropriate model' for a church to use.⁵⁵

Cooper says that the church could not subscribe to 'spin doctoring' since it makes a claim to truth.

⁵³ Harries, 'Church and media', p.32.

⁵⁴ Jones. Feb. 23rd, 2001.

⁵⁵ Maxwell. J. Jan 29th, 2002

'Spin doctoring' obviously gives an impression of a person who is massaging the truth. ... I am sure there are times when we have been tempted to put a 'spin' on something. But it would not be right.⁵⁶

However, he also says that this does not preclude using the positive aspects of public relations, in order to learn 'presentational methodology' in the service of truth. Hoban concurs, and identifies a reluctance to use what he termed 'wisdom' from the field of public relations. He speaks of a relative who was spending thousands of pounds on communications in his business and of how the church would not do so because it is often reluctant to act in a professional manner:

If there's a clash between the 'spin' and the truth, obviously the truth has to win out... but very often we use the excuse that Jesus Christ is present to us and is with us, as if that absolves us from the responsibility of actually doing what we're doing professionally and truthfully.⁵⁷

Lynas says that there is sometimes a conflict between the religious aspect of the work and the need to keep a public profile. He says:

Take the Omagh bomb.⁵⁸ Now the Moderator, is it his first job to talk to the press, to say, 'This is horrible, this is awful'? Or is it to go into the hospitals and visit the people who are dying or are injured? ⁵⁹

Dardis feels that it would be intolerable if a press officer could dictate what a bishop could and could not talk about. For example, he feels it would be wrong to make a decision that abortion is a topic not to be covered because it would not 'play' well. He says:

⁵⁶ Cooper. Jan 8th, 2001

⁵⁷ Hoban. Dec 18th, 2000.

⁵⁸ Bombing of the County Tyrone town of Omagh in 1998 when 31 people died.

⁵⁹ Lynas. Jan 8th, 2001.

I mean I'd hate if the church became involved in keeping its image okay. Having said that, I think that the church often isn't involved enough in defending itself and has let stuff be thrown at it without any kind of response and that's bad.⁶⁰

He makes the point that something may be labelled as 'spin' if it presents an alternative viewpoint, but that it may well be a valid viewpoint:

If it means I've got a right as a Catholic priest or as a Catholic to offer my perspective, call that 'spin' if you want. You would probably call it 'spin' if you don't agree with it. I call it a perspective and I wouldn't apologise for that... I think there has been hesitancy in church circles for maybe a few years about public relations because they feel that it means something a bit less than the truth. But if public relations mean you have to relate to people, you have to say something to your publics, not to leave them in the dark, not to stay quiet, then I'm fine with public relations.

Clarke says somewhat the same:

The church is entitled to express the truth, pursue the truth, and vindicate the truth as far as it can within the media. That is sometimes described pejoratively as 'spinning', but if there is a report in the media about the church which is untrue or inaccurate, the church is absolutely entitled to set out the true position.⁶¹

This is similar to what Thorn terms a 'formidable challenge for churches'. One of the most important roles of religious media relations, according to him, is to:

Correct and counter falsehoods and distortions that appear in news and entertainment content.⁶²

⁶⁰ Dardis. Oct.23rd, 2000.

⁶¹ Clarke. Dec. 18th, 2000.

⁶² Thorn, 'Religious organizations and public relations', p131.

Some of the interviewees draw a clear distinction between what one might term 'corporate profit-driven public relations' and the legitimate use of professional techniques that enhance communication. Lynas believes if the churches are to give leadership 'they have to say things that are at times unpopular.' He sees his job as saying those things in a way which people can find acceptable even though 'they might not agree with them.' None of the interviewees is willing to admit that 'spin' is part of their function, except in the sense alluded to above by Dardis.

As religious orders have been greatly affected by scandals relating to the sexual and physical abuse of children, Sr. Maxwell speaks about the change in attitudes of members of religious orders in relation to media, which came about as a result. In reply to a question about whether religious orders had come to lean too heavily on the legal profession and public relations firms, she singles out the treatment of the scandals by RTE, referring specifically to the series, *States of Fear*⁶³. She says:

We felt we were very unfairly treated in the making of that programme, in the refusal to allow us a preview of it and in the subsequent treatment and coverage both in the papers and on RTE.⁶⁴

She also points out that it is very difficult to respond other than in a legal fashion once this is the route taken by people who have complaints against you. She states that when congregations were served with writs from complainants that 'there is only one way you can respond which is through the legal system.' (This interview was conducted before discussions on the Residential Redress Bill, which offers an alternative route to litigation for those who were abused in industrial schools.) She recognises that a 'learning process' had to take place. She goes on:

⁶³ *States of Fear*. Three part RTE series on Irish industrial schools first broadcast in April and May 1999.

⁶⁴ Maxwell. Nov. 29th, 2002.

We are very concerned and we recognise the need to be pastorally focused around this. We are realising that legal opinion tends to be careful and protective. Legal opinion has its place but it's not the full picture.

She continues:

And it was in that climate that congregations began to realise that in responding or in putting out any public statement they needed the advice, not just of legal people but of public relations firms in drafting sensitive statements. So you looked to people who had expertise in that area because again it was not an area in which we were particularly skilled. The tension has always been, in my experience talking to congregations, that on the one hand they do not wish to be defensive, but on the other hand, as congregation leaders they're obliged to protect their members against false claims.

She has no desire to deny that abuse took place, but outlines her own initial shock that anyone in religious life or in the church could harm children. She feels that it was like 'the denial of a death' for her, but now 'I've grown up. I've accepted that this happened.' She believes that the incidence of abuse is no higher or lower than in the general population. She also says that while congregations had been shocked and taken somewhat by surprise, they did take some initiatives, including the apology made by the Christian Brothers in 1998 to all former residents who had been harmed:

[Later] the religious and CORI publicly welcomed the Laffoy commission⁶⁵ and we are hopeful still that if that continues that the truth of this very sad period in our history may emerge and that there would be a certain cleansing and a certain healing in the process for all.

⁶⁵ The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse chaired by the Honourable Ms. Justice Mary Laffoy and established by the government through legislation in April 2000.

While deeply regretting the harm caused to individuals, Hayes refers to the scandals in terms of an opportunity, albeit sometimes an opportunity missed. In his case, media inquiries about the scandals allowed him to rapidly build relationships with journalists and producers, and he feels it provided opportunities to inform the public about the reality of the institutional church, and to present a human face. He says:

It was frustrating because the church nationally didn't see it as an opportunity at all but saw it as something to run from. So a lot of the misconceptions about the church were allowed to run and still run on, including the very definition of 'church'. Every time you see the word 'church' in a headline in a newspaper irrespective of the newspaper or even on television it's invariably about an institutional organisation of ordained, vowed and professed people who are essentially all the same... So there is no differentiation made at all between what a diocesan priest does in his day-to-day life compared to what a monk does in a monastery or what a religious sister does in Dublin compared to a religious sister in Ecuador. There's no nuancing of the word allowed for.⁶⁶

He believes the media interest generated by the scandals presents an opportunity to show that the church is not a corporation in which the Cardinal is the CEO and commands his minions down the line. Dioceses are essentially independent, as are religious orders. He also believes that the level of knowledge of how the Catholic Church operates is very low generally, but particularly among journalists. He says:

At the time of the so-called scandals what the communications organs of the church tended to do at that stage was go into reactive and preservation mode rather than proactive. [A question might be asked] 'Why didn't the Cardinal rein in Father So-and-So?' when it was hinted that Father So-and-So was doing something or other and a headline gets run in the tabloid to the effect, 'Cardinal

⁶⁶ Hayes. Oct. 18th, 2002.

did nothing.’ What was absent from that issue is an understanding of the relationship between the Cardinal and a religious order - which is basically none.

Hayes is also deeply critical of the over-reliance on public relations firms. As he says, ‘You can’t give a public relations strategy to a group of bishops that you’ve borrowed from the CEO’s of a multinational organisation.’ He is not suggesting that legal and public relations perspectives should be ignored, but that there is a balance to be maintained between the legal, pastoral and educational issues and duties of care to all those immediately involved. He says public relations advice might be to ‘dump’ someone who is accused, while legal advice might be to say nothing at all until a case comes to court:

At a pastoral level, that’s a killer. The critical component that’s required there is trust, and if that trust is stretched or broken, it paralyses the church and it particularly paralyses a parish. One of the critical ingredients for sustaining trust is a clear flow of communication. So if you take the legal angle only and say ‘OK, my advice is say nothing, “Sorry, no comment”,’ you’re actually killing the soul of the church. If you take a corporate public relations perspective on it you’re killing the integrity of the church. If you take the gospel mandate in total isolation from everything else, you end up with a fundamentalist who’s in jail. So, you have to find some kind of a balance.

While there is a strong commitment to presence in the media, as can be seen from the above, one of the findings which emerged from the research was that there is agreement that religious media relations has to be conducted in an ethical fashion, which could not include ‘spin’. None the less, there is some evidence that ‘keeping the brand fresh’ does involve presenting the religious organisations in the best possible light.

2. Being an advocate for social justice

In Thorn’s analysis of Dulles’ secular-dialogic model, an emphasis on social justice emerges as a particularly appropriate way of practising dialogue. He writes:

...the secular-dialogic [model] provides a route for discerning the signs of the times and making common cause on issues of justice, peace, and human solidarity.⁶⁷

White in his commentary on the Second Vatican Council speaks about the church entering the public debate by making commitment to the poor 'the basis of socio-ethical witness in an affluent and consumer-oriented society.'⁶⁸ Social justice is also highlighted in the US Bishops' Pastoral Plan for Church Communications.

The Church should take the side of the oppressed and marginalized. (*Aetatis Novae*, 13, *Communio et Progressio*, 92-95)⁶⁹

The importance of social justice is particularly strongly emphasised in *Aetatis Novae*. The need to comprehend and respond to the social justice significance of the new media age and its impact on the development of peoples and cultures is found in *Aetatis Novae* 4, 7, 8, 9, and 15. This emphasis on social justice is a mainstream tradition of the Catholic Church, coming as it does from over a hundred years of Catholic social teaching in encyclicals, papal documents and statements from episcopal conferences. It is also a focus of the other Christian churches. For example, the ecumenical World Association of Christian Communicators (WACC) has concern for the poor as a central principle. It states:

Ultimately, Christian communicators have no other option but to throw in their lot with the poor, oppressed and marginalised who bear the hallmark of God's communication.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Thorn, 'Models of church and communication', p.98.

⁶⁸ White, 'Mass media and culture in contemporary Catholicism', p.601.

⁶⁹ *Pastoral plan for Church communications*, p.17.

⁷⁰ *Statements on communication*, p.13.

In Islam, the term social justice can have different connotations. There is an emphasis on caring for the poor, which is very important. However, the term 'social justice' when used in writings about Islam, sometimes concerns the Islamic position on usury and bank interest, which is forbidden in Islam.⁷¹ At other times it may concern how a society based on Islamic principles might function.⁷² The Islamic principle of Zakat or Zakah is also relevant:

The Qur'anic word Zakah not only includes charity, alms, tithe, kindness, official tax, voluntary contributions etc., but it also combines with all these God-mindedness and spiritual as well as moral motives.⁷³

There is also a connotation of help for the disadvantaged:

Contribution out of possessions compulsorily sets in motion the process of transfer of wealth from the haves to have-nots, making pursuit of values of life worthwhile for the latter who other wise could not have expected to discharge those responsibilities.⁷⁴

Given the difference in emphasis between the Muslim and Christian traditions, in what follows, the term social justice is used mainly in the Christian sense of those words, because the objective of promoting social justice is found most clearly stated by CORI's Sr. Maxwell. She says:

I think CORI probably appreciated the value of the media and the power of the media to communicate a message more quickly than individual orders and that's because we wanted to bring about an alternative vision of society. The way to do that was through newspapers, radio and television.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Ahmad, *Social Justice in Islam*, p.81.

⁷² Ashraf, *Islamic Social Framework*, p.19.

⁷³ Abdulati, *Islam in Focus*, p.185.

⁷⁴ Ashraf, *Islamic Social Framework*, p.51.

⁷⁵ Maxwell. E. Nov.29th, 2000.

CORI is recognised as an advocate for social justice, not least because of the fact that they have a seat as a member of the Voluntary and Community pillar, in the Social Partnership which negotiates national agreements. The focus on social justice is very explicit in the *Vision Statement* of the conference:

As members of the Conference of Religious, we see our leadership as a call to service modelled on the life and teachings of Jesus. Inspired by him, we strive to be prophetic in character. We dare to speak out on the burning issues that affect our world and struggle to respond to them. Our areas of concern include justice and the poor, care of the earth and collaboration among the people of God... We stand with the poor people...We yearn to be moulded by a faith which does justice.⁷⁶

One of the interesting things about this focus on promoting social justice through the media is the degree to which the Christian motivation of the religious orders is rendered implicit rather than explicit, given that social justice is seen as a core Christian value. The motivation is clear to CORI, but the organisation does not present its message in explicitly Christian terms in most of their dealings with the media. In a response to a question as to whether CORI tries to promote specifically Christian values, Sr. Maxwell replies in the affirmative adding that it does so in a way which is acceptable to the general public:

If we use, as I said, that language [of church teaching or gospel values] explicitly we may make people somewhat uncomfortable. We have no problem about making people uncomfortable, in one sense, but if it makes them so uncomfortable that they cannot hear what we're saying, then we're prepared to use the language of the 'market place' in order to get our message across. But I think we're pretty clear on where we're coming from ourselves.

⁷⁶ Vision Statement of CORI http://www.corl.ie/general_info/vision.htm

CORI Justice Commission has as a primary focus the development of public policy, and 'argues all the time for bigger slices of the budgetary cake to be allocated to the poor.'

Sr. Maxwell says:

So is this what Christ would have done? I think Christ would always have argued from the stance of the poor and we feel that we're consistent with that message.

Sr. Maxwell suggests that some of the ideas of theologian Walter Brueggemann explain very well the rationale behind why CORI deals with justice in an implicitly Christian fashion rather than explicitly. The relevant ideas of Brueggemann⁷⁷ are found in a prolonged analysis of a passage from the Second Book of Kings, 18-19. His rather difficult argument looks at what he calls 'bilingualism', the need for people of faith to have one language for public negotiation, and another for private communal discussion. In the passage that he analyses from the Book of Kings, the Assyrian army is at the gate of Jerusalem, demanding the surrender of the Jews:

The city is under siege. The context is a gross mismatch between imperial power and a tiny kingdom without visible resources.⁷⁸

There are two essential conversations in the passage, the conversation at the wall of the city, and the conversation that happens behind the wall. In the former, the Assyrian negotiator shouts the terms of surrender, and likens YHWH [the Jewish sacred symbol for God, sometimes written as Yahweh] to all the other failed Gods of the Middle East. The response of the Jewish negotiators is to ask that the Assyrian speak in Aramaic, so that the people within who speak mostly Hebrew will not be terrified. The Assyrian contemptuously and deliberately speaks in Hebrew. The conversation within the wall is very different. The Jewish king goes to YHWH and receives the message 'Do not be afraid'. Eventually the city is saved, and the apparently powerless are vindicated for their

⁷⁷ Brueggemann, 'The legitimacy of a sectarian hermeneutic: 2 Kings 18-19', pp.3-34.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.3.

faith. Brueggemann does not read the text in simplistic terms, that is, that prayer will defeat an empire, but as an analogy for Christians in a dominant and sometimes oppressive culture.

My urging is that church education must be bilingual, nurturing people [so that they] know the language to speak on the wall in the presence of the imperial negotiators and not to speak the language behind the wall in a community of faith where a different set of assumptions, a different perception of the world, a different epistemology is at work. The conversation at the wall is crucial, because the Assyrians are real. They are dialogue partners and must be taken seriously. And they will not go away. But unless there is another conversation behind the wall in another language about another agenda, Judah [the Jewish community] on the wall will simply submit to and echo imperial perceptions of reality.⁷⁹

It can be seen why CORI would identify with this passage. In a sense it is 'Judah', a tiny community living according to values which are at odds with the broader society, and yet wishing to make an impact in terms of the values which society will hold. This is not dissimilar to the idea found in Warren's writings of a religious culture that offers constructive criticism of the wider culture. Warren supports the idea of dialogue with the wider society, but also of cultural resistance to norms in society where they conflict with the moral code of the religious organisation. He believes that, at its best, the religious culture can provide a useful critique of the oppressive practices of the wider culture.⁸⁰ CORI's argument is that in order to achieve its goals they need to speak the language of negotiation, in terms that the 'empire' understands. The internal language which motivates and sustains it is not going to be understood by outsiders and may even be a barrier, but is vital for its own sustenance and ability to resist the 'empire.' However, CORI's choice of how it presents itself could be viewed in another way. It might be seen as part of a wider phenomenon within churches where the fact that their status in the wider society is changing forces a kind of re-invention on the part of a religious

⁷⁹ *ibid*, p. 6.

⁸⁰ Warren, *Seeing through the media*, p. 21.

organisation. Peck describes various means by which religions can accommodate the 'de-institutionalisation of religious reality in the worldviews of modern people.' She writes:

A religious belief system may accommodate functional rationality by downplaying supernaturalistic elements; by providing rational explanations for beliefs; or by reinterpreting its cosmology into a grammar of naturalism (e.g. translating religion into ethics, psychology, or politics.)⁸¹

The religious values espoused by CORI are specifically Christian, but it has chosen to downplay this aspect in its public advocacy on behalf of the poor, including its work in the media. Instead, it expresses itself in the language of sociology, economics and political economy, particularly in its advocacy for the disadvantaged. Is there a danger that CORI may be very successful at promoting a vision of society, but not necessarily at creating an atmosphere where a religious organisation like CORI could thrive? Sr. Maxwell counters the idea that CORI does not promote an explicitly religious profile by pointing to CORI's pastoral office, which works very hard to integrate lay people into ministry. However, it could be said that this illustrates that their pastoral work is more like work 'behind the wall' but that their public advocacy will be conducted in the language 'on the wall' to use Brueggemann's analogy.

Peter Steinfels, religious correspondent of the *New York Times*, also deals with how concerns of this kind are articulated. He was asked at a forum on religion and media hosted by the American magazine *Commonweal* why it was so difficult for the religious Left to get its message out through the mainstream press. (It may seem odd to some people to characterise CORI as the 'religious Left', but from Steinfels' reply, it is clear that he is thinking of those who have an 'option for the poor' as CORI does, rather than of any radical thinking on doctrine.) He says:

⁸¹ Peck, 'Psychologised religion in a mediated world', p.233.

The religious Left seems to me to have become habitually nervous or uncomfortable with stating its concerns in explicitly religious language. So, often times, perfectly good concerns about hunger or world problems coming out the religious left sound almost identical to the expressions that would come from non-religious groups...Sometimes I'm puzzled by what has happened to the explicit religious dimension, which I suspect is there in people's lives, but some kind of self-censorship seems to have removed the articulation of that from people's lives.⁸²

Choosing to allow Christian values be implicit in public communication is a valid choice which works very well in achieving CORI's aims of being an influence on society. However, it raises the question as to whether CORI could combine this work with a more explicitly spiritual or religious perspective, and whether it should do so, as part of a public witness to its members' faith.

3. Pre-evangelisation and preparation for *da'wa*

Evangelisation or *da'wa* through the media, in the sense of explicitly proclaiming or preaching, is seen as problematic by most of those who were interviewed. In Christianity, evangelisation as a term is used in different ways. In certain Protestant denominations, it has a connotation of urging people to be 'saved' by accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour.⁸³ In Catholic teaching and in many Protestant denominations, it is viewed more as an ongoing process of introducing people to Christian teachings that will shape the way in which they live their lives.⁸⁴ Although there is no exact equivalent in Islam, *da'wa*, which means witness to, or propagation of faith, comes close. In contrast with the United States, where there is a great deal of explicitly Christian evangelical broadcasting,⁸⁵ among those who are interviewed for this thesis the whole area of the spiritual is seen as perhaps not suited to news and current affairs. However, most interviewees did say that there are exceptions to this rule.

⁸² 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums' p.25.

⁸³ See 'By grace you have been saved through faith.' <http://www.christistheway.coma02a11ba.html>

⁸⁴ See *Decree on the Church's missionary activity*, Chapter 5, p.817 –818.

⁸⁵ See Alexander, *Televangelism reconsidered – ritual in the search for human community*.

In some of the literature about the role of media in evangelisation, caution is expressed. For example, Andrew Walker of the Gospel and Culture Project, suggests that television in particular may 'only be suited to a form of pre-evangelism.' He explains that pre-evangelism is about presenting religious people as reasonable, in a way that might cause someone to seek out a religious community in order to explore further. Walker says that advocates of explicit television evangelism are committed to a proclamation as opposed to a dialogue model.⁸⁶ All the religious representatives who were interviewed were open to the idea that sometimes it is possible to communicate some sense of the sacred, usually in an oblique way, but sometimes more directly. Hoban says that the word evangelisation for him has connotations of a 'strong, hard sell,' somewhat like a 'door-to-door salesman'. He states:

I think that approach is ineffective and it doesn't fit that easily in the media.⁸⁷

On the other hand, he did say that some people, though certainly not all, do have a sense of and a search for spirituality, and that what he feels he is trying to do is to 'spark something in people.' He gives one example of a report that he did on his local radio show of a religious service for stillborn and miscarried babies, which had been held in his parish. In his view the service, and the report of it, had a far-reaching effect:

It has affected people at a deep level and I think [evangelisation] can happen in that oblique kind of way rather than the direct evangelical sort of [hard] sell.

Several people write of 'keeping the rumour of God alive'. They include Fr. Dermot McCarthy, head of religious programming in RTE television, who writes:

⁸⁶ Walker, *Telling the story*. p.91.

⁸⁷ Hoban. Dec.12th, 2000.

We are involved in the intriguing business of keeping the rumour of God alive at the heart of the machine.⁸⁸

McCarthy believes that it is not the task of religious broadcasting to preach, but to be pre-evangelists, 'examining changing attitudes, banishing ignorance and prejudice, allowing people to tell their stories, sowing seeds, and floating ideas.'⁸⁹ Although he is speaking about religious broadcasting, the interviewees express similar ideas about religious media relations. As McKinnon notes, media cannot replace the function of a religious community. She says:

Television and radio, at their best, can stimulate the mind; quicken the heart; and prick the conscience. They cannot replace all the functions of the church.⁹⁰

This distinction between what might be called the 'virtual' world of the media, and 'real' communities of belief, is an important one. The US Bishops, in their 1997 document on communications, identify the over-arching goal of their communications as being to 'present Christ's message through participation in media, locally and nationally.' When they list the seven actions that flow from this, evangelisation comes first. When the goal of evangelisation is explained further, it is clear that it is not through media relations that they expect this to occur, except, for example, in securing publicity for a program of evangelisation which is planned at a local, diocesan or national level. They talk of 'making parishes the primary site for evangelisation and supporting their efforts with materials and training.'⁹¹ So evangelisation is seen as primarily happening at the local and personal level rather than through the media. In short, the primary site of evangelisation and belief is outside the media.

Although he believes that the communication of Christian values is central to his work, Clarke believes that it is rarely explicit:

⁸⁸ McCarthy, 'Using the message- using the symbols', p.79.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, p.81.

⁹⁰ McKinnon, 'Religious broadcasting', p.2.

⁹¹ *Pastoral Plan for Church Communications*, pp.7-8.

I think it is implicit rather than explicit. That has a lot to do with the authenticity of the people concerned, the credibility of the people who are at the coalface in media terms for the church.⁹²

He identifies moments where he spoke in quite explicit terms 'about what the church believes in and stands for, for what one believes in and stands for oneself' and he feels that these were moments of evangelisation. Bradley thinks that it is through the 'preoccupations' of the church, which he believes in the Dublin archdiocese should centre on ecumenism and social justice, that people are motivated to explore further:

If you have won their hearts a bit by the way in which you are present in society they might then want to know what motivates and underlies that, to ask what is the ultimate preoccupation. So, I don't think you can talk 'God language' terribly easily at first blush...The church is about transcendence, it has an ultimately transcendent preoccupation which is not easy to feed into the culture, especially now. But it's all the more important because of that. I would like to be somehow intimating that transcendence through what we do.⁹³

Catholic Bishop Donal Murray at a talk given at the European Episcopal Conference for Media says that:

One can hope to do little more than to present the church as a reasonable, responsible body with something constructive, challenging, perceptive and distinctive to say about human life.⁹⁴

McDonnell believes that direct preaching through the media appeals to very few, in the same way as 'party political broadcasts' sway very few people unless they are pre-disposed to 'accept the one-way message'. Again, he feels that spiritual matters are best

⁹² Clarke. Dec 18th, 2000.

⁹³ Bradley. Dec 18th, 2001.

⁹⁴ Murray, 'Communicating the faith in an era of rapidly growing faithlessness'.

conveyed in a much more oblique way.⁹⁵ Cooper tells a funny story of how the language used by a religious person failed to meet the media's criteria of news; he gave the Methodist presidential address script to a senior journalist, who said to him:

'Roy, my sub editor might take God once, but Jesus sixteen times in four paragraphs is just off the wall.' So I think what the church has to do is try to find a different vocabulary.⁹⁶

Cooper's point is that religious language, which is fine for a group of believers, does not necessarily transfer easily to the media. However, Dardis is adamant that the sacred can be conveyed through the media. He says:

The alternative is to say that the media is so kind of 'corrupted by original sin' that there is no way God can reach through it, which I do not accept.⁹⁷

He identifies occasions when reference to the sacred can be quite explicit. He mentions a time on *Morning Ireland*⁹⁸ when he heard a Presbyterian speak about 'Jesus Christ being alive today and loving each one of us.' He almost felt shock because it was so unexpected in the context of *Morning Ireland*. However, he believes that the church needs to explore ways of dealing with faith more explicitly, that some formats are more suited to it than others. Maxwell, Director of Communications for the Church of Ireland, says that it very much depends on the story involved as to whether explicitly religious concerns could be addressed. At the time of interview there was some degree of controversy concerning the siting of telecommunications towers in churches, and as she points out dryly, that did not give a great deal of scope for communicating a sense of the sacred. She says:

⁹⁵ McDonnell. Apr. 9th, 2002.

⁹⁶ Cooper. Jan. 8th, 2001.

⁹⁷ Dardis. Oct. 31st, 2000.

⁹⁸ *Morning Ireland*. Current affairs programme broadcast on weekdays between 7 and 9 o'clock each morning on RTE Radio One.

But then you take something like the Andrew Furlong⁹⁹ debate, which has really challenged people to think; what do they believe? Why do they believe it? And where do they stand in terms of the Creed, which of course is not just the Anglican creed, it's the same concepts and the same core of beliefs which are shared by all the Christian churches? And with something like that you definitely have that sense of the sacred coming through, and you are aware that something is happening there in terms of people and their own belief.¹⁰⁰

Lynas also speaks of occasions when very explicit references to faith are made, such as the role of faith during a tragedy. Following a spate of killings in Northern Ireland over Christmas, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church was invited on to *Good Morning Ulster*.¹⁰¹ A short interview had been scheduled but it was extended to become a much longer piece because the producer realised it was making good radio, including the explicit religious message. Lynas also speaks of the amount of airtime given to clergy when the Omagh bombing happened, because they were saying useful and helpful things which 'were assisting people to come to terms with this huge trauma'.¹⁰² Cantwell notes that by its nature news is sketchy, brief, and not particularly suited to spiritual matters. But like Lynas, he identifies particular moments where such values were communicated, including the Omagh bombing. He says:

That was an example of the church giving fairly powerful leadership, not in its cardinals but in local people who are with their people and know them. That's the one thing, I think, about the Irish priest, is that he does seem to know his people. Therefore, when he is called upon in such situations to speak to them, he can speak with an authentic voice because he doesn't have to sham it or imagine that he knows them. He does know them.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Andrew Furlong resigned from the ministry of the Church of Ireland after causing controversy by disputing, among other things, the divinity of Christ. See McGarry. 'Dean's episcopal authority removed'.

¹⁰⁰ Maxwell. J. Jan 29th, 2001

¹⁰¹ BBC Radio Northern Ireland current affairs programme.

¹⁰² Lynas. Jan 8th, 2001.

¹⁰³ Cantwell. Mar. 28th, 2002.

Cantwell believes that ultimately the church has to be about communicating the spiritual and the transcendent, the fact that 'God has called each of us by name before we were born.' This must be the central role of the church. He is not saying that it should not be concerned with social justice, but the hunger for spiritual values must be a primary concern. He identifies Cardinal Hume as someone who was able to break through the 'seeming no-man's land' of media and communicate spiritual values:

I often think that in all of the virtues that you might want in a religious leader, that the most important is that he can touch people, can bring an element of transcendence to people's lives, that amidst all of the seeming chaos and amidst all the noise there is this voice that is speaking to deeper needs and deeper truths.

McDonnell also identifies Cardinal Hume as someone capable of pointing to transcendent values. He says:

His enormous public credibility was due to the fact that he was able to speak authoritatively without seeming authoritarian, that he was transparently honest and sincere and a man of real holiness... Credibility is won every time the church is able to give its message not only in words but also in the whole manner of its life.¹⁰⁴

In common with the Christian representatives, the Islam representatives believe that media can act as a spur to faith, but that it cannot replace contact with a community of believers, which is where real *da'wa* takes place. For example, Al-Hussein says:

No, I don't think the media is the place for reversion to happen. This largely has to happen at the personal level. There is no organised machinery in Islam as such [for propagation] and in many countries people became reverted to Islam when

¹⁰⁴ McDonnell. Apr. 9th, 2001.

they mixed with other Muslims, when they saw the behaviour of other people, rather than these people trying to indoctrinate them.¹⁰⁵

As part of this oblique *da'wa*, Muslims have a particular objective, which is to present their beliefs not as a religion, but as a way of life encompassing every detail of the day. As Fazel Ryklief, administrator of the Islamic Cultural Centre, puts it, Islam governs everything from brushing your teeth, trimming your nails and shaving your underarms, to how to conduct a business or go about getting married. He states:

It is a total way of life. It is not a religion where you just sit down and you go into a mosque and you say your prayers and you come out and that's it. Because you pray 5 times a day, your whole life is governed by it.... There is a reminder every few hours to put you on the straight path.... It's a 7 days a week prayer and it's a 'God-consciousness' all the time.¹⁰⁶

For Golden, Islam's attitude to family and to women is an important part of this way of life, which is a 'whole family way of life, a value system of respect.' In relation to how to communicate this way of life, Ryklief feels that 'our biggest problem today in Ireland is getting a voice in the media which I don't think we have at all.' He sees communication about Islam as taking place at two levels:

The first thing we have to do is to tell people what Islam is all about because they don't know about Islam at all, and what some of what they do know, is obviously misconstrued. I think the next step then would be to go on to show how it is lived. I mean this not in the sense of preaching but for example, simple things like a cookery lesson, where you say, 'OK, I'm a Muslim and this is what I eat and this is what I cook.'

¹⁰⁵ Al-Hussein, Mar. 27th, 2002.

¹⁰⁶ Ryklief, Mar. 8th, 2002.

He sees the media as having a very important role to play, in overcoming the stereotype of the Muslim 'with the Kalashnikov'. He states:

In pictures in newspapers, or on television, Muslims always seem to be very stern and angry people or very sad people sometimes. We are never shown in the light that we are just as normal as everyone else around is.... We love our children just as much as you do and when your children hurt we also hurt, and when another child who is not a Muslim or a Christian is hurt we also hurt, because we have that same love for everyone else in the same way as you would have.

The Muslim religious representatives interviewed for this thesis believe that the Muslim way of life is very difficult for them to convey due to the small size of their community, and to the perceived bias of the media.

4. Upholding civic values

The religious representatives interviewed do not confine their aims to the narrowly 'religious', in the generally accepted sense of that word. They also have a sense of playing a role in developing and maintaining a society where the common good is promoted and the individual may realise his or her potential. McDonnell expresses one aspect of this in his concern for maintaining forums where serious debate can take place. He says:

The media forum (the newspaper article, the radio talk or discussion, the TV documentary or relatively serious chat show) can be an expression of a sense of civic values, the notion that we can as a society debate with each other and exchange ideas and together contribute something valuable to society as a whole. Of course that is quite an ideal, and media practice usually falls a long way short of it, but it is important to have the ideal, otherwise we just give up on the idea of

having any kind of civilized interchange. I think that the public service notion is vital in this respect....¹⁰⁷

McDonnell's support for a media forum where ideas can be exchanged in a serious way ties in with a desire expressed by many of the interviewees not just to support explicitly religious values, but values which help society to continue to function. This view is echoed by the US bishops in *Pastoral Planning for Social Communications*, where they identify 'acting as an advocate for the larger social and cultural communication environment' as a key priority for their work in the media. This involves supporting high standards in broadcasting, particularly public service broadcasting, and in journalism. They also say this support for standards should involve joining with other religious groups who have similar concerns.¹⁰⁸

Al- Hussein identifies working for common values as an essential concern of Islam.

We want what is good for people who are not Muslims. That doesn't have to be in the name of religion or wanting to convert or anything like that, because one of our objectives is to spread good in the world, regardless of whether these people are Muslims or not.¹⁰⁹

Lynas recognises that in a pluralist society, that the Presbyterian viewpoint must be expressed in a way that stands on its own merits and does not on rely on an appeal to religious authority. He contrasts this with a 'dictatorial approach', and says:

I think in terms of our input into news and current affairs, what we generally have is some sort of moral framework that we want to make people aware of.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ McDonnell. Apr.9th, 2001.

¹⁰⁸ *Pastoral Planning for Social Communication*, p.11.

¹⁰⁹ Al -Hussein. Mar. 27th, 2002.

¹¹⁰ Lynas. Jan 8th, 2001.

He gives two examples, in relation to alcohol and teenage sex, to illustrate an approach to civic or social values which is used across a whole range of issues. Presbyterians have traditionally been quite strict about alcohol:

We are concerned for people and this is an issue that affects their well being. We would back up what we say with statistics about the fact that where there is more alcohol available it clearly leads to more violence, and more problems in the home.

As the Presbyterians run a rehabilitation centre for those who abuse alcohol, they also speak from that experience. In other words, they present arguments that are accessible to everyone and do not rely on solely religious values. He talks about dealing with the issue of teenage sex in the same way, by trying to influence people and to point out the dangers. Dardis speaks about Mary Ellen Synon, who stopped writing her column in the *Sunday Independent* after she made offensive comments about the appearance of disabled participants in the Para-Olympics. He says that the world's view is increasingly influenced by the survival of the fittest, whereas the Christian viewpoint is 'whether you are lame, or blind or disabled or a Downs Syndrome person', all are of equal dignity. He speaks of church spokespersons providing a 'gentle tap on the shoulder,' a reminder to look at where we are headed as a society. In this context, he identifies 'life issues' like abortion, euthanasia and cloning, and also the treatment of prisoners, the desire on society's part 'to lock them up and throw away the key'. He believes that from the 'price of eggs to ecology' the church has something to contribute.¹¹¹

Jones feels that it is an attitude or a mindset that is most important. It is in service that the real role of the church lies, and she believes that 'sometimes we let the media propel us along and we forget entirely that the church is there to be the servant of the servants, to minister to people. That's what it's all about.'¹¹² According to Hoban, one of the areas where the church has an important role in advocacy is concerning the family. It is

¹¹¹ Dardis, Dec. 7th, 2000.

¹¹² Jones, Feb. 23rd, 2001.

important to be skilled at media relations so that this advocacy is not construed as hurtful commentary on people whose lives do not meet the pattern approved of by churches, even where this is backed up by sociological research. He says:

It's supported by sociological data, and by the experience of people that the optimum circumstances to rear children are when a man and a woman get married. We need to resource this and support them.... We need to present it in such a way that we are not looking down on single parent families. Sometimes, because the church is poor at media, when we talk about the importance of people being faithful to each other it becomes a comment on people in 'irregular' situations. Or if we're talking about the importance of a father and mother rearing their children, it's a comment on people who are in the single parent situation.¹¹³

It is clear that the religious representatives believe that their role extends beyond promoting the good of their own religious organisation. As will be seen later in the thesis, one aspect of this aim of developing a strong civic society, that of promoting high standards of debate and journalism, is shared by the journalists who are interviewed.

Summation

Clear areas of agreement emerge from the interviews conducted with the religious representatives. They concur that media relations must be conducted in a spirit of dialogue, where relationships with journalists and producers are cordial and professional. Some of the religious representatives make the point that there can be considerable resistance to and hostility to the media among members of their own religious organisations. They see media relations as having an important role in the churches and mosque, because the media are such an important influence in society, and religious organisations have a responsibility to have an active presence in the media. This can be hindered by lack of resources. They are also aware that their organisations must have credibility in the eyes of the public, or their communications efforts have little hope of

¹¹³ Hoban. Dec. 12th, 2000.

success. Again, some of those who are interviewed acknowledge that the Catholic Church has ground to regain in this area. Working from a guiding principle of dialogue, they hope to achieve four specific aims. These are: making the churches and mosque visible in public discourse, which includes correcting perceived misconceptions and clarifying the standpoint of the religious organisations; being an advocate for social justice, which means working on behalf of the poor and marginalised; pre-evangelisation or preparation for *da'wa*, where it is considered that a 'hard sell' of the belief system of their religious organisation is generally inappropriate in the context of news and current affairs, but that it is possible to present their churches and mosque's viewpoint as reasonable in a way that might encourage people to come and inquire further about a particular organisation; and upholding civic values, which means giving support to the wide range of values which can be shared by people of all faiths and none, in particular the need for a media which provides a forum for reasonable debate.

Since there can be considerable resistance and hostility to the media among members of their religious organisations, as a result religious representatives describe their role as trying to explain the media to the churches and mosque, and the churches and mosque to the media. This lack of support from members of their own organisations can be difficult. Within the Catholic Church, some of the religious representatives, notably Hayes, feel that the structures of the church militate against good communication, in particular that the Bishops' Conference is an unwieldy mechanism which cannot respond quickly to the demands of the media. The Muslim representatives, and some of the smaller churches, feel disadvantaged because the Catholic Church is so dominant. For the smaller churches and the mosque, lack of resources can be a problem.

It may be easily seen from the foregoing that religious representatives are at times in the uncomfortable position of trying to bridge the gap between the religious and journalistic spheres. They are also trying, for the most part, to sustain a model of religious media relations which is based on dialogue. The next chapter examines how the journalists perceive the success or failure of religious organisations to live up to the high standards

of religious media relations that are mandated in the official documents of these organisations.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF RELIGIOUS MEDIA RELATIONS

Introduction

This chapter draws primarily on the findings from six interviews conducted with journalists, which are examined in the light of the relevant literature. Four of those who were interviewed were print journalists with substantial experience in reporting on religion. (Some have since moved to other positions.) They are John Cooney, (*Ireland on Sunday*) Patsy McGarry, (*Irish Times*) Rachel Andrews (*Sunday Tribune*) and David Quinn (*Irish Catholic* and *Sunday Times*). The remaining two are Joe Little, who is RTE's Religious and Social Affairs Correspondent, and Mary Curtin, who is an RTE radio producer. This is a relatively small number of journalists, but reflects the reality that there are few journalists who specialise in the reporting of religion. The areas covered in the interviews include: the day-to-day reality of the journalists' work lives, including the difficult or pressurised areas; how well or otherwise each religious organisation communicates; the appropriate use of public relations techniques in religious media relations; whether the sacred or religious can be dealt with well in news coverage; the common complaint that journalists are not sufficiently informed about religion; and finally, how well the Catholic Church is handling the various scandals it has confronted in the last decade.

This chapter follows a structure similar to that of the previous one, which allows the similarities and contrasts between the views of the journalists and the religious representatives to be seen clearly. The chapter is sub-divided, in order to facilitate the examination of the journalists' views on each of the topics. The sub-divisions are: the religious organisations' claims to be engaged in dialogue; the four aims of religious media relations, as set out in Chapter Three; the various strengths and weakness of the religious organisations with regard to media relations; and finally, the constraints under which journalists operate, and the claim that journalists are frequently ill-informed.

The journalists speak mainly about the Catholic Church, because it is the largest church in Ireland and the one with which they have most contact. It is also the religious organisation with which they have most difficulty. It is the journalists' perception that secrecy and defensiveness are more common than openness. This means that there is more discussion of the first aim of religious media relations, that is, of making the presence and viewpoint of the churches and mosque visible in public discourse, than of the other three aims. The section on constraints and pressures under which journalists operate is significant, because there is some evidence that religious people often do not understand or appreciate the difficulties which face those who work in the media, and that this is one of the barriers to successful media relations.

Dialogue as a model for religious media relations – the journalists' views

Writing about the need for pastoral planning for communication, Zukowski identifies three types of engagement with the media by the Catholic Church. The first is 'separation' where the 'new infomedia are kept at a distance.' The second is the selective approach. She describes the selective approach as:

Yet, never wanting to immerse herself into the speedily evolving new infomedia culture, the church tiptoes and teases her way around and occasionally into the new media culture.¹

However, she goes on to say that when such cautious media adventures are unsuccessful, or the messengers of the new infomedia culture attack or communicate misunderstandings about the church, the church often retreats. She writes:

This latter experience may send the local church back into her separation or pre-selective approach. The selective approach creates a teeter-totter {see-saw} relationship with the infomedia culture.

¹ Zukowski. 'Shifting the paradigm', p.78-79.

The third approach which she outlines is integrative, that is 'positive and pro-active towards the infomedia culture.' It is very clear from those professionals who engage with the Catholic Church that fail to find this kind of positive and pro-active model. The two most common complaints are that far from engaging in dialogue, the Catholic Church is defensive and secretive. Rachel Andrews is a journalist with the *Sunday Tribune*, who writes mostly about religion and social affairs. When Andrews is dealing with the social end of her journalistic brief rather than the religious, she finds that people are very eager to talk and are used to dealing with the media. On the other hand, she finds religious people to be frequently reluctant to divulge even apparently innocuous information. This is particularly true of the Catholic Church. She says:

I think the church is happy to see their point of view put across in the media, but I think they are so used to having a negative portrayal in the media, particularly the Catholic Church, that they tend to be a bit defensive.... . There seems to be a lack of willingness in some quarters to let the media know anything at all, even if it doesn't reflect any way negatively. ²

Patsy McGarry is religious affairs correspondent of the *Irish Times*. He says that the churches and mosque have in common a deep suspicion of the media and a belief that the world is hostile and negative towards them, but adds:

In fact I think that the world is less hostile to the mosque and the church than the church and the mosque is to the world. ³

He believes that this attitude is damaging, because it predisposes to defensiveness. He acknowledges that there are people who are attempting to make a difference:

There are exceptions. The more experienced press officers are much more clued in and tuned in. I often think they have difficulty with their own people in trying

² Andrews, Jan 21st, 2002.

³ McGarry, Nov. 27th, 2001.

to convey to them what they're trying to do. They're caught in the middle between the two worlds and that can be very uncomfortable.

He identifies this suspicious attitude particularly with the Catholic Church, in its attempts to control journalists and keep information away from them.:

But they have set their face against the spirit of the age and so they maintain that very rigid, hard line, 'Thus far shall you go and no further; you may ask that question but you will not necessarily get an answer to it; we will tell you what we want to tell you; we will tell you what we want to discuss with you; otherwise forget about it.' It is very unsatisfactory, and deeply frustrating from a journalist's point of view. God help any press officer for the churches who has to deal with that. They're caught in an extremely difficult situation, given a modern context where the emphasis is on letting the information flow.

It is clear from the passages above that McGarry has some sympathy for the religious representatives who have to deal with structures that place a great emphasis on secrecy. He sees that personnel here are caught between two very different cultures and modes of communication. There is a strong feeling among journalists that religious representatives should be allowed to represent a broad spectrum of opinion. As Mary Curtin, producer with RTE, says:

The institution itself should be looking for spokespeople and giving them the freedom to speak freely, not saying that, 'You can't say this, you can't say that.' Even if somebody eventually says on air, 'Yes, I do believe that there will be married priests,' [it is possible to] say, 'Well, they are entitled to their opinion, they're not breaking any law by saying that. The official church position is X but they're entitled to disagree with it', but the church won't let that happen and I

think that they're damaging themselves. They're cutting themselves off from an area of growth.⁴

The veteran journalist John Cooney has been both a religious affairs correspondent and a political correspondent for the *Irish Times*, and has also worked for *INN* and *Ireland on Sunday*. He has written a biography of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid. He agrees with Curtin, and talks about the beginnings of the national press office, that is, the Catholic Press and Information Office. He says:

When Jim Cantwell was first appointed as the first Catholic press officer nationally, the various briefs that went in from religious affairs correspondents, including myself, emphasised that the spokesman should reflect all shades of opinion in the church. If they are explaining policy they should be facilitating the access of journalists to the key personnel who know the subject or who are making the decisions.... But by and large, what began to happen was it became more an organ for official thinking or official spokespersons. And consequently there was a narrowing of the debate. Students, intellectuals, lawyers, doctors, they are often ahead of opinion and are trying to change it. And there was frequently a dichotomy emerging between the official church claiming to represent the ordinary Catholic, the Catholic faithful, but at the same time the Catholic faithful not really engaged in this at all.⁵

The issue of dissent from official church positions is raised quite often in the literature. Thorn⁶ says that the reality for the institutional church is 'one of competing, sometimes contradictory, sources of information which claim a Catholic identity and inspiration.' Dunn discusses the role of the 'loyal opposition' and concludes:

⁴ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

⁵ Cooney. Feb. 1st, 2002.

⁶ Thorn, 'Models of church and communication'. p.98.

And no church can, it seems to me, really have the kind of renewal that was projected by the Second Vatican Council, unless it learns to live with those who, out of love for the church, for God, for Jesus Christ, criticise the church.⁷

Maloney urges caution about stifling dissent, or coverage of dissent. He says

I say this because the original Christians were people of protest - the dissenters of their own time. They rejected the view that they should conform within mainstream Judaism and the essence of their stand was an assertion of conscience.⁸

Cooney states in his book *No News is Bad News* that the media officer should cover a wide spectrum of opinion. He says:

Also, the media officer should not just be an agent for the hierarchy but should be at the service of all sections of opinion in the church so that wide-ranging and representative thought in the church is reflected in the work of the media office.⁹

Shaw, former press officer to the US bishops, disagrees with Cooney's opinion, while being complimentary about other aspects of the book. He states:

Certainly the public relations person should be aware of all sections of ecclesial opinion, should try to keep his or her superiors similarly aware, and should do the job in a way that takes the spectrum of opinion into account. But someone working in a church institution does not have precisely the same responsibilities, either in kind or degree, toward every sector of opinion and every ecclesiastical interest group. He is immediately accountable to the people in charge of the

⁷ Dunn, *No Lions in the Hierarchy*, p. 322.

⁸ Maloney, 'Learning from each other', p.194.

⁹ Cooney, *No news is bad news*, p.100.

institution or organization; other responsibilities, though real, ordinarily are secondary.¹⁰

Some of the journalists who are interviewed, though they disagree with the perception that the religious representative should only represent the views of his or her superiors, are more exercised by other aspects of religious media relations. McGarry is particularly irate about being 'locked out' of the bishops' conferences in Maynooth, as he sees it as a symptom of a culture of secrecy. In the case of the Presbyterian Assembly and Methodist Conference he is allowed access to all but the most sensitive sessions, for example, where the topic under discussion might concern something like the dismissal of a minister. Otherwise he is allowed access to the 'innards of discussion.' He says:

They may not be happy about it, but you're allowed complete and utter access. I then arrive down at Maynooth, where we're literally locked out. Nobody is allowed in to these meetings with the bishops. They choose what they're going to talk to us about and who will talk to us about it. So they have a press conference which usually takes place at the same time as the conference itself is meeting. It's utterly unsatisfactory. I mean, they are controlling and the very fact that they want to control so firmly makes me suspicious. What are they trying to hide, why won't they let us in, if all the others can let us in and the sky doesn't fall, what's so different? But the Catholic Church has this huge problem and its not just peculiar to Ireland.

Although McGarry says that the 'huge problem' is not just peculiar to Ireland, the United States Bishops' Conference has allowed access to journalists since 1972. Initially there was a great deal of interest, but when it became clear that much of what was discussed was routine administrative material, attendance by journalists became sporadic, unless

¹⁰ Shaw et al, *Dealing media for the Catholic Church*, p.59.

there was going to be discussion about an issue such as guidelines for prevention of child abuse.¹¹

Cooney's career spans three decades. The first decade was the post-conciliar period, in the 1970s. Cooney describes the late 1970s as the period leading up to the 'moral civil war', a phrase coined by journalist Gene Kerrigan and used repeatedly by Cooney in his writing. The 'moral civil war' refers to the 1980s, when the first abortion and divorce referenda were held amidst often acrimonious debate which divided public opinion. The third decade was the 1990s, where child sex abuse and other sex scandals dominated the news about religion. For him, though, a common theme runs through all three periods:

Lust for secrecy: I call that the eighth sacrament. They just don't want to tell you. They close ranks.¹²

He sees that it as his role to puncture that secrecy. He believes that the unwillingness to divulge information results from defensiveness, a desire to protect the institution, even when to do so works against other values such as honesty.

I think the values of a journalist lie in openness and honesty and truth. Frequently the churchmen want to defend the institution, defend the vested interests, defend their status-quo, and consequently their instincts are towards concealment rather than openness. Underlying that is a theocratic assumption on the part of churchmen that they have some holier status than you have, or some kind of license to be a proclaimer of truth and morality. They have the idea that the media are really permissive and untrustworthy and are not to be seen as authentic voices for values.

Far from agreeing that the bishops have accepted a model of dialogue as a basis for church communications, Cooney says that there has been very little movement towards

¹¹ Shaw, p.40-42.

¹² Cooney. Jan 25th, 2002.

dialogue. He became religious affairs correspondent of the *Irish Times* in 1972. Looking back on his career, his conclusion is that there was a retrenchment, a retreat by the Catholic Church from the openness envisaged by the Second Vatican Council:

The Catholic Church blew it. At the time of the Council there was a remarkable generation of journalists of the first rank. Sean McReamoinn, who could do anything. Louis Mc Redmond. [John] Horgan, versatile, able. Joe Power, a great reporter, more conservative and traditional, but still he could report on anything. Kevin O'Kelly, a brilliant broadcaster, and Desmond Fisher, even people like Tom Stack, Austin Flannery, and J.J. McGarry. What a fantastic generation!

He feels that the church sidelined this generation of journalists and interested and able priests such as Stack, Flannery and McGarry, and that a great opportunity was missed. The Catholic Church retreated from dialogue. He identifies the problem as a failure to implement the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. He says:

...Vatican II was alien to a lot of people. Bishops didn't really want to engage in new concepts and new thinking. After the Council there was the beginning of tension between an authoritarian system that was based on tight control of communications and a society which was being stimulated in many respects by these new ideas. These new ideas were very personalist, emphasising the principle of pluralism, making up your own mind, searching for answers and being prepared to debate wider issues. So this whole change began to affect churchmen and they responded in different ways. Some tried to ignore it, some tried to control it. Others said, 'No, you have got to start adapting'. But I think what happened then in the 1970s and 1980s was a retrenchment to bring in change slowly, but quite a number of more radical clergy associated with change would have left the priesthood.

He saw it as part of his job to challenge the lack of openness. This led to many confrontations at press conferences. He says that he took over the role of religious correspondent for the *Irish Times* when he was twenty-five, as a long-haired young man. He claims that the bishops saw him as not even having the status of a 'junior curate'. He says that he saw part of the job as holding an institution to account which was not facing up to sectarianism or implementing proper communications. This led to a great deal of confrontation at press conferences, since Cooney claims that the bishops could not 'make the adjustment' to being challenged. He goes on to talk about one particular conference:

So what then happened was press conferences became more like a gladiatorial occasion where Cardinal Conway would clash with John Cooney, and T.P. O'Mahoney. In fact on one occasion the cardinal got so ruffled that he was trying to get O'Mahoney and myself away and he shouted, 'Next question, Bishop Power.' To get Joe in.¹³

Cooney believes that the church was not used to being questioned and failed to come to terms with a new attitude of openness and dialogue:

They just want to use you as a vehicle for their ideas. They just see it as a hostile medium, and not as, 'Right, if we are going to have a church and media relationship, you need to get to know journalists, talk off the record and get policy explained.'

Cooney is aware that there have been suggestions in church circles that he is pursuing a personal agenda of seeking radical reform in the church, rather than acting as an impartial journalist. He acknowledges that he has strong feelings about the Catholic Church. For example, he speaks about the 1980s, when politics and religion mingled in the constitutional referenda regarding divorce and abortion. He says:

¹³ Joe Power, former religion correspondent with the *Irish Independent*.

And again, you can call me a liberal but I would have been for all the changes. And again it was a divisive period. People took sides. Again you are trying to report both for and against.¹⁴

He believes that the reporting of religion should be the same as any other area, in that the 'facts are sacred.' He does not believe that his own personal views coloured his reporting. His views on how the Catholic Church operates its media relations are particularly interesting because his career spans such a long period in religious and political journalism. He characterises the three decades as a retreat to conservatism instead of an implementation of the kind of communication with the media that received a mandate at the Second Vatican Council.

1. Making the presence and viewpoint of the churches and mosque visible in public discourse – the journalists' views

One of the key aims of the religious representatives is to make the presence of the churches and mosque visible in public discourse. Part of this aim, for the Catholic Church, is to present a reasonable face when issues arise that are difficult for the church. It is clear that the journalists interviewed believe that in many instances the church has failed to be convincing and that it has, in the main, failed to act in a transparent and credible manner regarding the scandals, and has instead tried to 'fudge' and 'spin.' As has been seen in the previous chapter, religious representatives strongly deny that they are in the business of 'spin', so there is a disagreement here. The failure of the church, as perceived by journalists, is dealt with under three headings:

- i. Failure to deal properly with scandals.
- ii. Reliance on an inappropriate model of public relations
- iii. Failure to be professional and pro-active

¹⁴ Cooney. Feb. 1st, 2002.

i. Failure to deal properly with scandals

The greatest challenge in recent times for the Irish Catholic Church has been a decade or more of scandals. Cooney believes that the key issue of the 1990s was the failure to come to terms or deal adequately with scandals, whether in the case of Bishop Casey, Fr. Michael Cleary or child sexual abuse by clerics or religious. He is deeply critical of the way in which the Catholic Church still refuses full disclosure. As an example, he points out that in 1995 Cardinal Cahal Daly was unable to give figures, diocese by diocese of the numbers of priests against whom allegations had been made or convictions secured. Nor was there information forthcoming about the amount of money which had been given to claimants. He says:

So the whole thing smacked of the church trying to do a public relations job on the whole issue. There were areas that weren't quite clarified, for example, is it a legal obligation [to report allegations against a church person] or [just] a counsel? There are so many grey areas. ...If they [the bishops] had been discussing this properly surely they would have aggregated the cases that are there in all the dioceses and we would have a picture of the extent of the problem.¹⁵

In 2002, Dr. Colum Kenny discovered that there had been little change since 1995, when his own request for information from dioceses about the numbers of priests who had either been convicted or removed from ministry was answered by one only diocese, Cork and Ross. So the circumstances which led to Cooney's claim that the Catholic Church fails to be open and transparent still pertained.¹⁶

Joe Little, religious and social affairs correspondent for RTE, thinks that the Catholic Church dealt badly with the scandals initially. He says that it was understandable that the church could not have been prepared for the revelation that the Bishop of Kerry, Eamonn Casey, had fathered a child with Annie Murphy. However, he says that subsequent

¹⁵ Cooney, Feb. 1st 2002.

¹⁶ Kenny, 'Bishops are counting the cost but unwilling to pay the price'.

failure to be open damaged the ability of the hierarchy to deal with victims of clerical sexual abuse of children. He goes on:

In general, it's widely accepted that since the Bishop Casey affair, the Catholic Church here has dealt poorly with scandals. It's fair to say that there was very little preparation for the Casey affair and that the leaders were visibly uncomfortable dealing publicly with the first major manifestation of episcopal failure in living memory, which is very understandable. At least one bishop, Willie Walsh, complained in an address to the National Council of Priest of Ireland that the Bishops' Conference had failed, in his experience, to address what he called the systemic issues underlying the clerical child sexual abuse scandals. I wonder has this failure contributed to a slowness among many in leadership to engage credibly in public with the wounded survivors?¹⁷

This point is reiterated by most of the journalists who are interviewed. The Catholic Church was slow to acknowledge and slow to disclose the scandals which had hit it. For many people, the failure to rein in Fr. Brendan Smyth's activities is shocking. He had abused children and been moved from place to place by his superiors in the religious order to which he belonged, in a way which continued to endanger children for years on end.¹⁸ Little does believe that things have improved somewhat, or at least there are individuals within the church who are making sincere attempts to come to terms with the issues. He says;

I note the statement by John Kelly of Irish SOCA (Survivors of Child Abuse) in an interview with Sean O'Rourke on the 9th of January [2001], that he found Bishop Eamonn Walshe very sympathetic in their recent discussions.... And both Fr Rosetti from the US and the NCPI (National Council of Priests of Ireland)¹⁹ have conducted some very powerful public discussions on and with abused people

¹⁷ Little. Jan. 18th, 2002.

¹⁸ Haughey, 'Church may face £1.5 million claims over Smyth'.

¹⁹ See *Child sexual abuse: The Irish experience so far and the way forward*.

which have forged a new consciousness of the damage done and the issues to be addressed in seeking forgiveness. So clearly one cannot generalise about the quality of the church's response.

McGarry believes that the church was slow to come to terms with child sex abuse because it did not realise the magnitude of the problem or the recidivist nature of abusers. The old way was to treat it as a moral failing and to believe that the sinner would go and sin no more. This he calls the most benign scenario, but he believes that there is a darker side. He says:

In the early to mid 1990s Father Andrew Greely, of the University of Chicago, came to Ireland to meet one of the bishops - he won't say who - who was seeking advice on how they should deal with the issue, based on what was then the more experienced American situation. He says all his advice was ignored. Nothing was done in response to it. The bishops seemed to have been transfixed by the problem. It took until 1996 for them to issue their guidelines, which were and are impressive. So much damage had already been done to the church by the delay that it has never fully recovered the lost ground – however valid the argued reasons for the delay. The bishops' tardiness was one fault perceived by the public at large, but worse was a sense that they were putting the institution before the truth and concern for victims.²⁰

McGarry goes on to list various occasions where the church's handling of cases was a cause of shock to ordinary people; Fr. Brendan Smyth; Fr. Sean Fortune in Wexford; Fr. Ivan Payne and Fr. Michael Cleary in the Dublin archdiocese. He is particularly trenchant about the Fr. Ivan Payne case, where there was some confusion about the payment of compensation to victims, in this case to Andrew Madden, who when he was an altar boy had been abused by Fr. Payne. He says:

²⁰ McGarry. Jan. 15th, 2002.

Archbishop [later Cardinal] Connell said no diocesan monies were being used to pay compensation to victims and it later transpired, as he admitted, that in fact he had loaned nearly £30,000 to Father Payne to pay compensation. The Archbishop's actions seemed illustrative of the way the church was dealing with the problem generally. A new emphasis by the church on literalism alarmed many people, not least in the media which saw every such example as an indication that what was being said was not the whole truth.... Examples such as the above do make you careful about taking what the bishops say at face value where the issue of sex and the clergy is concerned.

There is a sense among journalists that legal considerations were given undue weight and that this prevented a really human or indeed Christian response. Curtin is particularly adamant about this. She believes that there has been an emphasis on preserving the institution rather than on serving the people. She says that they concentrated on protecting themselves legally. She goes on:

For so many of those people [victims] a clear open apology from day one would have been enough, to have just an acknowledgement that they have been abused. For so many of them, it wasn't money. But their [the bishops'] whole focus has to be changed, from the institution to the people. They're there to serve people. That's what the gospel says.²¹

For Curtin, much of the mishandling of the situation stems from being completely out of touch with the realities of lay people's lives, and with the impact which successive scandals were having. She claims that some bishops went so far as to act as if it would 'all go away' if they ignored it. She tells a story to illustrate this:

[There's] a story which somebody told me about a meeting of bishops with CORI [Conference of Religious in Ireland] which actually I think was the body that

²¹ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

pushed for this to be taken seriously. At one meeting with the bishops where CORI were pushing the need to face up to it and to acknowledge and not run away but start by apologising there was one particular bishop. He was just practically spitting down the table: 'What do we have to apologise for? We've nothing to apologise for. We just say nothing. It will go away and they'll forget about it.' Now to me, that summed up in a nutshell the complete lack of awareness of how serious it is.

Curtin, like other journalists, feels that the major failing of the bishops was not to listen to advice to 'come clean'.

ii. Reliance on an inappropriate model of public relations

Curtin is also very critical of what she sees as attempts to 'spin' child sexual abuse. She says:

Now it's based on a number of experiences. One that stands out for me which was going down to Maynooth²² that particular time when sexual abuse of children had started really hitting the headlines and finding a particular spin-doctor there. I won't mention names but you'll probably know. I just sat there and said, 'They are dealing with probably the most serious issue and serious challenge to the church's validity.' I'm not saying 'authority' but 'validity' as an influence in Irish society. All they can think of doing is bringing in spin-doctors, instead of actually reflecting themselves on the gospel, and then having the courage to go on that. So I am very, very wary of spin doctors and of public relations... the kind of thing that I would object strongly to is, 'O.K, we've got a problem, how do we spin it so the people don't realise how serious it is?' That should never ever, ever happen within the Catholic Church or any church.

²² Press conference held by Bishops' Conference in Maynooth, Oct 11th, 1995.

The 'spin-doctor' in question, Pat Heneghan, has a different perspective. He was a clerical student for a time in Maynooth in the late 1950s. John Hume and Bishop William Murphy of Kerry were among his classmates. When he decided not to pursue his clerical studies he went to work in public relations for the tobacco firm, Carrolls, eventually becoming Director of Public Relations there. He was approached by the committee preparing for the Papal Visit to Ireland in 1979 and was released by Carrolls to work on the visit by Pope John Paul to Knock. When he left Carrolls he set up what is now one of the foremost public relations consultancy firms in Ireland, Heneghan Public Relations.

He believes that the media would have had an even more difficult time establishing the truth regarding child sexual abuse if he as a public relations man had not been involved. He says that people from the commissions (lay people who work on behalf of the Bishops in areas like 'Justice and Peace', the 'Laity', 'Social Welfare', 'Communications' and so on) were particularly distrustful of him. Miriam Lord of the *Irish Independent* wrote a 'colour piece' on the press conference which Heneghan had encouraged the Bishops to have on the question of child sexual abuse. She states that seeing Pat Heneghan, the 'Red Adair' of public relations, made all the assembled media sit up and realise that things were much worse than they thought.²³ This meant that some of the attention was focused on him, and his presence became an issue in itself. He is aware that the perception of being a 'spin-doctor' and the baggage that goes with it raised some hackles. He claims, however, that the church desperately needed help in order to deal with child sexual abuse, not least because of their lack of understanding of the reality of media. He says:

They are at it for 2,000 years. The media is a comparatively new phenomenon, compared to the Catholic Church. But they still don't know how to handle the media. They get themselves into extraordinary, reactive, locked-in situations, instead of being a bit more pro-active. We tried to get them to be pro-active on this one, and immediately during that first Bishops' Conference, on my

²³ Lord, 'PR calls the tune as bishops bravely face the music'.

recommendation, they held an up-front press conference. It caused quite a sensation in Maynooth, chaired by Cardinal Daly. Jim Cantwell²⁴ was the MC [Master of Ceremonies] at the conference. Bishop Flynn was there. The problem was that because I was there I became an issue.²⁵

Heneghan defends the role that he played on the grounds that his primary role was to encourage the bishops to deal with the situation and to come out and speak to the media. He says:

...if the public relations people hadn't come in, the media would have been waiting a lot longer for something to come out. I got them [the bishops] to come out. Within three hours, the media was invited to Maynooth and there was a press conference down there. I believe it wouldn't have happened that quickly, there would have been a door-step thing with [Bishop] Tom Flynn who would have answered as best he could, but would have been evasive. Here they took it and said, 'We were wrong, hands up, we are going to do something about it'. That was what we got them to do. That was no harm. The media resent public relations people too.

In Heneghan's view, all he did was to get the bishops to come out and hold a press conference that enabled the media to get at the story more quickly. He then worked with the bishops and their various commissions to come up with a set of guidelines to which they could adhere, which he described as 'trailblazing'²⁶. He does not accept that his presence damaged the church or made people doubt the authenticity of what was going on. He believes instead that he was a little damaged by it:

Your *bona fides* are questioned. They are not questioned publicly but they are questioned around the table. Various lay people from the [church] commissions,

²⁴ Director of the Catholic Press and Information Office, 1975-2000.

²⁵ Heneghan. Jan 17th, 2002.

²⁶ *Child sexual abuse – framework for a Church response*.

were very, very suspicious. 'What do we need those guys for? We will go at our own pace.' And in this particular issue if they went at their own pace the second stage would have been worse than the first. They had to grasp the issue and move it forward.

Heneghan's presence provoked a backlash among certain journalists, who perceived that the church was responding in an inappropriate way to a crisis by using professional public relations personnel to steer the response. However, Heneghan would argue vigorously that he is not in the business of 'spin'. He says that he hates the concept of 'spin', that in his mind, 'spin' is to public relations as pornography is to art. Yet he also acknowledges that his presence became an issue, even though he claims that ultimately it was more damaging to him than to the church. He believes that the two necessities of PR are the two 'T's, truth and trust, that you cannot operate as a PR person if you do not have the trust of the public and the media and if you do not tell the truth. However, his own concept of truth is an interesting one, in that he does not believe that it is necessary always to tell the whole truth:

You have got to be honest. I believe, and this can be misunderstood, but I am going to say it, that you don't have to tell all of the truth all of the time, but whatever you do tell must be true. ...If someone rings me up and says, 'I heard your client has cancer', and you go and find out that he has had a heart attack. But you don't tell the caller that, you just say that he doesn't have cancer. You have answered the question. John Bruton said one time, 'You asked the wrong question'. You have to be clever at that sort of thing.

It is precisely this kind of attitude which journalists like Curtin would find at variance with the values of the gospel. Yet Lynas, whom Curtin admires greatly, says almost the same thing.

I will never not tell the truth. I may not tell absolutely everything in the sense that there are certain facts that you can choose whether you tell or not.²⁷

Heneghan is much less equivocal about other issues. His advice on how to handle a crisis is to come straight out and admit what has gone wrong:

When the church has an issue, it shouldn't go for 14 years, weeks or days, discussing with legal people or public relations or accountants. It should come out and say, 'There is a huge problem coming down the line and we are going to address it. Where we are wrong we will tell you, where we are going to defend it we will. But we do now need to go away and talk to our legal people and our advisors and then we will come back to you'. They don't do that. They leave that gap. They go off and start number crunching and looking at the law and this and that, and in the meantime the media are running riot on it. There is no voice from the church. I think they need to turn that around a bit and come out 'hands up'.²⁸

Heneghan's advice on crisis reflects a standard theory on crisis management, which is to acknowledge what has been done that is wrong, to give as much information as possible and to show that there is a plan to prevent such crises in the future.²⁹ The Catholic Church is not seen to be acting in this way. Whatever the effect of Heneghan's presence at the sensitive time of the press conference on child sexual abuse, his comments are interesting in the light of the Catholic Church's own self-understanding, at least on paper, that they are engaged in a process of dialogue. As someone no longer actively involved in working for the church, either on a professional or a *pro-bono* basis, Heneghan's perception is that the church has gone backwards in terms of its engagement with the media. He acknowledges the work of people like Fr. John Dardis³⁰ and Fr. Martin Clarke³¹. However, he comments that Dardis was on 'the back foot' all the time, having

²⁷ Lynas. Jan 8th, 2002.

²⁸ Heneghan. Jan 17th, 2002.

²⁹ See for example, Regester, 'Crisis management', pp.157-163.

³⁰ Fr. John Dardis, Director of Communications for the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, 1995 – 2000.

³¹ Spokesperson for the Catholic bishops.

to react to crises, and that in his view Clarke has very few bishops, whom he can call on to act as spokesmen, because many of them lack communication skills. Heneghan points to the degree of engagement with media in the heyday of *Radharc*³² and the Communications Centre, during the 1960s and 1970s where media training for priests was a norm. He says:

What would concern me, and this is nothing to do with me as a public relations person, is the failure of the church universally since Vatican II to use the modern media, including public relations, to tell the story of the gospel as it should be told.³³

In common, therefore, with many of the journalists, Heneghan feels that the church is failing to communicate in a way that is appropriate to the needs of the time.

David Quinn is the editor of the *Irish Catholic* and a columnist with the *Sunday Times*. (The *Irish Catholic* is a privately owned weekly newspaper, contrary to the common belief that it is owned and managed by the Catholic bishops.) Like other journalists, Quinn is cautious about over-reliance on public relations or marketing as a solution to ingrained communication difficulties. He mentions an interview that he had heard on radio with Jack Jones of MRBI³⁴. Jones had said that he did not have a particular problem with political parties changing their policies according to opinion poll findings, as this was what business people had been doing for years. They test the reaction of the market to a product and change it accordingly. Quinn felt that this was a 'terrible analogy to use,' as principles should be important in politics and even more so in religion. He says:

A business need not have any sort of intrinsic attachment to a particular product. If it's unpopular, get rid of it. But if Labour were to get rid of all vestiges of egalitarianism... they may as well stop existing. Now the temptation for a religion

³² cf. Dunn, *No vipers in the Vatican*, p.275-325.

³³ Heneghan. Jan 17th, 2002.

³⁴ MRBI is a company which conducts research on public opinion, primarily through the use of polls and focus groups.

could be the same, once you use public relations. 'People don't like what we're standing for so we'll change it.' If that doesn't apply fully to politics, it applies even less to religion. So, in one sense, if you're going to live by public relations too much you're going to die by public relations as well. You've got to be able to maintain your message and not just tailor it to whatever suits the latest opinion poll finding. You've got to maintain your 'product' but make it as attractive as possible and do a much better job of selling it. But I think that the church hasn't even remotely begun to do that.³⁵

Quinn is against the use of a model of public relations which is inappropriate for religious organisations because it speaks about meeting market demand. Religious organisations in his view, should not be involved in a 'product' which varies according to public demand.

iii. Failure to be professional and pro-active

It is clear that many of the journalists have no objection to using the techniques of public relations in an appropriate way, in order to facilitate communication and to enhance relationships between religious representatives and journalists. For example, Curtin says:

Yes, get the advice of people who know how to get a story across, who know that if you're dealing with deadlines you actually meet the deadline of the programme or the print journal in question: you don't expect them to hold up the presses for you. By all means take that kind of practical advice but the 'spinning'? No, I would say, 'Steer clear.'³⁶

The journalists who were interviewed believe that when the church tries to spin, it does so in an awkward and inept way. For example, when a public relations person becomes an issue, as seems to have happened when the bishops spoke about the Fr. Brendan Smyth affair, using the services of Pat Heneghan, then they believe that this is disastrous

³⁵ Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001.

³⁶ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

for the perception of the church's credibility. This ties in with an observation from Cooney:

So I think they have just failed to come to terms with the dialogue in equal terms and in trusting terms. And they are still hesitant and manipulative and, by and large, amateurish and always complaining that they get a raw deal. Maybe they deserve a raw deal more than they are getting.³⁷

Terry Prone of Carr Communications, one of Ireland's best-known public relations consultancy firms, also believes that there is an 'amateurish' aspect to media relations as carried out by the Catholic Church. She comments on the timing of material which was released by the Dublin Archdiocese in response to queries by press journalists, in relation to Marie Collins, who had been abused by a priest of the diocese. It was released on a Saturday evening, which, according to Prone, was the time most calculated to annoy press people, as it was too late for Sunday newspapers, and would be old news for the daily papers by Monday.³⁸

Andrews speaks of interviews being given to people who were perceived by the Catholic Church to be 'onside', which would not be given to her. She expresses a wish that people would not take her questions so personally, almost as if she were questioning their own cherished beliefs. She believes that there could be a more professional atmosphere, such as she felt with Ronan Mullen,³⁹ with whom she could disagree but who would never take it personally.⁴⁰ Quinn believes that the Catholic Church is too reactive, too hesitant to present its own case. He uses the example of allegations made against the Christian Brothers in two *Prime Time* programmes, *Betrayed: Christian Brothers and Child Sex Abuse across Three Continents*.⁴¹ One of the major allegations of these programmes was that the Christian Brothers had salted away CAN\$100 million in an offshore account in

³⁷ Cooney. Feb. 1st, 2002.

³⁸ Prone, 'Church's delayed statement ensues nothing but a new round of misery'.

³⁹ Ronan Mullen, Communications Officer for the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, 1996-2001.

⁴⁰ Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

⁴¹ *Betrayed: The Christian Brothers and Child Abuse Across Three Continents*. Transmitted RTE One, 28th and 29th November, 2001.

order to prevent having to pay compensation to victims of abuse in their institutions. He says:

The Christian Brothers attitude seems to be, 'Under legal advice we'll say as little as possible'. Information has to be dragged out of them. [This] gives the appearance that they have something to hide because they can't answer the case being made against them or the accusations being hurled at them. So they say nothing and say, 'We can't for legal reasons,' so it sounds like a convenient excuse.⁴²

The allegations were subsequently denied in strong terms by Br. Edmund Garvey, head of the Christian Brothers world-wide, at a press conference one week after the programmes were broadcast, and in an *Irish Times* article several weeks after the broadcasts.⁴³ This delay would seem to bear out Quinn's point that in general, the Catholic Church and religious orders are reactive rather than pro-active. He goes on:

Whereas, what they really should have done, is to have learned from past experience that the way to react to this sort of thing is to anticipate and to shape people's perceptions of a particular story in advance of it. TV is so powerful that once the story goes on to TV people's perceptions are pretty much shaped anyway. It takes a huge amount of work to shape peoples' perceptions after the event. So they've got to become more pre-emptive.

Quinn refers to the church's 'usual ham-fisted approach to the media.' He says:

The church in general doesn't trust or understand the media. I would be among the first to argue that there are good reasons for this, but this does not excuse its reluctance or inability to engage with journalists. On the contrary, it is precisely because the Church finds it difficult to get a good press, and because its teachings

⁴² Quinn, Nov. 28th, 2001.

⁴³ Garvey, 'Brothers have right to just treatment'.

and policies are often misunderstood, that it needs to develop unrivalled media skills.⁴⁴

He points out that while the Catholic Church may have made some advances by opening up press offices, a press officer 'can only operate effectively if he is kept informed by his bosses.' A press officer should not have to worry about what will befall him or her if he or she makes public sensitive items of information. He comments:

Since that seems to mean most items of information, church spokesmen end up being far more tight-lipped than they should have to be.

He goes on to discuss the headlines concerning a Vatican document on the reporting of child sex abuse. This is a letter that was sent from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith to the world's bishops. It outlines guidelines for dealing with clerical sexual abuse of children.⁴⁵ It was reported on in a way which suggested that the church were advocating secrecy yet again on the question, but Quinn says that it is quite an innocuous document when taken in context. He says that this document had been in the hands of thousands of church people world-wide for weeks. Not one, apparently, spotted the sensitivity of the document. He questions:

Why didn't one of this multitude see that it was open to misinterpretation? Why didn't one of them contact a church press officer with a view to making it public, offering an interpretation of it and fielding questions? Why did it only become public when a journalist spotted it in a Vatican publication last month?

Worse, many people in Ireland were unaware of the document. According to Quinn, 'this only shows that even internally, church communications are frequently a disaster area.' He also reiterates a point made by Cooney. He asks why we know so little of what is

⁴⁴ Quinn, 'Church must end secrecy and step into the media age'.

⁴⁵ This letter (in Latin) is to be found in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* for 2001, the Official Bulletin of the Holy See.

discussed at the quarterly meetings of the Bishops. 'Cameras are allowed into such meetings in America.' The journalists believe that a deeper engagement with the media would be a positive step, but that such an approach is a long way off. Cooney states that the church has not invested in the area of communications as it should do. In that regard, he is of like mind with the religious representatives who feel that there has been a failure to provide adequate resources for religious media relations. He does not approve of the way in which public relations in the sense of 'spin-doctoring' has come to dominate media. He says:

What I have been saying is there is too much emphasis on just public relations, and this isn't just a disease that is afflicting the church, its afflicting the whole of media.... So by and large I think public relations has moved in. But it's not as well financed or as extensive [in the church as it is elsewhere]. Political parties can put more and more resources into 'spin doctoring'. The big business corporations do that more and more. Look at the European parliament lobby. Where do the churches put much resources? Where do they explain their cause? I don't know. So if it is leaning towards public relations it's a pretty impoverished style of public relations. They are trying to get it cheap and the priests are probably getting a salary but they [the bishops] have not appointed top-notch journalists.⁴⁶

In common with the religious representatives, the journalists who were interviewed believe that to conduct proper public relations, resources must be invested. More importantly, however, they believe that public relations techniques must be used in a way that does not detract from, but instead enhances the church's credibility.

⁴⁶ Cooney. Jan 25th, 2002.

2. Social Justice – the journalists' view

The promotion of social justice is seen as an important aim of religious media relations, particularly by CORI. The churches' social mission is appreciated by journalists. Little spoke particularly about the St. Vincent de Paul charity and its ethos. He comments:

They take the newest journalist from a northside paper or a local paper who comes along to the press conference as seriously as they would take somebody from the national media. They are genuinely appreciative of journalists who come along to their press conferences.⁴⁷

He saw the Society of St. Vincent de Paul as flexible, open to suggestion, and providing him with information ahead of time so that their various projects can be highlighted. He also sees the Catholic Church's commitment to immigrants in Britain as praiseworthy, and that those who are involved are very open to the media. He sees these kinds of social initiatives as part of telling the 'story' of faith. He says that while it may be difficult to speak about virtue in itself, it is easier when you have a story to tell which 'involves the application of a virtue.' Andrews feels that CORI do an excellent, professional job of putting across their viewpoint. She says:

I haven't dealt with Brigid Reynolds⁴⁸ but I have dealt with Sean Healy.⁴⁹ I found him very good. He knows very much how the media works. And he wouldn't be offended if he 'press releases' something and I don't get it in the paper. He knows how it works. He is very busy. He knows what he is doing. He is very on top of his job, and I found him helpful to work with. ... In a way, anyone could be dealing with these issues. But the fact is that this is the church's body which is doing so.⁵⁰

McGarry sees an extended role for the churches' involvement in this kind of area:

⁴⁷ Little. Dec. 17th, 2001.

⁴⁸ Sr. Brigid Reynolds, who works for CORI's Justice Commission.

⁴⁹ Fr. Sean Healy, of CORI's Justice Commission.

⁵⁰ Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

There's a place for campaigning for social policy that looks after the marginalised and the poor. For instance, CORI do a lot of this...They've taken a political role if you like, whereas in the past it was 'by their deeds we knew them' rather than 'by their politics we knew them'. I think you need both, probably. One is the preaching, which is fine, but I think that the other is probably the route they should go into in the future.⁵¹

Social justice is seen by the journalists as an area where the churches are already very involved and where there is potential for the future. However, Andrews thinks that such 'good news' stories might find it difficult to get coverage, saying that 'it is hard to make the papers on good issues.'⁵² This echoes a complaint by religious representatives which is covered in the next chapter, that the news media concentrate on the negative.

3. Pre-evangelisation and preparation for *da'wa* – the journalists' view

There are mixed feelings among the journalists about the possibility of evangelisation or communicating the sacred. Most of those interviewed concentrate in their answers on the Christian faith, which perhaps reflects the relatively recent rise in numbers of Muslims in Ireland. All of the journalists are clear that it is not their role to evangelise for any church, but some of them saw that it was possible for religious people to communicate their faith through the media, either implicitly or explicitly. Cooney believes that a journalist should not evangelise in any way, because he or she 'is a journalist, not an evangelist'. He goes on:

Having said that, and we are talking here specifically about the secular media, ... the difference in religion is that you are dealing with people's faith.

Consequently, you have to come to terms with key theological concepts of

⁵¹ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

⁵² Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

spiritual beliefs... But unlike say the religious press that is rooted in a particular faith, you are not making that the norm of your newspaper.⁵³

Cooney goes on to say that most of the news in religion, like every other area of news, was likely to be about 'cock-ups' and that therefore a newspaper is unlikely to cover faith in itself. Andrews believes that communicating a sense of the sacred is very unlikely to happen in the news pages of a newspaper. She does say that there are exceptions:

If you can find something quirky... I remember the Irish Jesuits had their *Sacred Space* ⁵⁴on the Internet...people can go there and pray. That makes the paper because it's quirky. But I wouldn't have thought the general news and current affairs is the place really.⁵⁵

In contrast, Little expresses the view that there was room for communicating the sacred and expression of faith in the media. He says, in common with religious representatives, that perhaps the most effective way is to do so obliquely. He says:

If there is anywhere people can give effective witness to their faith, it's in the modern media. Now I am not saying it's the only place, but it's a significant addition to the tools of the trade of a cleric or of a lay person who is sincerely committed to their faith... And I suppose I am heavily influenced in my thinking at the moment by having edited a documentary on Mary McAleese in Africa, who herself is explicitly Christian, and who has thought out this whole business about witnessing to her faith in her everyday work. And one can see that in a job well done, well organised by a group like the Department of Foreign Affairs and the President's office, in a place like East Africa, one can highlight some very important features of Christian commitment in the media. The tabloid newspapers were the outlets which gave most coverage to that visit, because the

⁵³ Cooney. Jan 25th, 2002.

⁵⁴ Website run by the Irish Jesuits where people can log on and pray at their computer.
www.sacredspace.com

⁵⁵ Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

material being given to them was new, colourful, refreshing, and at the centre of it was a very strong Christian message.⁵⁶

He says that television and radio are essentially story-telling media, which many religious people forget, to their detriment. He goes on:

I think belief is something that seeps out of the pores of an individual, sometimes an institution, more often an individual in an institution... I think belief emerges almost in parable form. Christianity invented the parable [sic], which is the way to get across a point about belief. To talk about belief *qua* belief has a limited audience. But to talk about belief as a human story has a wider appeal. ...So it would seem to me that if you are going to use the modern media, a lesson can be drawn from the earliest preaching.

Far from discounting the possibility of communicating the sacred, Little believes that story-telling is an excellent way to communicate faith and so he holds that religious representatives have a responsibility to find ways of doing just this in the secular media. He gives examples where faith becomes visible in people's actions. He talks of the Irish immigrants in Britain, where the church is not in a powerful position, but is immersed in the needs of its flock. This to him is a witness to spiritual values. He also instances the way in which tragedy often reveals the need which people still have for the spiritual. He says:

I think the churches do a lot of good things, and they are still a leaven in our society. You only realise that when you see a mass drowning in a small coastal village, and the priest is there. Or suicides which have become so common around the country, or killings in families. People still need their priest and their pastors to be there. I saw this a lot through the Northern crisis, which I covered in the '80s in particular. At the time of terrible brutality, priests were there.

⁵⁶ Little. Jan. 18th, 2002.

Little pays tribute to many of the religious people he met at that time, people who shone 'like a beacon' in those troubled times, whose courage exemplified the 'belief which seeps out of the pores of a person'. He also sees it as part of his function to be sensitive at times where people's faith is the centre of a story, or where he is covering a liturgy. He finds this a 'great challenge in terms of choosing and editing pictures of major events' such as a funeral:

You are going into a sacred space and you can't just cobble the pictures together so that you have a cutaway⁵⁷ of the consecration as if the consecration is just incidental. You have to respect the key points of ritual. There is a kind of pulsing rhythm in how news is delivered and I think that often people welcome a report which has maybe a bit of silence, some sound effects of a religious ceremony.

Curtin is also certain that a sense of the sacred can be communicated. She speaks of people like Cardinal Martini of Milan whom she has interviewed, who communicate their message simply by being who they are:

Again it's back to people genuinely believing, being uninhibited enough, and I am not talking about the evangelical or happy clappy, that is the last thing I have on my mind. But again I have to come back to Martini... that extraordinary humility in a man who must be one of the greatest scholars in this age and... infused the whole way through is his concept of God, his relationship with God, his awe ...So, yes, I think you can, but it needs someone very special.⁵⁸

She did concede that such people are rare, and that there are barriers to communicating the sacred on radio, which is her area of expertise. She says:

I think we are so conditioned to switching off, if somebody says this is about the sacred, this is about religion, that maybe coming at it obliquely is a better way

⁵⁷ Shot inserted to cover an edit point in a programme.

⁵⁸ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

until people are used again to hearing people being genuine about the subject on radio.

Like Little, she finds that the role of the churches in times of tragedy is very important:

National tragedies bring people back to a sense of the sacred, a sense of 'otherness', a sense that there must be something more and the media are very, very important in communicating that at the time.

She spoke of colleagues in RTE who would not be 'remotely religious' and yet they were aware of the need for religious ceremonies around the time of the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11th, 2001. Nothing else would address the need for some kind of communal marking of that event in the same way. McGarry also speaks of the importance of ritual. He says:

I think the Catholic Church is superb on ceremonial. In relation to Cardinal Daly's handling of the very difficult Kevin Barry ceremony, the re-interring of all those men, I don't know anybody else who could have done it so well. ...For big events like the National Day of Mourning, [after the attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001] nobody can do it better.⁵⁹

In common with Andrews, he feels that news was not the place for a sense of the sacred, because 'because news essentially is concerned with who, what, where, when and how, it's event driven, fact driven.' However, he saw no difficulty with a gifted writer communicating such a sense in a feature. He feels that a sense of the sacred verged on the poetic, and the poetic and the journalistic are not often seen as having much in common. He himself wrote a series called the *Jesus Reports* for the millennium year, in which the events of the gospels are written about as if they are current events. He deliberately kept them in a reportage style. From his own writing he could think of only

⁵⁹ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

two occasions where he had attempted to communicate a sense of the transcendent. One was prompted by the visit of the relics of St. Therese of Lisieux, where he was reminded of a friend's faith in the saint.⁶⁰ He explains:

I wrote about an experience I had myself, about a friend of mine who died and about smelling roses after her death. It was an extraordinary experience that I cannot explain in any ordinary language ...Also, in a piece about Islam recently for the (*Irish Times*)*Weekend* magazine, I talked about being with a friend on a trip to Istanbul. We were in the Blue Mosque there, a naturally stunning building. I felt absolutely nothing there but I knew what he was feeling because I had had those feelings at home in my own church, that sense of the sacred... those two pieces were probably the nearest I'll ever come to addressing the sacred in a feature piece in writing.⁶¹

Quinn refers to the visit of the relics of St. Therese to Ireland, as an example of how the sacred is important in people's lives, but is also a worthy subject for news coverage.

If you think about when the relics of St. Therese were here and look at the huge numbers of people that turned out to see that... A program like *Live Line* [RTE radio] took that and it covered it like a big event in the life of the country, which it was. Now I don't know to what extent the sense of the sacred was conveyed but they were speaking to people who were definitely finding something of spiritual benefit to them from the visit of these relics and that came across loud and clear on *Liveline*.⁶²

Quinn feels that this could happen more often than it does. He uses the example of the dearth of coverage given to activities in the basilica in Knock, in contrast with the amount of coverage given to events such as, for example, the Glenties Summer School. He says:

⁶⁰ McGarry, 'All saint'.

⁶¹ McGarry, 'Unveiling a world apart'.

⁶² Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001.

Now a sort of Catholic 'summer school' to me would be the annual novena at Knock. Every day in the basilica they have a speaker who will address five thousand people and yet that's not covered at all, because they say, 'Well that's religion, that's only a minority interest.'

There is some divergence among the journalists about the possibility of evangelisation or *da'wa* taking place in the media, but some of them, notably Little and Quinn, do feel that it is possible to convey a sense of the sacred. In Little's case he believes that it is possible to do so obliquely, through the medium of telling a story in which virtue is visible, such as in the social actions of the Catholic Church. In Quinn's view, religion could be covered much more by the mainstream media, in a way which would show the importance of faith in people's lives.

4. Upholding Civic Values

Both the journalists interviewed and those representing religious institutions share a concern to uphold standards in journalism and public service broadcasting. This is covered at greater depth in Chapter Six. Little expresses his belief that the churches and public service broadcasting, in their 'depth approach' to life, have much in common. He says:

I think public service broadcasting in what it purports to do, to educate, to entertain and to inform,⁶³ has a lot in common with the churches. If you think of Lord Reith's dictum as a dictum for a new kind of template for religion, it's not that far off the mark. If you ask someone what is a good sermon, 'educate, entertain and inform' [are central]. But I think that kind of depth of approach to things is endangered.⁶⁴

⁶³ As first chairman of the BBC, Lord Reith suggested that to educate, entertain and inform was a good model for public service broadcasting. See 'Lord Reith' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/thenandnow/history/1920s-1.shtml>.

⁶⁴ Little. Dec. 17th, 2001.

Little speaks about the rise of the American right, about the claim that it is the virtuous individual who brings good to society, and that there is no need for structures in society any longer. Little acknowledges that Mrs. Thatcher did not actually say that there was no such thing as society, but as a society we are 'almost importing that parody of Mrs. Thatcher and implementing it.' This is a world where robust individualism and the entrepreneur are what matters. He concludes:

That is something that has implications for religion and for public service broadcasting. Religion and public broadcasting have a lot to say to each other about how to chart the future.

Curtin makes the point that as the concept of public service broadcasting gets 'squeezed', so does the space for religion in media. This is of concern to some broadcasters and religious representatives. Cooney believes that there is a huge onus on 'churchmen, not just Catholic ones' to make 'revitalised efforts to have structures of debate that can also spill over into society.' He spoke of the need to 'influence, debate and still defend values, but at the same time try and maintain standards that are eroding.' He feels that this is even more of a pressing need in an age where:

.. the media is now more and more concentrating on the misfortunes of the great and good, whether it's drugs or drink or some major political figure found in a financial scandal, or churchmen involved with paedophilia or going off with women. The whole thing in the media now is to treat all that as if it were an extension of these soap programmes.⁶⁵

This is an area where the churches, mosque and media have common interests, and where both sides see that they could work together to mutual benefit.

⁶⁵ Cooney. Feb. 1st, 2002.

Presbyterians, Church of Ireland, Methodists and Muslims

The journalists concentrate on the Catholic Church in terms of its failure to come to terms with an open and accountable means of communication. They make complimentary comments about individuals within the Catholic Church who work closely with the media such as Dardis and Clarke but they feel that the underlying ethos of the Catholic Church works against an open spirit of communication. In contrast, the Presbyterian Press office in Belfast run by Stephen Lynas receives a very favourable response. Little says:

At the risk of offending other press offices, I would highlight the work of Stephen Lynas in the Presbyterian Church. ... He has to communicate with people through the tabloids. And I remember at an All Hallows conference⁶⁶ on church and communication, he talked about this, devising stories which were ready made for tabloid communicators, which were brief and in simple language and might have a visual element to them. And that is wonderful when someone 'crunches' a story themselves, before they come to you with a document that you have to do all the work on.⁶⁷

Little's point about 'crunching' material, that is, making it easy for a journalist to use, indicates another way in which religious institutions can build good relationships with journalists. Curtin also praises Lynas, as someone who understands the needs of journalists. She says:

At the moment I find the Presbyterian Church excellent. Stephen Lynas is open, accessible, will do his best, is not covering up for anybody, will acknowledge off the record, 'I'm having a problem with your man.' You feel you're dealing with somebody, firstly, who is doing a job because he wants to do it. It's not just a job, he really believes in the whole thing himself. Secondly, he genuinely understands where we're coming from and he doesn't assume we're all out to attack him or

⁶⁶ All Hallows, Drumcondra was founded as a seminary and now conducts an extensive range of courses for lay people and clergy. The conference referred to is 'Church and Media in modern Ireland', 1997.

⁶⁷ Little. Dec. 17th, 2001.

the church, though I would imagine there are people just as ready to attack the Presbyterian Church as they are to attack the Catholic Church.⁶⁸

McGarry is equally complimentary about Lynas. He says that he does not get a sense from the Presbyterian Press office of being 'shoved in one direction or another, you just get what you want out of them.' He does introduce a cautionary note, to the effect that the Presbyterian Church has a great deal of work to do to overcome sectarianism in its membership, yet he believes that Lynas manages to surmount that. In other words, because Lynas is a good communicator, he helps the Presbyterian Church overcome what would be perceived by journalists as a serious handicap. This is perceived as a tribute to his media relations skills. McGarry says:

A person like that can be very good for the institution. The Presbyterian Church would not be seen by many people in a very positive light ... because of the evangelical wing of that church. But there's more to it than that and he has overcome that and presented it in quite a positive light. He has emphasised people like Reverend John Dunlop who is a tremendous man in terms of his insight, and of ecumenism and positive relations on the island as a whole. Even though this is the church that will not participate with the Roman Catholic Church in the proposed new conference for Irish churches and it's quite anti-Catholic in terms of some of its members, [Lynas] can overcome all of that and present a positive profile of the church itself. They still have an awful lot of work to do on the whole sectarianism area. Of all the Protestant churches, the Presbyterians particularly have an enormous lot of work to do.⁶⁹

The area of communications was a constant subject of discussion at committee and General Assembly level in the Presbyterian Church from the 1970s right up to 1990,⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

⁶⁹ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Report of the Publications Committee, paragraph 10. In Report of the General Assembly, (Belfast.) 1970. Report of the Publications Committee, paragraph s 2-8. In Report of the General Assembly, (Belfast.) 1973. Report of the Publications Committee, paragraph 4-7. In Report of the General Assembly, (Belfast.) 1988. Appendix Two. In Annual Reports of the Presbyterian Church, (Belfast.) 1990.

with dissatisfaction being expressed about the church's involvement in media. Once the current office with Lynas in charge was set up, it ceased to be an area which recurred in discussion, which may indicate that there is a degree of satisfaction as to how their communications enterprise is being conducted. This satisfaction is mirrored by the journalists who speak highly of this press office and press officer. Writing about church and media, Inglis speculates that the ethos of Protestant churches, with their emphasis on individual conscience, may make it easier for them to engage with the media.⁷¹ Be that as it may, it is clear from the interviews with the journalists, that there is a long way to go before they believe they are being given similar co-operation by the Catholic Church. For example, in one case McGarry declares that after two months of requests, he still had not received answers to questions which he raised regarding the level of knowledge which authorities in Maynooth had regarding the alleged activities of the former president of the seminary, Micheal Ledwith.⁷² Like the others, Andrews finds the Presbyterian Press office helpful, and also commends the Church of Ireland press officers:

For example, the Church of Ireland has lay press officers. I find I have a different relationship with them. I remember when Andrew Furlong⁷³ recently was making statements and I rang up the press officer and was looking for his number and his mobile number. There was no problem. He just gave it to me. I expected him to go, 'No, we can't give that out'. But he did, and so he was allowing me just to do my job.⁷⁴

Jones, Church of Ireland press officer for the Archdiocese of Dublin and Glendalough came in for praise from most of the journalists, but there is a sense that Drumcree⁷⁵ has damaged the Church of Ireland's relationship with the media. A church which formerly had had excellent relationships with the media became defensive, and at one point journalists were banned from the church in Drumcree. Curtin says that, before Drumcree,

⁷¹ Inglis, 'Irish civil society; from church to media domination', p.64.

⁷² McGarry, 'Church silence that hid "kernel of evil" at Maynooth.'

⁷³ Andrew Furlong, Church of Ireland Dean who raised doubts about Christ's divinity. See McGarry, 'Dean's episcopal authority removed.'

⁷⁴ Andrews, Jan 21st, 2002.

⁷⁵ Loyalists wished to march down the Garvaghy Road as part of their traditional marching season, but this was opposed by residents of the road. It causes great controversy that the Loyalists assemble, and attend services in marching costumes, at the Church of Ireland Church in Drumcree.

she found the Church of Ireland media relations excellent. However, the fact that it was being labelled 'perhaps unfairly' as sectarian began to affect how it dealt with media. It was receiving very bad publicity due to the ongoing press focus on Drumcree, and this meant that it had less trust in journalists. Curtin thinks that the damage done by this might be beginning to recede. She says:

I would now see the Church of Ireland coming back again to the place where it engages. It's open, it values what we [journalists] are at and is prepared to criticise where necessary but certainly to accept the validity of what we're doing.⁷⁶

Cooney also says that 'the flavour or ethos of the interchange between the journalist and the Church of Ireland is nearer the model that I have been saying is lacking in the Catholic Church.' He does qualify his approval, though, because the deliberations of the House of Bishops in the Church of Ireland are 'quite secretive.' He says that the minutes of these meetings have not been released since 1898 and would make fascinating reading, particularly for the period when the Church of Ireland was most closely associated with unionism. He believes that the pluralist ethos and tradition of open debate makes the Church of Ireland much more in touch with the spirit of the age. He says that the Church of Ireland is a force for change in the Republic, 'a muted force for change.' However, in the North, things are much more complex, as the Church of Ireland there often supported the 'status quo, which was against more involvement and participation of the Catholic Community.' He goes on to say:

In the last couple of years the Drumcree situation has put a whole fulcrum of sectarianism in the spot-light every year.... I think it's, by and large, been an issue that hasn't been properly addressed, despite efforts. We are in a situation today where the Church of Ireland does face sectarianism as its biggest issue and that

⁷⁶ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

obviously needs a far greater degree of ventilation in the media than has been given to it so far.⁷⁷

McGarry makes a similar point, that he admires the inclusive and welcoming nature of the Church of Ireland in the Republic but adds that if you go to South Armagh or Drumcree you see a different church, 'very evangelical and quite in their old traditional anti-Catholic mind set.' The handling of the Drumcree crisis is an example of a clash of values between religious organisations and media. Liz Harries, former press officer to Archbishop Eames, defends her decision to bar media from the church in Drumcree:

I realise the media have a job to do, but I have a duty to protect the Church of Ireland from the scenes inside the church which would send the wrong signals.⁷⁸

McGarry, writing in the Church Of Ireland journal, *Search*, queries this decision. He says that the church has repeated that it cannot banish the Orangemen from its service because its services are open to all. He asks:

If the service is genuinely open to all, why were the press excluded? And if the press can be excluded, why not others?⁷⁹

The significance of the issue of sectarianism in the context of this thesis, is that it damaged what had once been excellent relations with the Church of Ireland, and made religious people in that church more wary of journalists.

Criticism of the Church of Ireland is not confined to those interviewed for this thesis. Martin O'Brien, producer of BBC Ulster's religious affairs programme, *Sunday Sequence* was invited by the diocesan clergy of the Church of Ireland diocese of Armagh to address them on the issue of media. He is highly critical:

⁷⁷ Cooney, Feb. 1st, 2002.

⁷⁸ Harries, 'Church and media; servants, not friends?' p.37.

⁷⁹ McGarry, 'The Church of Ireland and Drumcree. A view from the media', p.13.

The Church of Ireland in Northern Ireland does not come across as a body that regards the transmission of its message as a priority.⁸⁰

He also says:

You come across as a deeply cautious church. It's difficult to be cautious and exciting.⁸¹

He also comments that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland appears to be 'slicker, more professional, better organised and more resourced in this area.' In contrast, Quinn is of the opinion that there probably is little to choose between the churches in terms of 'their relative media illiteracy'. However, it is his perception that the Church of Ireland receives an easier time from the media than the Catholic Church does. He gives a number of examples: for instance when Bishop John Neill of Cashel and Ossory had called Cardinal Connell a 'representative of the most reactionary elements of the Catholic Church', this received very little negative coverage. Yet when Cardinal Connell had said that Archbishop Walton Empey was not a 'theological high-flyer'⁸², this caused outrage. He is not defending Connell's remarks which he said were not only impolite but also unnecessary, but wondered why one comment was seen as damaging ecumenism while the other was not. In his view, we rarely see 'negative commentary or headlines given to negative comments made by Church of Ireland prelates.' The only exception is when there is coverage of 'more extreme Orange elements' in the North of Ireland. Jones, press officer for the combined dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough, does not believe this to be true, saying that the media would be 'just as quick to turn on Archbishop Empey in the morning.'⁸³

⁸⁰ O'Brien, 'Church criticised for poor communications set-up', p.8.

⁸¹ *ibid*, p.11.

⁸² McGarry, 'Cardinal says Empey is not a "high flyer" '.

⁸³ Jones, Feb. 23rd, 2001.

The journalists acknowledge the Methodists have difficulties because their numbers are so small, which makes it hard for them to be pro-active in media terms. Curtin says that she has not had much contact with them, but that the contact has been good. Little acknowledges that being a small church can present problems when seeking coverage, and gives the example of when the Methodist conference: when it is in session in Cork, he does not cover it personally as religious affairs correspondent. He leaves it to the RTE people in Cork to cover it, because the church is small, and therefore does not rate travel from Dublin.

Andrews, of all the journalists, has probably had the most experience of working with the Islamic community. She finds them helpful, in particular Rabi'ia Golden who is an Irishwoman:

She was able to provide me with someone who was willing to talk to me about converting from being a Catholic to a Muslim. I remember ringing her up and asking her about the Qu'ran, and was it selling well? Obviously they want positive portrayal of Islam, but I got the impression that she was willing to help me.⁸⁴

Quinn mentions that the Islamic community is not yet in a position to go beyond reacting to media, because 'they're still trying to set down roots in Ireland and they would be still unsure of their place within Ireland.'⁸⁵ McGarry states that he had not had a huge amount of contact with the Islamic community, but in a strange way that the attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001 had been helpful to Islam:

It has created a curiosity about Islam. ...A lot of people were quite shocked, in a positive way, to discover how much there is in common between Christianity and Islam. They believe in Jesus Christ, they hold him to be one of the great prophets and they believe in the virgin birth. They believe Jesus ascended to heaven. They

⁸⁴ Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

⁸⁵ Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001.

don't believe in the Resurrection of Christ but there is just so much there that people would never have thought that we had in common.⁸⁶

In general, there is a consensus that Islam is both a relatively new faith in Ireland, and does not have the resources to be pro-active to media.

Constraints on journalists

Some of the journalists are candid about the difficulties and pressures of their job. For example, Little works in what is termed a 'rolling news service.' In other words, news is continually updated during the day, which means that as religious and social affairs correspondent for RTE, he can be expected to provide material for *Morning Ireland*, which will be then updated for news broadcasts during the day, especially the *Six-One* and *Nine O'Clock* television news, and also for a radio magazine programme like *Five-Seven Live*. In addition, he must input copy for the Internet news service and for use as sub-titles for viewers. He says:

So there was a time when you could do something from home on the telephone and you stuffed the jotter back into your pocket and forgot about it, but now they like you to get it up on the web and e-mail it in, so that it can be used immediately and our web site can provide genuine breaking news. Another innovation is that they like you to put all your copy into a computerised system so that it's available for sub-titling on the *Six-One* and *Nine O'Clock News*. So there are plenty of demands in terms of time, and also the formats RTE want your information in.

He is also aware that the demands of television and radio can lead to charges of insensitivity from religious people, particularly when he is working to a deadline. He understands very well the concerns of churches and mosque and tries to be careful, but sometimes it is difficult. He goes on:

⁸⁶ McGarry, Nov. 27th, 2001.

You go in with a news cameraman, and you start getting shots quickly and you have to leave before the service has ended. That is regarded by people as questionable. But the deadlines often dictate that you must. So there is a kind of cultural misfit between the culture of the broadcaster and the culture of the [religious] person. It's very apparent to one going in and out of churches to do a news report.⁸⁷

This 'conflict of cultures' is a recurring theme in discussions of religious media relations. Oliver Maloney, former director-general of RTE, writes that one of the difficulties in the relationship between church and media, is an inherent difference in dynamics:

Media concern with elements of competitiveness, profit, simplification, personalities, openness and urgency are given no great weight by many in the church: on the other hand, church preoccupation with tradition, continuity, fidelity and authority seems remote and strange to many media people.⁸⁸

He goes on to discuss the Catholic Bishop of Achonry, Thomas Flynn's, description of the priorities of church and media. According to Maloney, Bishop Flynn describes:

... an antithetical model in which the church is seen as concerned with reconciliation, the eternal and the profound, as opposed to the media who are presented as inherently conflictual, ephemeral and superficial.⁸⁹

Maloney argues that this antithetical approach is largely rhetorical and that the reality is more complex. Could the church deny having large elements of the 'conflictual, ephemeral and superficial' in its own outlook? In other words, the church may contain

⁸⁷ Little. Dec. 17th, 2001.

⁸⁸ Maloney, 'Learning from each other', p.186.

⁸⁹ Flynn, 'The Church and the media', pp.24-25.

much that is mundane and ephemeral and the media may at least occasionally point to eternal truths.

There are difficulties inherent in how the media works, which can make it difficult for journalists to cover a story as they might wish to do. McGarry speaks about the difficulties of getting space in the *Irish Times* for stories which he might consider important:

The primary difficulty I would have day-to-day, is simply getting stuff into the paper and fighting with the news desk. It's a continuous and a continual row. It's not peculiar to me or my area. Every correspondent has this difficulty and especially a paper like ourselves, a paper of record which has pages already dedicated to the courts, to the Dail, to the North of Ireland, to all these tribunals. There's heavy competition for space and it can be very intense at times, so it becomes a matter of brute haranguing, hassling, persistence and perseverance. It can really cheese you off in the beginning, but you get used to it. It's a dynamic process. Ground shifts all the time, stories happen all the time and you may have your story in, in the afternoon and suddenly there's a late news meeting at a quarter to 6 in the evening and a big story breaks and you're wiped off the face of the paper for that day or for a couple of days. It can be very frustrating but there's not a lot you can do about it.⁹⁰

McGarry goes on to say that quite often religious people imagine that there is some kind of agenda when a story is not covered, but more often it is a case of being unable to persuade the news desk to allocate space to it. Andrews has an additional problem, in that she has to find something new in the story to report as she writes for a Sunday newspaper, and if a story breaks early in the week it can be 'played out' by the weekend:

⁹⁰ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

So my own difficulty would be in finding people to talk to who can shed new light on a certain topic, or can give me enough understanding about that subject to go away and look at it differently. And then of course there are the deadlines, but I think you get used to those. They are not really the biggest problem at all.⁹¹

Curtin feels that the coverage of religion is one of the areas which has been damaged in what she perceives as a decreased commitment to the ideals of public service broadcasting. She says:

Certainly religion, treated as a subject in its own right, religion in that more serious strain, as opposed to religion as a subject for current affairs in terms of controversies or political manoeuvring within churches or between churches, is not central because it will not get the audiences. Now, one could argue that there's a validity for that attitude within RTE given that we are so heavily dependent on advertising because of what's happened to the licence fee. I would like to think that, if the licence fee were restored to its proper level, religion would be restored to a central position. Undoubtedly, like other public service areas, it has been given a less central place than it had in the past.⁹²

Little acknowledges that there is a different dynamic at work in religion than in media, and that the media focus on what goes wrong can sometimes give an unbalanced picture. He points to the positive things which the Catholic Church can and does do:

I think people read it like this, that the only news about religion in recent times, the only news about the Catholic Church in particular has been bad news. That is losing sight of the wood for the trees....So I think there is that demand for the new all the time [by the media] which can probably be infuriating for people who have a tradition to purvey and to hone. But there are plenty of healthy meeting points between the two. There is a healthy tension between those [two]. Perhaps the

⁹¹ Andrews. Jan 21st 2002.

⁹² Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

media can, as in the case of the treatment of the sexual abuse scandals, offer a breath of fresh air to a church organization which needed to have the thing aired, and wasn't going to be able to air it itself.⁹³

Little also makes the point that there can be a trivialising aspect to media, which can be in conflict with the deeper aspects of religion:

But I am not saying that everything the media can offer is going to be healthy. A lot of it is trite and is short term.

Along with other journalists who were interviewed, he acknowledges that the way in which the media operates puts great pressure on journalists, but can also be very difficult for religious people to understand. It can add to the 'gulf of misunderstanding' which sometimes exists between religious organisations and the media.

Summation

In summary, while journalists might have some difficulties with the way in which coverage of sectarianism has affected their relationship with the Protestant churches, and think it is too soon to form a judgement on Islam, their biggest difficulty is with what they perceive to be a culture of secrecy within the Catholic Church. This may be because the secrecy and defensiveness which they perceive in the Catholic Church regularly makes it difficult for them to do their job, while manifestations of sectarianism are more rare and confined to specific incidents. All of them were at pains to point out people who are exceptions to the perceived culture of secrecy in the Catholic Church, but nonetheless the perception remains. Quinn writes quite strong things about the unnecessary secrecy in the church. 'The church's communications problem is deeply ingrained' he says, likening it to that of the British Royal Family:

Both institutions evolved ways of doing things long before the media arrived on the scene. Both are unaccustomed to having their internal workings scrutinised,

⁹³ Little. Dec. 17th, 2001.

and their questions and policies publicly questioned. They instinctively react against such scrutiny, and when the media does cast the spotlight on them, they often hope that by keeping as much hidden as possible, the press will lose interest and go away.⁹⁴

Instead, as he says, what happens is that information is dragged out of the institution piecemeal and the perception grows that they have something to hide. Other journalists feel even more strongly, notably Cooney and McGarry. Cooney refers to secrecy as the 'eighth sacrament' of the church.

There is a strong contrast between what the stated aims of the religious representatives are, and the way in which the actual structures and actions of the Catholic Church in particular are perceived by journalists. It is not surprising that difficulties in religious media relations arise, given the strong resentment expressed by many of the journalists about the secrecy and defensiveness of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the journalists acknowledge that they are increasingly working in a deadline-driven and pressurised environment which can sometimes militate against the kind of depth needed in the coverage of religious issues. This may not be clearly understood by religious people, and may be interpreted as antagonism towards religious values. These are all factors which can lead to mutual suspicion between religious organisations and the media and which do not make the task of religious media relations any easier.

⁹⁴ Quinn, 'Church must end secrecy'.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIVES' VIEWS ON THE NEWS MEDIA'S TREATMENT OF RELIGION

Introduction

This chapter draws on findings from the interviews with religious representatives, with particular reference to their views on the positive and negative aspects of the news media's treatment of religion. It also contains material from the interviews with journalists, who at times concede that there are difficulties with media coverage and at others reject the negative claims made about the media. The religious representatives' comments are made about the news media in general, because (as has been pointed out in previous chapters) due to the small number of specialist reporters, when a big story breaks in religion, many journalists with no specialised knowledge will be assigned to it. There are two main divisions in the chapter. The first concerns the positive contribution of the media to the coverage of religion, and the second, the shortcomings of the news media.

1. Recognition of positive contribution of media

In this section, the importance of the media role in forcing or helping the Catholic Church to come to terms with scandal is emphasised. Others acknowledge the space given to religion in Irish news media, in contrast with other countries.

2. Shortcomings of the media

The religious representatives identify difficulties with the coverage of religion such as bias, lack of knowledge, sensationalism and imposing a 'grid' on religion that is more suited to politics. It is notable that many of the complaints made against Irish journalists are also made about journalists from the United States, for example, in *Bridging the Gap*, which is a major study that examines the sources of discontent between religion and the news media:

Many clergy are convinced the news coverage of religion is biased, unfairly negative, and too sensational. Editors and writers strongly deny the accusation. But journalists acknowledge errors in stories and concede they are more likely to be the reporter's, rather than the clergy's, fault because of unfamiliarity with religion.¹

The shortcomings of the news media as perceived by the Irish religious representatives interviewed fall into the following four main categories:

i. Biased reporting and lack of balance

The major difficulty here is a perception that some journalists come with an 'agenda' and that this colours how they report. Some believe, however, that it is less an agenda, than a sceptical and secular mindset that militates against good coverage of religion.

ii. Lack of knowledge and professionalism

The single greatest complaint of religious representatives is that those covering the area are ill-informed and unwilling to remedy that lack of knowledge. This comment is made more about the general reporter than the specialist.

iii. Sensationalism and superficiality

The Muslim representatives feel particularly strongly that there is a tendency to sensationalise and trivialise Islam, but others also feel that stories are dealt with in a sensational manner.

iv. Imposing a 'political grid' on religion

Coverage of religion can treat it as if the essence of religion were about liberals vs. conservatives, people jockeying for power, and the words and actions of prominent personalities. Religious representatives sum up this attitude, as 'covering religion as if it were politics'.

¹ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap. Update 2000*, p.6.

1. Recognition of positive contribution of media

There is widespread recognition of the important role which the media play. Jim Cantwell, Director of the Catholic Press and Information Office from 1975-2000 commends the media for 'serving church and society well' in bringing child abuse to light. He believes that due to the persistence of the media, church and society were forced to face up to unpleasant realities, to stop worrying only about protecting people's reputations and to take the needs of victims seriously.² Michael Breen, a priest of the Archdiocese of Dublin and Head of the Communications Department at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, writes in similar vein:

Media reports have been sometimes factual, sometimes sensational, but they have communicated to Irish society the very real need of addressing a hidden cancer in the church. Media exposure of child sexual abuse by clergy has forced the church to address the issue in a comprehensive, public manner.³

Fr. Bruce Bradley S.J., Director of Communications, Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, 2001-2002, thinks that the media perform a 'fundamental service' to the church, by communicating messages to a wide audience which otherwise would not be heard:

It's a continual encouragement, coercion, compulsion to greater openness and accountability which by tradition hasn't come that easily for the church. It also induces humility when that accountability is painful, but that is good.⁴

Valerie Jones, Diocesan communications officer for the United Dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough in the Church of Ireland, believes that the churches get more coverage in Ireland than they do elsewhere. She gives the example that when Archbishop Connell became Cardinal it made the headlines of all the news bulletins, and he was given space in the newspapers to express what it meant to him. She also thinks that church people are

² Cantwell. Mar. 26th, 2002.

³ Breen, 'The scandals and the media', p.333.

⁴ Bradley. Dec. 18th, 2001.

quite often given 'slots' in the newspapers, particularly at Christmas and Easter, to deal with specifically spiritual messages.⁵ Martin Clarke, Director of Communications for the Catholic Bishops' Conference and spokesperson for the bishops, talks about a 'huge interest' in stories about the church, citing the fact that there is a full turnout to every press conference after the bishops' meetings in Maynooth. He also talks about the growth in local media, which means that during times of controversy he might have to do fifteen interviews for local radio in one day. As a result, he has an unusual focus for a press officer: he acknowledges that some businesses or voluntary organisations are 'tearing their hair out' to get into the media, but at least some of the time he is trying to keep things out of the paper. He states:

... Sometimes people say to me, 'God, you mustn't be doing anything at the moment, we don't see you in print, or I don't see the bishops on radio or television,' and I say, 'That means we are doing a good job,' because a lot of the time I am averting publicity.⁶

John Dardis, S.J., Director of Communications, Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, 1995-2000, thinks that to 'blame the media' is fruitless, particularly when it can be used by church people as a 'cop-out' and to excuse lack of engagement. He says:

Rather than call them the media, let's talk about journalists who are trying to do a job. Some of them have certain biases but even then, I've generally found that you can say to somebody, 'Can we think about that, can we talk about the issue again tomorrow? In the meanwhile, can you just think about what I'm saying?' Generally speaking, people are open to that.⁷

Dardis' point is that a good working relationship can ameliorate tendencies towards bias. However, not everyone would share his view.

⁵ Jones. Feb. 23rd, 2001.

⁶ Clarke. Dec. 18th, 2000.

⁷ Dardis. Oct 31st, 2000.

2. Shortcomings of the media

One of the major complaints of some religious representatives is that journalists and media organisations fail to give religion adequate coverage, even though religion remains an important influence in Irish people's lives. The view of religious representatives that religion is still an important topic for many Irish people seems to be confirmed by analyses of recent European Values and International Social Survey Programme data, such as the work done by Cassidy, Fahey and Breen.⁸ These analyses show that there is no room for complacency for the churches as there has been a decline in respect for institutional religion and the attendance of religious services, particularly among the young. Nevertheless, there is still a higher level of respect for religious organisations in Ireland than there is in the rest of Europe. Take, for example, what Fahey says about the Catholic Church:

But it still remains one of the most respected institutions in Irish life, and one might be as impressed by its resilience in this regard in the face of adversity as by the extent of its fall from grace.⁹

Religious representatives believe that religion is not taken seriously enough, and that one of the most obvious manifestations of this is the lack of specialist reporters, or even basic knowledge among general reporters. Buddenbaum writes in similar vein, that 'too many media do not have a religion beat'. She also believes that there can be blindness to religion in the selection of reporters. She says:

Frequently they do not even demand any expertise beyond basic reporting skills when they do assign someone to the religion beat. Media that expect all of their reporters to know something about government rarely enquire whether reporters have even minimal knowledge about religion.¹⁰

⁸ See, for example: Cassidy, 'Modernity and religion in Ireland, 1980-2000'; Fahey, 'Is atheism increasing?'; and Breen, 'Different from their elders and betters'.

⁹ Fahey, 'Is atheism increasing?' p.59.

¹⁰ Buddenbaum, 'Improving religion reporting', p. 191.

The main difficulties which some of the religious representatives have with some journalists are examined below.

i. Biased reporting and lack of balance

It is important to note that the allegation of bias and lack of balance is the subjective impression of some of the religious representatives. There is very little quantitative research carried out in this area. However, one such study, carried out by the Research and Development Unit in Maynooth, focused on the representation in Irish newspapers of three statements issued by the Catholic hierarchy in 1992 – the Bishops' statement on the Maastricht referendum, and on the Abortion Referenda, and the Bishops' Pastoral, *Work is the Key*. The author of the study, Ann Hanley, found the coverage to be quite balanced overall. She concludes:

If the Irish newspapers do not give the Catholic Church any special treatment or shield it from public controversy, neither do they treat the church unfairly, particularly when the church positions coincide with what is perceived to be a widely held social consensus.¹¹

It would seem important that similar research be carried out, for example, on the coverage of clerical sexual abuse of children, but to date, the writer is not aware of the publication of such research.

Most of the journalists interviewed, with the exception of David Quinn, editor of the *Irish Catholic* and columnist with the *Sunday Times*, do not see the ideology of journalists as a problem. In contrast, in the literature, it is often referred to as a factor in religious people's dissatisfaction with the media. For example, in a *Commonweal* forum on religion and media, Peter Steinfels, religion correspondent with the *New York Times*, identifies three 'standard explanations for media shortcomings':

¹¹ Hanley, 'Religion in Irish newspapers: 3 case studies', p. 536.

First, ideology: journalists are ideologically opposed to religion and unusually influenced by negative stereotypes of most faiths and believers. Second, the three 'I's'; ignorance, incompetence, insufficient resources. Third, the framework of journalism itself, the working definition of news, and the practical conditions under which it is carried out.¹²

Ideology is defined by the Concise Oxford dictionary as 'the system of ideas at the basis of an economic or political theory.' The implication of what Steinfelds says is that journalists are influenced by a left-wing ideology which renders them unsympathetic to religion. This is not a charge that the religious representatives who are interviewed repeat. Most of the religious representatives concentrate of Steinfeld's second point, the so-called three 'I's', ignorance, incompetence and insufficient resources - that is, lack of knowledge and professionalism, and the failure to allocate the same resources to religion as they would to education or sport. Very few of the interviewees identified ideology as a problem, so Quinn is in the minority when he speaks of an 'Enlightenment mentality' among his fellow journalists. According to Quinn, the Enlightenment project is based on the idea that 'when man freed himself from religion, prejudice, tradition and superstition, he'd be able to see the world through the eyes of reason, objectively and as it really is.' There is support for his position in the literature. Don Wycliff of the *Chicago Tribune*, claims that there is 'appalling ignorance' among journalists and also a 'puerile attitude', a failure to understand religion as a different way of seeing reality. This attitude, he says, stems from a failure to move on from resentment of childhood voices which always seemed to be saying, 'Don't do that; you'll go to hell.' He concludes by saying, 'Aside from those high-minded philosophical differences, there's some plain old animus.'¹³ From an Irish perspective, at least among the religious representatives who are interviewed, there are only a few references to 'plain old animus.' Quinn is the only journalist interviewed who says that there is hostility to the church among journalists:

¹² In 'Religion and the media - three 70th anniversary forums', p.15.

¹³ *ibid*, p.19.

I have seen it myself many times personally. If you go to journalists' parties for example, as the night goes on, and the drink begins to talk, I have personally encountered it from journalists.¹⁴

He claims that many journalists either consciously or otherwise operate out of a secular viewpoint. He points out that 'secularism is in itself an ideology', something often ignored by journalists:

The idea that they [journalists] are totally objective and the people who are religious cannot be objective is extremely dangerous because it completely blinds them to their own bias.

By this he means that there is a danger that those who are influenced by secularism will see their viewpoint as automatically more reasonable, and therefore not maintain the objectivity necessary for good journalism. David Brooks makes a similar point when he writes humorously of being a 'recovering secularist.' He goes on:

Until September 11, I accepted the notion that as the world becomes richer and better educated, it becomes less religious. Extrapolating from a tiny and unrepresentative sample of humanity (in Western Europe and parts of North America) this theory holds that as history moves forward, science replaces dogma and reason replaces unthinking obedience... It is now clear that the secularisation theory is untrue.¹⁵

Notwithstanding Brooks' view, there is evidence that a secularist mindset influences journalists, if only in the nature of their scepticism. E. J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* describes journalism as the 'quintessentially Enlightenment profession.' He goes on:

¹⁴ Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001.

¹⁵ Brooks, 'Kicking the secularist habit', p.26.

Our rules say, 'Prove it. Show me. Give me the evidence. Where are the documents? Do you have two sources on the Virgin Birth? Why should we believe these guys who said they saw Jesus after he died?' The journalist might ask, 'Where are the pictures? How do we know that the Ten Commandments come from God? Maybe... the guys who wrote them figured out the best way to sell them was to assert that God endorses the Ten Commandments'.¹⁶

Patsy McGarry, religious affairs correspondent of the *Irish Times*, accepts that there is a perception that journalists are 'children of the Enlightenment' but rejects the idea that secularism is in any way a threat to the church. He believes that people confuse secularism with materialism and the two are very different. One denies that the spiritual exists, but the other recognises that spirituality is an important motivation for many people. He says:

Modern western secularism is rooted in Judaism and Christianity. It comes from the same root, Abrahamic religion. So I think the churches could be a bit more open to that view [secularism]. They have so much in common in terms of fighting for social justice and all of those issues. The welfare state is probably the greatest achievement of the last century. That was rooted in secularism but its inspiration was Judaism and Christianity.¹⁷

This concurs with something which Silk holds, that far from being secular, the media approach stories through a series of topoi, or formulae, which are rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. These are: applause for good works, embrace of tolerance, contempt for hypocrisy, rejection of false prophets, inclusion of worthy religious others, appreciation of faith in things unseen, and concern about religious decline.¹⁸ On the other hand, Dart and Allen caution that there is a difference between 'a benevolent secular

¹⁶ In 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums', p.28.

¹⁷ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

¹⁸ Silk, 'Unsecular media', p.142.

approach to the news' and a 'thoughtless secularism that slides easily into anti-religious treatment by the media.':

In the newsroom, such attitudes can be prejudicial to religion. There are some journalists who see most people of faith as loyal to anachronistic doctrines, authoritarian organizations and supposedly immutable tradition. In that regard, of course, there are more than enough religious extremists and would-be prophets to solidify newsroom stereotypes.¹⁹

McGarry says that the problems between journalists and religious people stem less from secularism than from a lack of understanding of how the media work and the pressures under which journalists operate. Religious people tend to believe that if something is not covered it is because 'You don't want to publish it.' This indicates that they do not understand news values. He says:

These values are judged in terms of news interest, on how interesting an item is to the reader as interpreted by experienced people who are working at this every day. And they [religious people] believe that when a story doesn't appear that it's because, 'Oh we don't like that crowd, to hell with them. ' It's not like that.'²⁰

Not all authors would believe that religious people do not understand news values. Hoover conducted research on religious people and their use and knowledge of newspapers. From his research it emerges that religious people are regular newspaper readers, who understand the news process reasonably well. What concerns religious people, according to Hoover, is that because they have a fair knowledge of how the process of news works, they 'see much that could fit in the newspaper, but does not.' These readers want to see religion 'mainstreamed' as opposed to 'ghettoised.'²¹

¹⁹ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.15.

²⁰ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

²¹ Hoover, 'The challenge of standards', p.200.

There is a perception that some journalists come with a lot of 'baggage'. In other words, they may have had negative experiences or perceptions about religion, which colour how they report certain issues. Clarke contrasts this with reporters from other countries:

So much baggage among [Irish] journalists who write on religious issues, and at the same time, so little knowledge of the church. The difference between them and dealing with journalists from other countries is always very noticeable. It is very difficult if a journalist is looking at issues through a lens of their own creation all the time. It is very hard from the church point of view to get them out of that loop and to have any sort of reasonable objectivity.²²

Sr. Maxwell, secretary general of CORI, also speaks of reporters having an agenda, perhaps because of some past hurt. She believes that this frequently colours what they write. She goes on:

Dare I say it, many journalists also speak and react out of a sense of personal hurt or rejection in the past. I always remember Michael Paul Gallagher, the Jesuit, making that point to us, that whenever you come across an atheist or even an agnostic or somebody who is anti-church, it's worth hanging in there with that person, getting to hear that person's personal story and nine times out of ten, we'll find that it's not a loss of faith. It's a loss of self-esteem, sometimes occasioned by harsh treatment by somebody that represented the church for him or her. So it's a very personal agenda and that's regrettable.²³

Clarke believes strongly that there is often a lack of balance in the coverage of religious issues. He expresses great frustration at having no control and having to operate by the 'media's rulebook', a rulebook which he believes does not have balance as a central

²² Clarke. Dec. 18th, 2000.

²³ Maxwell. E. Nov. 29th, 2000.

principle in practice, whatever their formal Code of Conduct may say in theory. He gives the example of a programme about *Dominus Iesus*²⁴ :

The presenter and three of the four panellists were partisan against the Catholic Church and there was one Catholic Church person. Now that person couldn't enforce having two people present who were pro-church. He couldn't even enforce the impartiality of the presenter.²⁵

He also speaks of situations where he receives a telephone call and he knows the reporter wants 'three sentences for balance.' This results in a 'Damned if you do, damned if you don't' situation, where he knows that if he does respond, only a line or two which will not represent his position in full will be used, but if he does not, he will be criticised for not producing a spokesperson. Some of the interviewees had very specific cases where they feel they have been 'burned' in their contact with the media. Roy Cooper, a parish minister and communications and press officer for the Methodist Church in Ireland, describes giving a script of a Methodist President's address to a senior reporter, now retired. The President had expressed concerns about declining numbers. However, the coverage that resulted was rather more extreme in its analysis:

So I got up the next morning and I was accosted by three members of our church who said to me, 'Some press officer you are. The headline in one of the national papers this morning is, "Methodists will be extinct in 2001, says incoming President".'²⁶

Sr. Maxwell feels strongly about coverage of the housing crisis. She believes that it was framed in an unbalanced way in that it was presented as if religious orders handing over land for building would solve the housing crisis:

²⁴ *Dominus Iesus* . In the news because it was considered by some other Christian churches that the Catholic Church is dismissive of their claim to be authentic churches in this document.

²⁵ Clarke. Dec. 18th, 2000.

²⁶ Cooper. Jan 8th, 2002.

One of the issues that I would have been addressing a year ago was the accusation that if only religious released all the lands that they have that were surplus to their requirements, the housing shortage in Ireland would have been cured. Well, I mean that was not just a myth, it was a downright lie, because it was years of non-planning and not looking forward by the government that created this impasse that we're experiencing now around housing.²⁷

Quinn does not believe that the idea that there is an 'agenda' among journalists is quite accurate. 'Agenda' implies conspiracy, an idea that he rejects. He says that what might look like an agenda from the outside results from 'a generally highly sceptical attitude towards the church' which leads people to 'tend to interpret what the church does in a negative light a lot of the time.' He says that this results in stories being selected, which are 'always to do with scandal or dissent'. He contrasts this, for example, with the coverage of education where an education correspondent is not expected to be always looking for conflict and scandal, but instead to cover issues which are of interest to educators, students and parents. He says of an education correspondent:

He's [or she's] expected to be a serious correspondent covering the issues that are important in education. That is how the religious area should be covered as well. If a story is going to cast the church in a negative light, and it's a genuine story, then so be it, but equally the issues that are important within the church and to the people interested in church matters should be covered as seriously as education issues.²⁸

This belief ties in with something covered in *Bridging the Gap*, that is, the failure to adequately resource religion coverage. Dart and Allen write:

²⁷ Maxwell. E. Nov.29th, 2000.

²⁸ Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001.

Many news executives have maintained that they are open to good religion-news stories, but few devote to such stories the resources that they give to covering education, medicine or sports.²⁹

Clarke also believes that there is a very narrow definition of what constitutes a religion news story, which works to the detriment of more balanced coverage. He describes an obsessive interest in certain stories almost to the exclusion of everything else. He says that he could keep seven or eight files on his desk which the media are interested in and that they ignore everything else. He lists the topics that the media are interested in: divorce, abortion, contraception, the fall-off in Mass attendance and vocations, child abuse, ordination of women and celibacy. He says:

It never moves beyond the superficial analysis or superficial perception and the reinforcement of those perceptions. Another difficulty is an unwillingness to cover the good news stories. In recent surveys the surprising thing is that so many young people thought highly of their local priest and that confounds the critics but good news stories are not acceptable.³⁰

It is not that he downplays the importance of the issues he names, particularly of something like child abuse, but he objects to the superficiality of most of the coverage. He gives examples of what he means by superficiality. Five per cent of Irish people attend daily mass. Sunday mass attendance may be dropping, but it is still much higher than elsewhere in Europe. Why not examine that reality? Vocations are in decline, but many thousands of lay people are pursuing courses in theology. Why is this angle not covered? Andrews acknowledges that it is difficult to get good news into the paper, but she says that this is not confined to the churches, saying that you see very few stories with headlines like 'Garda doing fine job.' She herself has experienced difficulty with persuading her newspaper that it was worth pursuing certain stories. She explains:

²⁹ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.12.

³⁰ Clarke. Dec 18th. 2000.

I remember I was interested in looking at how the church is working more and more with lay people. It is moving away from teaching, nursing and working in hospitals. I remember I was interested in reporting on church people working with prostitutes. I wanted to do that, but there wasn't that much 'pick up' on it in my paper. Again, it was perhaps not 'sexy' enough, even though I thought it was quite interesting, quite 'sexy' really.³¹

Andrews' anecdote illustrates the difficulty of getting coverage for positive material and reinforces John Cooney's earlier point that 'most news is about cock-ups.' This view is shared by Cullen Murphy, managing editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, who is quoted in *Bridging the Gap*. He says that the 'real workhorse in giving structure to a daily news story is conflict – us versus them, veterans versus upstarts, good guys versus bad guys.' He goes on:

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.³²

The fact that some religious representatives claim that some journalists are biased would imply that the latter are failing to live up to the National Union of Journalists Code of Conduct, which states in section three:

A journalist shall strive to ensure that the information he/she disseminates is fair and accurate, avoid the expression of comment and conjecture as established fact and falsification by distortion, selection or misrepresentation.³³

Some of the journalists who are interviewed comment on the allegation of bias, and dispute whether it exists to any great extent. Cooney believes 'facts are sacred'. He

³¹ Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

³² Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.18.

³³ National Union of Journalists Code of Conduct.

objects to the idea that he would report anything just 'to be nasty, to damage the church forever.' He feels he is not given credit by those who would charge him with 'having an agenda' for times when he did not publicise events. He mentions refraining from running a story, for example, because it would have damaged someone whose mother was elderly.³⁴ In relation to news reporting, McGarry believes that the same criteria hold for covering a 'fair day in Ballaghaderreen' as for covering religion:

Basic, simple principles apply. Establish the facts, report them accurately, quote people accurately, get the essence, summarise the event or the report in the space given as accurately and as cogently as you can. Just get the facts out there.³⁵

When it comes to 'analysis, interpretation, comment and opinion,' he feels there is space for personal bias to come through. He goes on:

I think it's good for the reader to know where you're coming from. They're entitled to know your perspective on things so that they can sieve through what they read written by you to establish what they find acceptable or otherwise.

Having clearly identifiable views when writing opinion and analysis is not what troubles some of the religious representatives. They are much more troubled by what they perceive as distortion, or undue emphasis on the negative to the exclusion of the positive.

ii Lack of knowledge and professionalism

If a single characteristic had to be nominated as the most annoying to religious representatives who are interviewed, it is lack of knowledge and professionalism among journalists. As Quinn puts it:

³⁴ Cooney. Jan 25th, 2002.

³⁵ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

Are there journalists who are hostile to the church? Absolutely, but there are far more journalists who actually know nothing about it.³⁶

Religious representatives believe that religion is not taken seriously enough, and that one of the most obvious manifestations of this is the lack of specialist reporters, or even basic knowledge among general reporters. A number of the religious representatives comment on younger journalists who may be graduates but who have very little knowledge of any church, much less the mosque. Jones wonders whether some of them have even heard of the Church of Ireland, and has to tailor her media relations material to take account of that. She understands why they might not have met anyone from the Church of Ireland, given its small size, but occasionally she is taken aback by the questions she is asked, which have included whether the Church of Ireland celebrates Christmas:

On a big media occasion in Christchurch cathedral at a celebration of Holy Communion, the RTE person turned to me and said, 'You have Holy Communion!' Now admittedly she wasn't a religious correspondent, she was someone who had been sent in that day, but she actually turned to me and said that.³⁷

Many of the journalists agree that there is a great deal of ignorance amongst journalists. Little, for example, points out that although he attended a school with a Church of Ireland chaplain he would not have been aware that they celebrate communion until he attended an inter-church marriage. He puts at least some of the blame on the way the churches have failed to teach about the other churches.³⁸ Other journalists also acknowledge that the charge can be accurately levelled against journalists of not being sufficiently informed about religion. For example, Andrews says:

³⁶ Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001.

³⁷ Jones. Feb. 23rd, 2001.

³⁸ Little. Jan. 18th, 2002.

When something blows up, then all the reporters get involved, not just people who always deal with religion. You have general reporters coming along and they are sent out with an hour's notice. They wouldn't have the knowledge, or the time, to prepare. So I imagine then the questions can come across as too general and not informed enough. I am sure that can be frustrating [for religious people.]³⁹

Andrews cites McGarry as someone who has 'read himself into the job and who is learning all the time.' Little also feels it is a priority to inform himself. Cooney says that all reporters, whether in the courts, or in politics have to pick up information and contacts as they go along, but that in the case of the churches, particularly the Catholic Church, that is very difficult. He uses the example of a political reporter having at least a chance of getting an interview or briefing from a leader of an opposition political party:

The difficulty is in religion, if you want to pick up the phone and talk to Cardinal Connell or some of the other bishops and get a quick interview you are not going to get it.⁴⁰

Tom Hayes, Director of Communications for the Catholic diocese of Cork and Ross, believes that some of the difficulty stems from the poor education in religious matters. He acknowledges that this poor religious education is often provided in church-run schools. He says that in spite of having so-called 'Catholic education' most people in Ireland have a very low level of knowledge and understanding, and that is reflected in reporters. He gives an example of journalists speaking about 'lay deacons', which is inaccurate, as a deacon is 'somebody who has received the same sacrament of Holy Orders as a priest or a bishop.'⁴¹ Sr. Maxwell feels that the level of knowledge of the social teaching of the church is so low among journalists 'that it's almost impossible even to talk with them and to discuss the issues.'⁴² Quinn concurs:

³⁹ Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

⁴⁰ Cooney. Jan 25th, 2002

⁴¹ Hayes. Oct. 18th, 2000

⁴² Maxwell. E. Nov.29th, 2000

I often have journalists saying to me, 'Why doesn't the church speak out more about economic issues or social issues, about the refugees? Why is it that they're silent on these things?' I know that it is constantly speaking out on such matters. I am constantly seeing statements about such things. But the journalists are reading the papers and they see Desmond Connell said something stupid again, or there's another priest involved in a scandal, or there's that theologian who's questioning the teachings of the church. Because in their own papers they see nothing about the church and refugees, or poverty, or drug addicts they assume that the church has nothing to say and nothing to do in these areas.⁴³

Cooper declares that such a lack of knowledge would not be tolerated in any other area, a point that is reiterated by others. He highlights the lack of specialist reporters and a condescending attitude to religion:

They feel that they're doing us a favour, but I think they've got to take us as seriously as they would take their reports on GAA matches.⁴⁴

However, Stephen Lynas, Information Officer with the Presbyterian Church, speaks about a question asked at a seminar⁴⁵ as to whether the church people would prefer a theologian or a reporter as a religion reporter. Lynas and Harries [former press officer for the Church of Ireland] both said that they would prefer a reporter, because he or she would be able to take complicated material and produce a 'tight, ninety second piece'. In other words, for both of them, being proficient in the craft of journalism is more important. Lynas got the impression that the Catholic Church would have preferred a theologian because the material is complex. Lynas disagrees about the necessity for a theologian:

⁴³ Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001

⁴⁴ Cooper. Jan 8th, 2002.

⁴⁵ Church and Media, All Hallows, 1997.

I thought Joe Little's response [to the question as to whether a theologian or a journalist would make a better religion reporter] was very good. He said, 'You think theology is complicated? What about some of the European legislation or the budget statements or politics that we as journalists have to condense and grasp?' To me, that is the journalistic skill, that you can take a thirty-page document or a fifty-page document and you can get the bones of it to enable people to understand it.⁴⁶

It is perhaps significant that Lynas, who is highly thought of among journalists, has such regard for the profession of journalism. Others feel that there is a lack of professionalism among journalists. Clarke is particularly strong on this:

Another difficulty I find constantly, with Irish journalists particularly, is superficiality, lack of research, sheer unprofessional conduct I would call it in terms of how people set about addressing an issue. For instance, on major issues they will write and discuss things on radio and television on the basis of newspaper reports, or programmes, but will not read the primary material.⁴⁷

As Andrews points out, this results from the assignment of general reporters instead of specialists to religion stories.⁴⁸ Jones, in particular, is at pains to say that most of the problems stem from people for whom religion is not a regular beat.⁴⁹ This brings us back to Dart and Allen's point that newspaper executives often fail to invest in proper coverage⁵⁰.

iii Sensationalism

Sensationalising and the trivialising of stories are other charges laid against the media. The Islamic community feel particularly strongly about it. Fazel Ryklief, Administrator

⁴⁶ Lynas. Jan 8th, 2002.

⁴⁷ Clarke. Dec. 18th, 2000.

⁴⁸ Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

⁴⁹ Jones. Feb. 23rd, 2001.

⁵⁰ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.12.

of the Islamic Foundation of Ireland, tells of a reporter coming to him for a comment after the attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001, asking whether there were Al Qaeda or Taliban supporters attending the mosque. Ryklief refused to comment, saying it would not be appropriate to do so at such a sensitive time. Two days later an article appeared ⁵¹in the *Evening Herald*. Ryklief says:

It was the worst article I ever read on Islam. He couldn't get the material he wanted. He said that Muslims tend to be homosexuals far more than any other faith because they are not allowed to mix freely with women. He said he went down to the mosque and he spoke to some of the Muslims there. One of the Muslims told him that he has absolutely no respect for Irish women and all Irish women are whores and sluts, and this appeared in the newspaper. ... maybe he did speak to one person but the fact that where he said it was just outside the mosque just put us all into this one basket. It seemed like we were all the same.⁵²

He points out how unfair it is to take the views of one person and to make them appear to be representative of all Muslims. He also believes that the Islamic community should have the right to nominate who should speak on their behalf. Ryklief says:

We are a charitable organisation [Islamic Foundation] and we have a constitution, which has been drawn up and approved by the Muslim people of Ireland. We have an AGM. We have elections of new trustees. We have elections of new representatives of the Muslim community. When we do that also we have smaller elections for people to represent, or to speak to the press or to attend gatherings whether it be at state level or at inter-faith groups. So all these are elected democratically by our people. So we don't like when somebody just stands up and speaks on our behalf without us even knowing who they are or what their background is. Like in every other faith, you would have someone who may be very radical or someone who may be very uneducated about Islam itself and says

⁵¹ O'Connell, 'Osama terrorists' gay secret revealed'.

⁵² Ryklief. Mar 8, 2002.

something contrary to what we believe. Some of the media can't understand this and they can't accept this. They think it's based on secrecy or that we've something to hide and 'Why can't anyone old Muslim in the street talk about Islam?'

This issue is likely to remain a source of tension and is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. Rabia'a Golden, Women's Co-ordinator at the Islamic Foundation of Ireland, also believes that the media are not interested in Islam unless for sensationalist reasons. In her view, men who beat their wives, for example, are identified as Muslim, whereas a Catholic will not be identified in the same way. She also mentions the kind of coverage her daughters received when they married young, as evidence that the media were only looking for sensational stories. She mentioned their marriages on a radio show, and it caused a great deal of interest among journalists, but she feels that it was pursued in a sensationalist way. She says:

It was all 'Can we get something juicy here?' And they weren't really interested in the true Islamic side of it and why they married young or why they wanted to do that.⁵³

She believes that the interest was salacious, and that journalists were not interested in examining the faith that motivated her daughters to marry young.

iv Political 'grid'

Islam is often treated as if it were primarily a political system, rather than a faith, although Christian religious representatives complain that this is also the case with their faith, if for different reasons. The Muslim religious representatives were deeply upset by an article with no by-line that appeared in the *Southern Star* after the visit of Henry Kissinger to Cork in March 2002, which referred to 'the evil which is Islam'. The unnamed writer says:

⁵³ Golden. Nov.21st, 2000.

The fanatical anarchists emerging from Islam constitute a most insidious threat and it is hard to believe that the Taliban leadership, for example, represented any recognisable system of moral and religious belief, however distorted by fundamentalist zealotry. ...Can the evil that is Islam, at least in part, be changed?⁵⁴

The failure to distinguish between Islam as a faith and extreme elements of what might be termed 'political Islam' is a recurring theme in the literature. For example, Murphy, writing in the Jesuit journal, *America*, says:

It is frightening that some in the United States are taking a simplistic view of this internal struggle within Islam, equating the faith itself with its most radical, violent and anti-Western adherents.⁵⁵

Lawrence takes up the theme:

In recent decades the emphasis of scholars, journalists and policy makers alike has been almost exclusively on Islamic fundamentalism. The result has been a deficit in understanding the actual nature of Muslim social and cultural values in the modern period. For there is no concerted, uniform movement called Islamic fundamentalism.⁵⁶

This failure to distinguish between Islam as a faith and as a political system upsets both Ryklief and Golden. They feel that they have little opportunity to redress the balance. However, they did mention journalists who have been fair and helpful, such as McGarry.

⁵⁴ 'City on a Hill.'

⁵⁵ Murphy, 'The war on terrorism', p.11.

⁵⁶ Lawrence, 'The Shah Bano Case', p.149.

The issue of imposing a 'political grid' on religion is not confined to Islam. Mary Alice Williams, former religion correspondent for NBC-TV, says that religion is not treated as seriously as medicine or law or 'even the weather report' in that reporters do not have to have any specialised knowledge. She goes on:

So those expected to cover religious matters, usually those from the general assignment ranks, fall back on what they know, through a time-tested method, makes for a good story. Wars, battles in which there is always a winner or loser – politics.⁵⁷

Dermot McCarthy, Director of Religious Programmes in RTE television, speaking about television news reporters, writes that it is almost impossible for those who have no interest in religion and who do not believe in God to be familiar with the way in which believers see their faith:

So the only way in which they can interpret the standpoint of the church on an issue of faith or morality is by imposing a political grid on the subject, and viewing it in terms of a government and its opposition, right or left opinions.⁵⁸

Cooper describes a time when he suggested that the President of the Methodists re-draft a New Year's message because he was sure that a political reference would become the focus of attention to the exclusion of everything else. The President did not want to re-draft it. He says:

I was right. All they [the media] wanted was the paragraph that started, 'George Mitchell was right when he said....'⁵⁹

Cantwell agrees that religion is rarely covered in it's own right, and says that this is not the case in other countries:

⁵⁷ In 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums ', p.42.

⁵⁸ McCarthy, 'Using the message- using the symbols', p.81.

⁵⁹ Cooper. Jan 8th, 2002.

This is probably peculiar to Ireland, but religion is seen as important in terms of prominence only to the extent that it impinges on the political. That wouldn't have been my experience in Britain, I'd have to say, where there's been much more depth to coverage of religion.⁶⁰

Cooney disagrees. He sees the whole area of conflict, of clashes of power, as being central to the coverage of religion:

There is public interest in personality clashes, lifestyles, power struggles and pressure group activities in the churches....Journalists do the public a disservice by overlooking these and presenting the churches as perfect societies. Such a view of impeccability is not only bad reportage; it is false theology.⁶¹

Again, this illustrates a well-documented 'clash of cultures' between religious representatives and journalists. It is not so much that religious representatives resent the coverage of 'personality clashes, lifestyles, power struggles and pressure group activities in the churches', it is that they object when this is all that is covered.

Summation

While the positive role of the media is acknowledged, some, though not all, religious representatives have serious reservations about the way in which the media cover religion. Among the charges are that some journalists are influenced by bias and 'baggage' when they cover religion and that their coverage is unbalanced and overly negative as a result. There is a belief that some journalists do not possess enough knowledge about religion to do an adequate job. Some journalists are believed to be sensationalist, or guilty of imposing a political 'grid' on religion, rather than covering it as a discipline in its own right. Not surprisingly, some of the journalists dispute the claims made by some of the religious representatives, in particular that they are influenced by a secular viewpoint to the extent that their coverage is unbalanced. The one area where it is conceded that there is a justified complaint is in the area of knowledge. Journalists acknowledge that non-specialist reporters often do not have the

⁶⁰ Cantwell, Mar. 26th, 2002.

⁶¹ Cooney, 'Putting the church in the limelight', p.520.

necessary knowledge to ask appropriate questions if they are sent out at short notice. However, one of the religious representatives, Hayes, lays some of the blame for this at the feet of the Catholic Church, who after all provided much of the early religious education of journalists in Catholic-run schools.

The complaints that are made about journalists are echoed in the literature, particularly in writings which emanate from the United States. Peter Steinfels, religion correspondent with the *New York Times*, identifies some of the major complaints about the way in which religion is covered as ideology, ignorance, incompetence and insufficient resources.⁶² Irish religious representatives emphasise ideology less than ignorance. They compare the coverage of religion unfavourably to coverage of education. They say that education is newsworthy not just when there is scandal or dissent, but when there are issues of importance to educators, students and parents. Similarly, with regard to sport, they believe that specialist reporters with excellent background knowledge are the norm in sports coverage. Given the high level of religious practice, and the lack of evidence for a decline in interest in spiritual matters, they wonder why religion is not treated in the same way. Analyses of recent European Values and International Social Survey Programme data, such as the work done by Cassidy, Fahey and Breen,⁶³ show that religion is still an important topic for Irish people, despite a decline in respect for institutional religion and the attendance of religious services. E.J. Dionne, columnist and editorial writer for the *New York Times*, says:

...I would suggest that secular people, including journalists, need to accept that religious belief is usually built upon an intellectually serious foundation.⁶⁴

⁶² In 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums', p.15.

⁶³ See, for example, Cassidy, 'Modernity and religion in Ireland, 1980-2000', Fahey, 'Is atheism increasing?', Breen, 'Different from their elders and betters'.

⁶⁴ In Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums. p. 29.

Although not phrased in exactly this way by any of the religious representatives who are interviewed, a viewpoint similar to Dionne's is implicit in much of what they say. They believe that religion comprises specific bodies of knowledge and ways of looking at the world, which demand serious attention in their own right.

The complaints made by some religious representatives show a significant degree of disenchantment with the way in which religion is covered by the news media. The specific incidents related by religious representatives where they believe they have been 'burnt' by journalists explain some of their negative impressions. If their perceptions are even somewhat accurate, it represents a major obstacle to successful media relations. It is difficult to carry out a dialogue with journalists if you believe, as some of religious representatives do, that it is a pointless exercise because journalists have already made up their minds even before they conduct an interview or request a comment. It is notable that not all religious representatives emphasise the negative aspects of religion coverage. Perhaps this indicates that there are ways of approaching journalists which are more in tune with an approach based on dialogue, even when there have been difficulties in the professional relationship in the past. Even though they are not referred to very much by the religious representatives who are interviewed, more systemic issues also appear to be an issue, such as the level of importance given by media organisations to coverage of religion. Religion does not appear to be high on the priorities of media organisations, given the small number of religion specialists among journalists. This is a factor beyond the individual journalist's control, as it is influenced by editorial priorities.

Some of the journalists counter the negative claims made by religious representatives by saying that religious people do not understand the nature of the media, and as a result are inclined to attribute to bias what is much more easily explained by the reality of a highly pressurised and deadline-driven environment. It may only be partly true that religious people do not understand the media. In Hoover's phrase, religious people 'see much that could fit in the newspaper, but does not.'

Whether or not the perceptions of the religious representatives are entirely accurate, the fact that they believe that they have cause for unhappiness because of the way in which the media cover religion, means that the likelihood of establishing a real dialogue with journalists is reduced. Since it has been seen in Chapter Four that journalists also believe strongly that some religious organisations are defensive, secretive, and inept in the way in which they conduct their media relations, it is clear that the obstacles to effective religious media relations are significant.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WAY FORWARD

Introduction

In this chapter of the thesis, suggestions about how to improve the way in which religious media relations are conducted are drawn together from the interviews. Ideas come from both religious representatives and journalists, and are considered below under four headings.

1. Change in attitudes.
2. Resources
3. Practical strategies to facilitate change.
4. Collaboration

1. Change in attitudes

Not surprisingly, the journalists are to the fore in suggesting a change in attitudes on the part of the churches and mosque, but there is also a strong call for change among those who represent the churches and mosque themselves. Both the journalists and religious representatives call for a move away from defensiveness and towards transparency. For example, Patsy McGarry of the *Irish Times* has this to say about defensiveness: 'They [religious people] are braced for a fight where there is going to be none.' He goes on:

They're creating a fight by the disposition they adopt, in other words their own rigidity and their own suspicion which freezes people out and sets up a conflict situation.¹

¹ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

Jim Cantwell, former director of the Catholic Press and Information Office explains that this defensiveness stems sometimes from bad experiences of the media, but he too calls for a more balanced attitude. He says that if people could understand the nature of journalism better they would not be inclined 'either to exaggerate or to underestimate its importance' but instead 'to treat it openly without being naïve.'² In other words, he advocates moving beyond attitudes of defensiveness, secrecy and suspicion, yet without being naïve. It is advice that might equally well be adopted by the media in its relationship with any church or mosque, given that an open mind might be considered a prerequisite for good journalism.

Brendan Hoban, Communications Officer for the Diocese of Killala, also advocates openness. He criticises the 'clerical culture', which led to 'keeping things under wraps', which was supposed to be for the good of the church. He speaks of a priest at a meeting saying, 'We have been found out,' and that as a result 'it is impossible to go on as before'. Instead a new culture of 'accountability and transparency' needs to grow.³ John Cooney, journalist and author, gives blunt advice: 'Implement Vatican II.' In other words, the Second Vatican Council mandated much more open relations with the media and the world than has happened to date. He suggests having a pastoral assembly involving lay people and clergy in regular meetings with the bishops. The church should try to make sure that 'committees are dynamic, and documentation is open to journalists,' who should receive regular briefings. He says:

There might be a need for some kind of 'back to the drawing board and looking at the bigger picture: stop being so neurotic and defensive, and let's get some processes going'. If the church has become boring [for believers] the scope for the religious affairs correspondent to be either exciting or insightful, is very limited.⁴

² Cantwell. Mar. 26th, 2002.

³ Hoban. Dec. 12th, 2000.

⁴ Cooney. Feb. 1st, 2002.

Cooney's latter point about the church having become boring for believers is interesting, given that in Thorn's pithy formulation, 'As a communicator, each religious group provides an insight into itself.'⁵ The fact that the Catholic Church is experiencing so much difficulty with its media relations, may signal a deeper difficulty, not only with the process of communication, but within its life as a religious community. Curtin develops this point. She expresses puzzlement as to why people who have given their lives to something, are not getting across what they obviously believe? She says that Catholic Bishop Willie Walsh of Killaloe has no such difficulty. Whether or not people agree with him, they see that he is communicating from the heart. She wonders what stops others, whether it's 'self-consciousness, inadequacy, or fear of we journalists'. Whatever it is, she feels that they have to get past it to the 'perfect love, which casts out fear'. This would allow them to say, 'I don't give a "sugar" how this "shower" react to me, this is what's most important, this is what I believe and this is what they're going to get.'⁶ Dardis also feels that there is fear among the bishops and that this is blocking progress. He says:

I think bishops are afraid of the media question. They are almost relieved when it doesn't go badly. That is just looking at the past. We should be expecting it to go well and it can go well. It's a victim mentality which says that, 'We are going to be victimised again, so what is the point?'⁷

He suggests that the bishops should go outside Ireland, perhaps to the United States for two weeks for an intensive training course, where they would be encouraged to forget temporarily that they are bishops, in order to see how the whole business of media should best be conducted. He goes on:

It's too important. It's about the hearts and minds of people. So we are in there, we are not conceding it to Nike and to all the other people. We have a much

⁵ Thorn, 'Religious organizations and public relations', p.128.

⁶ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

⁷ Dardis. Oct 31st, 2000.

better product to offer and if it means hustling and fighting for elbow room, we are going to do it: but with that kind of determination and the conviction that you can be good.

2. Resources

If the process of communication is to become a priority, it must receive adequate resources. This is a theme that is echoed in the literature. For example in *Bridging the Gap*, it is one of the central suggestions for religious leaders, that they provide adequate financial support and expertise.⁸ As Cantwell explains, there is still a battle to convince bishops of the need for communications. In the past when there has been a need to cut expenses, communications and media relations has been a target for cutbacks. Giving adequate resources is a way 'to place communications really at the forefront, not the backroom.'⁹ Bradley also feels that there is a need to invest serious resources. He believes:

The way in which this [communications] office is seen and financed, reflects a fairly low estimate of its importance. I don't think it's seen as a central function of the church's functioning in Dublin.... I would say there are big expenditures that could be made on developing web sites and so on.... The web is an area that should be developed substantially, but I think the notion of funding such a thing isn't in the minds at the moment. So we continue with communication in the old-fashioned way, with these long written statements and homilies. But I think they have little or no impact.¹⁰

Of twenty-six Catholic dioceses, there are only three – Down and Connor, Cork and Ross, and the Dublin Archdiocese, which have full-time media relations offices - which also carry out other communications functions, such as production of newsletters, diocesan magazines, and other religious publications. There is also a national office,

⁸ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.80.

⁹ Cantwell. Mar. 26th, 2002.

¹⁰ Bradley. Dec.18th, 2001.

which at time of writing is undergoing change, following the cessation of Martin Clarke's period as spokesperson for the Bishops. He has now been replaced by a lay man, Martin Long.¹¹

The national Catholic Communications office has an annual budget of E125, 000, which covers a director, one communications officer and secretarial services.¹² The director also speaks on behalf of the Bishops' Conference, and the Communications Office provides an information service for the general public.

In the Catholic Communications Office's previous incarnation as the Catholic Press and Information Office, there were five people working there, three of those working as ancillary and secretarial staff, including answering queries from the public, leaving the communications officers to deal with the media. The Dublin Archdiocese revived a communications office in 1995. Currently, that is, November 2003, there are two priests, Fr. Martin Clarke and Fr. Damien McNeice working there, as director and communications officer, respectively, along with a secretary. However, during most of the period of research for this thesis, the Diocesan Communications Office in Dublin had a director of communications, along with two full-time communications officers, and a secretary. There was a budget of E 94,600 to cover the Diocesan Office's expenses, which included part of the cost of producing the diocesan magazine, *Link-up*. Given the fact that at the last census, there were 3,462,606 Catholics in Ireland,¹³ and given the acknowledged importance of media, this level of outlay both nationally and in Dublin seems to reflect a relatively modest investment in media relations.

Hayes thinks that the Catholic Church has a great deal to do before it can claim to be prioritising media relations. For example, Archbishop Brady does not have a diocesan communications office, and media relations is conducted on his behalf by the national office. Hayes points out that the situation looks better on paper than in reality:

¹¹ <http://www.catholiccommunications.ie/Pressrel/20-october-2003.html>

¹² Email correspondence with author from Brenda Drumm, communications officer, dated June 27th, 2003.

¹³ [Http://www.cso.ie/principalstats/cenrel1.html](http://www.cso.ie/principalstats/cenrel1.html)

There are others [press offices] on paper but in most cases they are diocesan secretaries [priests] who will answer a question if they're asked by a journalist, but that doesn't make them a communications officer.... I mean the clearest evidence that the church doesn't really believe in its communication strategy is that it doesn't resource it. The church in my lifetime has put most of its financial resources into buildings, and maintenance of buildings is a huge cost expenditure.... You can't have a communication strategy that thrives on fresh air.¹⁴

Hayes makes the point that it is futile to invest so much money in buildings if you ignore the fact that there are fewer people attending religious services in those buildings, who could be reached in other ways. White expresses a similar idea, that investment tends to follow the church's priorities. He writes:

If the church see a particular form of communication as important in a given cultural context, then motivating the faithful to support this communication- whether this be building cathedrals or establishing television stations - becomes central in Catholic culture.¹⁵

Cooney says that the church is trying to do its public relations 'on the cheap', and says that 'they have not appointed top-notch journalists'. Cantwell agrees that there is a problem if cost is the major factor. He says:

The tendency is to appoint people because they're cheap and that's not a good approach. Your first thought should be for a professional who can do the job. Then questions of faith come, but only if he or she is competent. The fact that he or she goes to Mass every day is not a recipe for finding anybody.¹⁶

¹⁴ Hayes. Oct. 18th, 2000.

¹⁵ White, 'Mass media and culture in contemporary Catholicism', p. 588.

¹⁶ Cantwell. Mar. 26th, 2002.

Clarke believes on the other hand that progress is being made in relation to funding and the priority given to religious media relations. Before his appointment, the position of bishops' spokesperson was always held by a bishop. The existence of a 'resourced national office' and the fact that, aside from the secretary, he is the only non-bishop at the Bishops' conference meeting who has a 'seat at the table' indicates to him that there is increasing commitment to the area of communications.¹⁷

The issue of provision of resources is relevant not only to the Catholic Church. Rev. Roy Cooper is a full-time Methodist minister attempting to operate as a press officer, who has advocated for a long time that a full-time person should be appointed. He says that the answer from his church is always, 'How could we pay them?'. As he points out, the media can't wait when he says, due to pressure of work as a minister, 'I'm sorry, I can't deal with that today.'¹⁸ This echoes another of *Bridging the Gap's* recommendations, that resources should be used to ensure 'timely and precise information to the media.'¹⁹

Valerie Jones, Diocesan communications officer for the United Dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough in the Church of Ireland says that the people in church life 'who have the power, the money and the control of the purse strings' are people who generally don't really understand that 'media is part of mission for the churches.' Aside from herself, all the diocesan communications officers in the Church of Ireland are voluntary. She says that it's not appropriate to have volunteers in a professional world and that 'we are probably putting money into the wrong places.'²⁰ The Islamic community feels the lack of money even more acutely. Golden says that funding is available from the government for programme refugee groups²¹ like the Bosnians and Kosovars, which is seen as expenditure on the Muslim community and which she is glad to see them getting, but it does not support Islam as a faith. She believes that there should be some funding to

¹⁷ Clarke. Dec. 18th, 2000.

¹⁸ Cooper. Jan 8th, 2002.

¹⁹ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p. 80.

²⁰ Jones. Feb. 23rd, 2001.

²¹ Programme refugees are those who have been accepted by the State as a group from a specified country as part of its international obligations to uphold human rights .

allow Muslims to develop professional media relations that would be able to be pro-active rather than reactive to media:

Until we can actually pay somebody to work with us and help us properly it's very hard to get organised.²²

3. Practical strategies to facilitate change

Some of the interviewees, such as Heneghan and Hayes, feel that there is an urgent need for research. For example, Heneghan wonders why the church does not engage in proper marketing surveys, to establish exactly what people think of the church, not with a view to changing their fundamental teaching but to know exactly where they stand. He feels it would give the bishops vital information, which could improve their ministry.²³ Hayes gives the example of decline in vocations about which everyone has a theory, but which no one has researched.²⁴ He feels that it is a pity that the church does not sponsor research or do its own, and that they have 'virtually killed off the research and development unit they did have which did some very good work.'²⁵

Other interviewees concentrate on communications and press offices, and who should staff them. Quinn wonders why the religious orders do not group together to create press offices, which would work to get publicity for all the good work they do which is invisible at the moment.²⁶ In the same way he feels that dioceses could come together to share press offices, a point reiterated by Dardis. Part of the reason for an emphasis on local press offices is the perception that local media are much more accessible than national media is. As Hoban says:

²² Golden. Nov.21st, 2000.

²³ Heneghan. Jan 17th, 2002.

²⁴ Hayes. Oct. 18th, 2000.

²⁵ See for example, Hanley, 'Religion in Irish Newspapers', p.525, for an extensive examination carried out by the Research Unit in Maynooth of newspaper coverage of the Bishops' Conference.

²⁶ Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001.

I think the local scene is quite different. I'm involved in a local radio station and in a local paper. They're very receptive and anxious for me to do religious programmes and for me to write for the local paper.²⁷

Lynas thinks that there are great opportunities at local level. He encourages the Presbyterian Moderator to agree to interviews on community radio, which might have an audience of two or three hundred people that, although still small, is bigger than many congregations in a church. Similarly, local papers reach far more people than a 'Sunday morning homily.'²⁸

As to who should staff a communications office, there is a clear preference among the journalists who were interviewed for lay people. Andrews says that lay people are easier to work with, as they do not take questions personally, as if you were questioning their faith. Curtin believes that it was a step backward to appoint a priest as bishops' spokesperson. She says:

This is no reflection on the current incumbent (Jan 2002)²⁹, but I felt it was a backward step to appoint a priest to the job of press officer for the bishops nationally. I think they should have appointed a married woman, let's say a mother, but at least somebody who was quite specifically not a hierarchical voice yet again.³⁰

She is aware that the Catholic national office has appointed a lay woman, Brenda Drumm, but has had no contact with her. It is not only journalists who believe that there should be lay religious representatives. (Hoban agrees that press officers should be lay people, and that even if 'they make mistakes they should be encouraged to keep going.' Bradley believes that the Irish church has not even really begun to look at the role of lay people:

²⁷ Hoban. Dec. 12th, 2000.

²⁸ Lynas. Jan 8th, 2002.

²⁹ Martin Clarke.

³⁰ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

My own conviction is lay people are the church. I am a lay person who is ordained. I am not another species of being. I think it's a very inviting challenge [to involve lay people]. It's not as if it's distasteful.³¹

Quinn feels that the time is overdue to involve lay people, so that there is a proper balance between lay people and clergy. He gives the example of the U.S. Bishops who have employed a young lawyer called Helen Alvare, who is also a mother, as their spokesperson on pro-life issues. But he has one caveat. He claims that lay people who need 'to pay their mortgages' might be in some senses less free than clergy:

The clerics know that practically no matter what they do their livelihood is still secure and so actually that gives them more freedom, not less. So if you had a lot of lay people working for the church wondering about upsetting their boss and then wondering about their prospects for promotion or even being sacked, things might become even more tight-lipped.³²

None the less, he recognises that there is a tendency among clerics 'to defend the clerical club' to which they belong, which is not healthy. He feels a lay person is a great deal less likely to do so. The point which he makes regarding how independent lay people might feel more circumscribed is echoed by Peggy Shriver, a Presbyterian who is a staff associate at the U.S. National Council of Churches. She writes that religious public relations professionals are sometimes caught between the conflicting interests of their bosses and the news media:

When the institution is attempting to control the damage caused by a controversy and you are caught whitewashing things too much, everything else you do

³¹ Bradley. Dec. 18th, 2001.

³² Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001.

becomes suspect. If you expose too much, you are working somewhere else pretty soon.³³

Cooper also believes that lay people should be involved, giving the examples of Stephen Lynas and Liz Harries, the latter having been press officer for Church of Ireland Archbishop Robin Eames. There are mixed views on whether a person working in the job of communications officer should have a belief or faith in the church or mosque that they are representing. Lynas places competence in the role first:

I don't particularly need to have Christian convictions or beliefs to do this job. I think a skilled press PR person could do this job without necessarily having loads of Christian conviction.³⁴

Yet he does concede that 'Unless you believe in the product you are selling I don't think you're quite as good.' This is interesting, given that the journalists who comment favourably on him all mention his religious conviction. McGarry says that, 'He's an active and practising Presbyterian himself, a man who is very committed to his church but he has a great understanding of media and what we require.'³⁵ Curtin speaks of Lynas in similar terms, as someone who 'believes the whole thing himself.' She goes on:

Secondly, he genuinely understands where we're coming from and he does not assume we're all out to attack him or the church, though I would imagine there are people just as ready to attack the Presbyterian Church as they are to attack the Catholic Church.³⁶

Jones, who is also praised by some of the journalists for her helpful and professional attitude, has a wide range of experience within the Church of Ireland as a volunteer. This

³³ In Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.33.

³⁴ Lynas. Jan 8th, 2002.

³⁵ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

³⁶ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

is at 'the parochial level, at the diocesan level, at the general central church level', because 'It happens to be something I'm interested in.' She says:

I suppose, this sounds terrible, I suppose in my own peculiar way I see this [being a press officer] as a form of ministry.³⁷

The consensus appears to be that the ideal press officer is preferably a layperson, who has a high level of competence, has knowledge of how the media work and has a positive attitude towards journalists. Finally, for many of the interviewees, it should not be 'just a job,' but the person should be a media relations officer because he or she believes in the religious organisation's messages themselves.

So what then, do journalists and religious representatives expect religious media relations officers to achieve by adopting practical strategies to achieve change? Some key objectives are identified.

- a. To build relationships with those who work in the media and to establish some form of 'lobby system' with regular briefings.
 - b. To 'crunch' material such as church documents and statements in a way which facilitates understanding.
 - c. To facilitate the church or mosque in becoming more pro-active.
-
- a. Building relationships and a lobby system

As Hayes puts it:

They [media people] need to see church faces that are not seeking to control social mores in the country, but to act as a part of society. They need to see people who are seeking to engage with the world in a meaningful and dialogic

³⁷ Jones. Feb. 23rd, 2001.

fashion to make a contribution to our culture, to help all people to have an understanding of self and of the world around us which is relevant, meaningful and fulfilling.³⁸

That is quite a tall order, given the current climate. However, Alvare, who is the U.S. Bishops spokesperson on pro-life issues, believes that dialogue and the building of relationships is the only way forward. She represents the U.S. bishops on an issue which generates great hostility, to the extent that she says humorously that she is now very used to 'being accused of being personally responsible for the Inquisition and the Crusades.' None the less, she feels that problems can be overcome 'in the same human ways that problems between any two groups can be overcome,' and that this works to improve the 'quality of reporting.'³⁹

Maier, chancellor for the Archdiocese of Denver and former secretary for communications, concurs with this viewpoint:

First, work hard to understand the psychology of the individual media people you deal with. Cultivate personal relationships. Be patient. Anticipate their needs. Most reporters, most of the time, are decent people trying to do a good professional job. If you're fair, honest and reliable, they usually try to behave the same way.⁴⁰

Or as Cooney puts it, 'There is never any harm in talking, because even if you don't like people, you can get on with them.' Cooper sees a similar need for journalists to 'meet with us in a social ambience', but in his case he says humorously that he would like a 'slush fund' for the purpose, because finance is a difficulty.⁴¹ Obviously, none of the interviewees see the building of relationships as an end in itself, but as a means to

³⁸ Hayes. Oct. 18th, 2000.

³⁹ In 'Religion and The Media', p. 36.

⁴⁰ Maier, 'Communicating openly with the media', p. 68.

⁴¹ Cooper. Jan 8th, 2002.

communicating more effectively. Cooney would like to see a regular system of briefings evolve, similar to the lobby system which political correspondents have:

The one criticism I would obviously have is that neither the national spokesman nor the archbishop nor the press office in Dublin has really evolved the lobby system of regular communications. They could be formal in the sense that there could be regular briefings, on and off the record, and informal, in some kind of forum where you can meet socially, where if differences or tension arise the grievances can be aired and ventilated. At the moment both nationally and locally the stereotype of the tight-mouthed church spokesmen prevails: 'God, if we have another press conference on this there will be another flare up and the media will just want to focus on a couple of angles that we want to minimise'. There are always going to be tensions. We operate in two different spheres. But, overall, I think the churchmen haven't made the adjustment to treat media as professionals doing their job, and to try and talk to them more openly.⁴²

Cooney sees a lobby system as a key to real dialogue between church and media, and that the lack of it is a blow to genuine communication. What he says is reinforced by one of the recommendations made by the authors of *Bridging the Gap*, which recommends that informal meetings should be held between local religious leaders and news executives. In addition:

A newly appointed bishop or official should seek a series of 'get-acquainted' lunch discussions.⁴³

b. 'Crunching' material for journalists

Little provides a description of how a briefing worked very well when Catholic Bishop Donal Murray's document on conscience was launched⁴⁴.

⁴² Cooney, Feb. 1st, 2002.

⁴³ Dart and Allen, 'Final words on closing the gap: recommendations', p.80.

⁴⁴ Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. *Conscience*.

I remember the present information office did this. They invited us along to a meal in Maynooth the evening before it [*Conscience*] was launched, where Donal [Bishop Murray] explained the background and genesis of the document and took questions in an informal atmosphere.... he explained the context of what could have become points of controversy the next day at the press launch.⁴⁵

Little makes a plea for documents or statements to be released well before their scheduled launch, albeit with embargoes in place. He contends that church documents and sermons tend to be lengthy and prepared in detail, so if justice is going to be done to them, 'Let's have them a bit earlier.' Good summaries would help. If, instead, a difficult document is handed to you five minutes before a press conference, it is very hard to ask intelligent questions about it. Cooney uses the example of the last abortion referendum [2000] to make a point. At the political level, there was a lengthy consultation process, and it was possible to trace the genesis of the proposal. This did not happen in the church, and it was difficult for reporters to understand why the church took a favourable position towards the proposal, as the process by which this decision was reached was not transparent. He goes on:

If you are reporting politics you know certain things are going through different stages. You follow it stage by stage and see it evolving. With the Catholic Church, these things come out of the blue.⁴⁶

The fact that important information like the reasoning behind a decision to back a particular side in a referendum comes 'out of the blue', underscores for him the need to develop a lobby system.

c. Becoming pro-active

⁴⁵ Little. Dec. 17th, 2001.

⁴⁶ Cooney. Jan 25th, 2002.

Heneghan believes that the churches need to set a system in place, which gets them out of their current mode of being defensive and reactive. He says:

It needs to be an ongoing relationship [with the media] where they can build confidence, where the media could also build confidence in whatever system is set up. And then [the bishops should] get out there and look for their 'share of voice'. They don't do that; they are reactive, reactive, reactive, and not pro-active.⁴⁷

Shaw, former communications officer for the U.S. Bishops' Conference, is slightly more jaundiced about being pro-active.

'Pro-active' is one of those pompous words that ooze their way into bureaucratic jargon...This is an excellent idea in principle, but it is hard to be terribly pro-active when most of your time, energy and creativity go into meeting crises that were not anticipated and could not have been.⁴⁸

Be that as it may, Quinn feels that the religious orders are particularly bad at being pro-active. He says:

Individuals within the orders are doing heroic work. When they have an initiative planned from within the order they tend not to announce it. Also, they seem to have no particular sense of how to actually set up a public relations event. If you take an organisation like Trocaire, they are very good at organising photo opportunities. These photo op.s [opportunities], because they're so well set up, beg to be put in the paper. Whereas the orders and in fact the dioceses as well don't seem to have the slightest, foggiest notion of how to set up a photo op. in

⁴⁷ Heneghan. Jan 17th, 2002.

⁴⁸ Shaw et al, *Dealing Media For the Catholic Church*, p.43 .

order to make sure that photo editors will say, 'Well, this photograph is so good it's got to go in.'⁴⁹

At a more serious level than photo opportunities, he is particularly critical of how the Christian Brothers handled programmes concerning allegations that in Canada they had salted away money from the sale of assets in order to prevent victims receiving compensation :⁵⁰

Whereas what they really should have done, is to have learned from past experience that the way to react to this sort of thing is really to anticipate and to shape people's perceptions of a particular story in advance of it. TV is so powerful that once the story goes on to TV people's perceptions are pretty much shaped anyway. It takes a huge amount of work to shape people's perceptions after the event.

McGarry also criticises the Christian Brothers' handling of these allegations:

The language is highly legal. I don't believe it to be the case, but the impression that's given is that they're trying to protect themselves and the institution ...They have laboured under that impression for years and they have still not corrected it. They had a public relations firm here in town who were handling their publicity for a while but they also adopted a hugely reactive and defensive role. They weren't proactive. They weren't pushing the positive thing and they must do that.⁵¹

The Church of Ireland has also come under criticism for not being pro-active. Martin O'Brien, producer of BBC Radio Ulster's religious affairs programme *Sunday Sequence*, addressed a diocesan conference of clergy in 2001. He compared the Church of Ireland

⁴⁹ Quinn. Nov. 28th, 2001.

⁵⁰ *Prime Time: Betrayed: The Christian Brothers and Child Abuse Across Three Continents*. Transmitted RTE One, 28th and 29th November, 2001.

⁵¹ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

very unfavourably with the Presbyterian Church and the Catholic Church in England and Wales. He told them that the Church of Ireland comes across as being a deeply cautious church, and 'it is difficult to be cautious and exciting.' He believes that their biggest problem is 'a lack of pro-activity'.⁵² He suggests that they appoint a Director of Communications. Janet Maxwell was appointed to such a position later in 2001. She explains why she believes the Church of Ireland made this appointment:

They [church leadership] would have that sense of attempting to become more proactive. They did have a feeling that ... they lacked internal communications structures as well as the external.... It's a green field type of operation where the church had previously had a press officer but never had a function that brought together the broader aspects of communications. Those aspects cover the media, communications strategies and it would also cover publishing. It covers the development of web sites and of training for media skills within the church. It also covers developing crisis communication strategies and trying to co-ordinate a response where there is some sort of crisis within the church of a public nature. And from time to time it would involve researching particular policy areas... And there is also the organisational side of it, such as organising the press and media support for things like the General Synod and for other large conferences that the church might have.⁵³

This appears to be an institutional commitment to becoming more pro-active, though it seems an enormous brief for one person. It serves as a reminder of the need to adequately resource communications, and this in turn must include providing adequate personnel.

The training of journalists is also a matter of concern. There is consensus that there is a need for more journalists who are specialists in religion. Specialist religion reporters are

⁵² O'Brien. 'Church criticised for poor communications set-up.' p. 8.

⁵³ Maxwell. J. Jan 29th, 2002

less common than they once were, not just here but in Britain⁵⁴. However, in the United States, the trend is towards an increase in specialist reporters.⁵⁵ The *Irish Independent* appointed David Quinn as a religious and social affairs correspondent in September 2003, a position which was vacant for several years. There has been too often a failure to allocate specialist reporters to religion, despite the fact that there are now specialist writers on health, economics, lifestyle, economics, politics and even wine. This unwillingness to appoint religion reporters may be related to the acceptance of the 'increasing secularisation theory', which argues that the increasing marginalisation of religion in news is justified because, allegedly, it is of declining interest to the public. As Schofield Clark writes, this is a deeply flawed perception of the actual level of interest in religion, and the many ways in which this interest is expressed. The fact that there has been a decline in institutional religion does not mean that religion is no longer relevant to people's lives, but belief is expressed in more individualised and autonomous ways.⁵⁶

Curtin is someone who has made efforts, including attending theology courses in her own time, to acquire what she feels is the necessary level of knowledge in her profession. She compares it with sport - 'nobody would be allowed work in a sports department with the kind of background that I had coming to religious programming.'⁵⁷ They'd be kicked out on the spot.'⁵⁸

Andrews says the only way to see better reporting 'is to have people specifically working on these areas'.⁵⁹ Since one of the major complaints of representatives of religious organisations is about lack of knowledge, it is in everyone's interests to ensure that specialisation happens. McGarry suggests that post-graduate courses should include an element of preparation for specialisation, whether it be in 'economics, politics, religion, environment, you name it.'⁶⁰ Clarke agrees and feels that the churches might

⁵⁴ Donovan, 'Keeping the faith'.

⁵⁵ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap - Update 2000* p.ii ff.

⁵⁶ Clark, 'At the intersection of media, culture and religion: a bibliographic essay', p.22.

⁵⁷ See similar point made in Siegenthaler, 'Introduction', p. 2.

⁵⁸ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

⁵⁹ Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

⁶⁰ McGarry. Nov. 27th, 2001.

have a role in helping to provide training for journalists in a way which is a service and did not impose:

There is a huge amount to be done there and investment to be made. I would like to see the church in Ireland providing modules for trainee journalists who have a particular interest in religious affairs. I think it should be done on an inter-church basis, in fact.... We do not expect most journalists to report in depth on legal or medical issues unless they have expertise in those areas, so it is unreasonable to expect them to report in depth on church issues unless they have the appropriate expertise and training.⁶¹

4. Call for collaboration

Both journalists and religious representatives are concerned about what they perceive to be a drop in standards in journalism due to commercial pressures. For example, Cooney says:

In an age where the media is now more and more concentrating on the misfortunes of the great and good, whether it's drugs or drink or some major political figure found with a financial scandal or churchmen involved with paedophilia, or going off with women, the whole thing in the media now is to cover that as if it was an extension of all these soap programmes. In that context..., wouldn't it be another reason why churchmen, not just Catholic, should be making revitalised efforts to have structures of debate that can also spill into society? That can influence the debate and still defend values, but at the same time try and maintain standards that are eroding? ⁶²

Cooney feels that there are many who would be glad if the church did defend standards of debate:

⁶¹ Clarke. Dec. 18th, 2000.

⁶² Cooney. Feb. 1st, 2002.

It should be setting new norms, and bringing discourse of the highest standards back into the media. I think there are elements within the media who would respond to that, who are under pressure from commercialised news desks and news proprietors, to be more sensational than the next. Even good people, who don't like this, are under pressure to earn their livelihood, rear their kids, and maintain their pensions. They don't have sufficient clout to deal with that tendency.

In other words, a strong voice from religious organisations which calls for resistance to the distortions caused by extreme pressure to be commercial and to 'dumb down' would, in Cooney's view, support journalists who are uneasy about the increasing commercialisation of news. In order to be credible, however, the churches and mosque would have to maintain high standards of communication themselves.

Hoover writes that good coverage of religion can feed into the 'public service provided by the news media' as 'an important contribution to social and cultural life,' not as a method of increasing readership but because it is what 'these media *should* be doing.'⁶³ Among those who were interviewed for this study, there is a great deal of consensus that standards in journalism and in public service broadcasting are worth defending. Maxwell is conscious of the space which public service broadcasting affords minority churches:

Certainly in the Republic of Ireland, the last amendment of the public service Broadcasting Act maintained religion as a named aspect of society that must be included and covered. And that is a very valuable thing, because without it there is no guarantee in the commercial broadcasting service that religion would get coverage.⁶⁴

Cooper makes a similar point:

⁶³ Hoover, *Religion in the News*, p.203.

⁶⁴ Maxwell. J. Jan 29th, 2002.

So RTE have always been very good and I think what's sad for me now is there seems to be a 'leakage' as far as public service broadcasting goes. I think it's being driven by the forces of commerce and of viewing figures and I think the same is going to happen with local radio as well.⁶⁵

These concerns also animate Curtin.

There's a lot of commercial pressure.... Nobody within broadcasting would deny the fact that this has affected RTE.... Certainly, religion treated as a subject in its own right as against religion as a subject for current affairs in terms of controversies, in terms of political manoeuvring within churches or between churches, religion in that more serious strain, is not central because it will not get the audiences.... I would like to think that if the licence fee was restored to its proper level that religion would once again be restored to a central position.⁶⁶

Little feels that religion and public service broadcasting have common values, which are under threat. As he says about news coverage, 'There is perhaps a feeling that as long as you get the pictures and have some kind of voice, it doesn't really matter if you don't have experts or people who are used to dealing with these stories.' Goethals echoes this in her examination of what the 'journalist' and 'prophet' have in common. She writes of the need for the press not to become so identified with the establishment that it fail to act as society's conscience.⁶⁷

Little believes that the dictum of Lord Reith, that public service broadcasting is to educate, entertain and inform, might not be too far from a description of a good sermon.

⁶⁵ Cooper. Jan 8th, 2002.

⁶⁶ Curtin. Jan 15th, 2002.

⁶⁷ Goethals, *The Electronic Golden Calf*, pp.180-183.

But I think that kind of depth of approach to things is endangered.... I think religion and public service broadcasting have a lot to say to each other about how to chart the future, in this environment, where that American Right is in the ascent. I know Mrs Thatcher didn't say there was no such thing as society, but we are almost importing that parody of Mrs. Thatcher and implementing it. We're in a world where robust individualism, where the entrepreneur is all that matters. Everything else has to fall aside and make way.⁶⁸

Some religious representatives agree strongly. McDonnell echoes Little's sentiments:

I think that the public service notion is vital in this respect and that the survival of public service broadcasting is tied up with any hope of a religious broadcasting that might have some chance of appealing to those outside the ghetto. So the weakening of public service broadcasting is to me a serious threat to the *maintenance of civic values.*⁶⁹

Summation

There are a number of important areas of agreement between the religious representatives and journalists who were interviewed for this study. There is a perceived need for religious organisations to place a greater priority on media relations, including, where necessary, the allocation of more resources and personnel to the task. There are a number of suggestions regarding the setting up of additional media relations offices, perhaps by religious orders combining forces to fund an office between them. A clear preference is stated by the journalists for media relations officers who are lay people, who understand the needs of journalists. In addition, some of the journalists feel that it is desirable if the position of media relations officer is filled by someone who is himself or herself convinced of the validity of the message of the religious organisation which he or she represents. Cooney advocates regular contact between journalists and religious representatives, which he describes in terms of a lobby system similar to that which

⁶⁸ Little. Jan. 18th, 2002.

⁶⁹ McDonnell. Apr. 9th, 2001

operates between political journalists and politicians. He believes that this would facilitate better relationships and allow grievances to be aired. It is useful for journalists when documents are issued in advance with embargoes, and when there are good summaries and, if necessary, briefings available. This is particularly so when documents are long or complex. Religious organisations are also urged to stop being reactive, and instead to attempt to put positive angles forward about themselves. Andrews cautions, however, that it is not always easy to get coverage for good news stories. Quinn believes that religious orders need to put more effort into publicising the many important areas of social development which they are involved in, and cites Trocaire as a church organisation which has an ability to gain publicity for its work. There is also a call for more training for religious representatives. Similarly, both religious representatives and journalists believe that enhanced education in religion would be of benefit to journalists in training, who in their future careers might be sent out to cover religious stories which would demand some degree of background knowledge. There is also consensus that there is a need for more specialist reporters in religion. A potential area of collaboration exists between some of the religious representatives and journalists in relation to the protection of high standards in journalism. Several of the journalists interviewed feel that both public service broadcasting and worthwhile standards in journalism are under attack from commercial pressures. In turn, some of the religious representatives believe that the space in public discourse for serious discussion of religion depends on a healthy public service broadcasting service and on journalism which is not dominated by commercial values.

In spite of many grievances against each other, it is obvious that both journalists and religious representatives believe that relatively simple changes would improve media relations. The cultural gap of misunderstanding may not be as wide as either side perceives it to be.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This thesis has examined the current relationship between religious organisations and the media, has looked at both the successful and unsuccessful components of it, and suggested the elements of a model of religious media relations. There is a relatively small number of people who are professionally involved in this area in Ireland.

Qualitative research has been the chosen methodology. Representatives of the four major Christian churches, and the Dublin Mosque and Islamic Centre were approached and interviewed, some twenty-two people in all. No request was turned down, and people gave freely of their time. All the interviewees were at the time of their interviews either involved full-time or part-time in religious media relations, or had significant responsibility for it in a religious organisation, or were journalists with a particular interest or expertise in this area. There was also an interview with a public relations consultant who was employed by the Catholic Church at the beginning of the crises relating to clerical sexual abuse of children. Questionnaires were prepared and forwarded to the interviewees before interview. The interviews took between one to two hours each, and there was also some follow-up by email. This material was then analysed according to the themes that emerged most strongly from the interviews. In this concluding chapter, an attempt will be made to synthesise the findings of this research with reference to the literature on the subject. The aims of religious representatives will be reviewed, as will the journalists' view of religious media relations. The practices that work well, and what the major barriers to successful media relations are, as seen by both sides, will be looked at again. The ideas that came from both religious representatives and journalists as to how religious media relations might be improved will be examined. The chapter will conclude with the final comments of this writer and some suggestions for further research.

As has been mentioned before, the idea of 'two sides' in relation to religion and media is challenged by a number of writers who believe that religion and media occupy the same

cultural space, and that media may have taken over some of the functions which traditionally were the province of religion. Valid though this may be, most of those who are interviewed identify more with the idea of 'clashing worldviews', a description used by Dart and Allen in *Bridging the Gap*¹. A divide is perceived between the world of religion and the world of media, and in many cases, the religious representatives see themselves as attempting to bridge that divide.

The churches and mosque – a rationale for presence in the media

Religious representatives view their work as important. They see a need for their religious organisations to have an active presence in the media and view themselves as operating in a spirit of dialogue. They are aware that some factors make this dialogue difficult. For example, good relationships with journalists and producers are an important condition of achieving this aim, but sometimes the structures of the particular religious organisation may make it difficult to maintain this kind of professional relationship. The Catholic Church, despite its popular image as a monolith, has a quite dispersed structure which sometimes results in difficulties, firstly, in obtaining accurate information, and secondly, in obtaining permission to release such information. Each diocese is autonomous and answerable only to Rome. As a result, there is little or no possibility of effective action right across the Irish Catholic Church when it comes to a crisis. The Bishops' Conference is a relatively weak mechanism, which has no right to impose a programme across all dioceses. Added to this, each religious order is effectively independent.²

In some instances in religious organisations, there may be a degree of under-funding, which reflects a lack of understanding of the need for religious media relations on the part of the authorities who control expenditure. This can be a factor which impedes religious media relations. In spite of this, as has been indicated earlier in this study, the attempt to engage in dialogue provides the framework within which religious representatives try to achieve four more concrete aims.

¹ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.6.

² Savage, 'Bishops lack management skills and support'.

The first of these aims concerns attempting to make the presence and viewpoint of the religious organisation visible in public discourse. Each of the religious organisations wishes to promote its own messages effectively, but there are specific challenges for each organisation. For the smaller churches, there is a need to remind people that the church exists and has something to offer to society. The Muslims seek to redress what they perceive as negative stereotyping of Islam as a faith. The Catholic Church tries to overcome the poor image it has gained, principally because of its handling of the scandals concerning clerical sexual abuse of children.

Secondly, and this is particularly true of the Catholic Church, media relations are seen as valuable in the attempt to secure social justice, that is, a fairer share for the poor and marginalised. Thirdly, there is the more specifically religious aim of pre-evangelisation or preparation for *da'wa*, that is, the possibility of showing the religious organisation to be reasonable and attractive, and therefore perhaps stimulating people to enquire further. The upholding of civic values is a fourth aim, that is, the attempt to support values that can be shared by people of all faiths, or of none. The ethos of public service broadcasting and maintaining high standards in journalism are seen as examples of such civic values.

There is a strong theoretical backing within religious organisations for viewing religious media relations as an important form of dialogue. Within the Catholic Church, documents such as *Communio et progressio*³ and *Aetatis Novae*,⁴ and within the Protestant churches, documents such as the World Association for Christian Communicators' *Christian principles of Communication*,⁵ advocate a dialogue between the church and society which is open and respectful. The work of Avery Dulles on the models of the church which emerge from the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and how these models affect communication, has been an important influence. However, while the model of dialogue may have had a major influence on religious representatives,

³ *Communio et Progressio* 16, 19, 174 and 175.

⁴ *Aetatis Novae* 1, 6, 8 and 10.

⁵ WACC *Christian principles of communication*.

it may not have penetrated in the same way elsewhere in the churches. This is particularly true in the Catholic Church.

For some of the smaller religious organisations, the task of media relations is more difficult. The Dublin Mosque and Islamic Centre are at a disadvantage, because firstly they have a small membership, and secondly, they perceive that they are operating in an overwhelmingly Christian atmosphere that means journalists know little about non-Christians. They are forced into being reactive, in part because they cannot afford the personnel to devote to media relations full-time. Rev. Roy Cooper of the Methodist Church feels similar constraints, because he is working as a parish minister, even though he believes media relations warrants a full-time paid post.

The journalists' perceptions of religious media relations

The journalists who were interviewed take a jaundiced view of the idea that the churches and mosque are engaged in dialogue, particularly the Catholic Church. They believe that it is too early to pass judgement on the new and small Islamic community, but have no hesitation in characterising the Catholic Church as defensive and secretive. In the words of veteran journalist John Cooney, secrecy is the 'eleventh commandment and the eighth sacrament of the Catholic Church.' Journalists see the other Christian churches, particularly the Church of Ireland, as having become more defensive since the events in Drumcree and less open to journalists. Liz Harries, former press officer for Archbishop Robin Eames of the Church Of Ireland secured permission from Church of Ireland authorities to ban journalists from the church in Drumcree itself.⁶ For these and other reasons, the experience of sectarianism within its ranks is seen as having damaged relationships with journalists. Patsy McGarry, for example, queries how it is possible for the Church of Ireland who claim to welcome all to their services, to ban journalists, but not Orangemen who wish to march down the Garvaghy Road?⁷

⁶ Harries, 'Church and media – servants, not friends?', p. 37.

⁷ McGarry, 'The Church of Ireland and Drumcree. A view from the media', p.13.

The Presbyterian Church, and in particular, Stephen Lynas, the Information officer with that church, is singled out for praise as being particularly 'media-friendly' by four of the journalists interviewed – Patsy McGarry, Joe Little, Mary Curtin and Rachel Andrews. Other media and press officers are commended, but in the journalists' view, the organisation which employs them sometimes fails to support them. It is recognised that the Presbyterian Church has problems, too, significantly so with sectarianism, but in the according to the journalists, Lynas manages to surmount this problem. On the positive side, the role of each of the churches, particularly at times of crisis, is recognised in that they perform a service to society through providing rituals and services when tragedies occur, which are often transmitted to greater numbers through news reports in the media.

The religious representatives' views on the news media's treatment of religion

There is recognition by the religious representatives of the important role played by media in helping to ensure a well-functioning and accountable society. This includes forcing the Catholic Church to begin to come to terms with clerical sexual abuse of children. As Michael Breen puts it, perhaps optimistically:

Media exposure of child sexual abuse by clergy has forced the church to address the issue in a comprehensive, public manner.⁸

This is reiterated by many of the religious representatives who were interviewed. In addition, Valerie Jones, communications officer for the combined Church of Ireland dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough, believes that the churches receive a very good share of coverage, including 'slots' in the newspapers to present their case at Christmas and Easter. None the less, there are significant complaints about the way in which the news media deal with religion. These cluster around allegations of bias and lack of balance in reporting: lack of knowledge and professionalism; sensationalism and trivialising of religion stories; and imposing a political grid on religion reporting. One journalist, David Quinn, says that there is an Enlightenment bias among his colleagues, a tendency to

⁸ Breen, 'The scandals and the media', p.333.

believe that religion will be superseded by the forces of science and reason. This is strongly disputed by other journalists, including Patsy McGarry, who believe that religious people often confuse secularism with materialism and that the two are very different. On the other hand, Dart and Allen caution that there is a difference between 'a benevolent secular approach to the news' and a 'thoughtless secularism that slides easily into anti-religious treatment by the media.'⁹

Some of the religious representatives complain about lack of balance in coverage of religion. Martin Clarke, spokesperson for the Irish Catholic bishops, feels most strongly about this, saying that he could keep six or seven files on his desk, because these are almost the only questions that journalists are interested in. He names these issues as divorce, abortion, contraception, the fall-off in Mass attendance and vocations, child abuse, ordination of women and celibacy. He accepts the importance of these issues, but wonders why others are not covered, giving the example of the growth in numbers of lay people studying theology, which he believes puts the fall in vocations to the priesthood and religious life in a different light.

The single issue which troubles religious representatives most about journalists is that they sometimes lack knowledge and professionalism. This is particularly notable when a general reporter, as opposed to a religion specialist, is sent out to cover a religion story. Some religious representatives are more accepting of this lack of knowledge. Jones, for example, as a member of the Church of Ireland, accepts that it is her function to explain even basic matters to journalists. However, even she was taken aback by a journalist who expressed surprise that the Church of Ireland celebrated communion. Clarke describes the attitude of journalists as 'sheer lack of professionalism,' saying that they will report on the basis of other media coverage, but will not read the primary material. Quinn says that there are far more journalists who know absolutely nothing about the Catholic Church than there are journalists who are hostile to it. Cooper uses an analogy that is common among religious representatives, which is that religion needs to be taken as

⁹ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.15.

seriously by the media as they take sport. Mary Curtin, producer with RTE radio, admits that no-one would have been allowed to join the sports department in RTE with the same level of knowledge about sport that she had about religion when she was asked to produce religious affairs. This point is made by many writing in the area, including the authors of *Bridging the Gap*, who say:

Many news executives have maintained that they are open to good religion news stories, but few devote to such stories the resources that they give to covering education, medicine or sports.¹⁰

The perceived sensationalisation and trivialisation of religion by the media troubles the Muslim religious representatives greatly. Rabia'a Golden, Women's Administrator at the Islamic Foundation, speaks of journalists looking for something salacious in the fact that her daughters married early, without being willing to look at the religious reasons for it. The Muslim representatives are also upset by the unwillingness to look on Islam as a faith system as opposed to a set of political beliefs. The Christian representatives also complain of religion being treated as politics, though for different reasons, because the issue in the treatment of Christianity, unlike Islam, is not usually conflation with 'fundamentalism'. The only time that this might happen, in Ireland at any rate, is perhaps during more intemperate moments of debate about issues like abortion and divorce. The conflation of Islam and fundamentalism or terrorism is well-documented in the literature.

The reduction of religion to 'two sides', often with the dissident being lionised, is a source of great annoyance to religious representatives. On the other hand, John Cooney, author and journalist, says that there is public interest in 'personality clashes, lifestyles, power struggles and pressure group activities in the churches'. He goes on to say that 'journalists do the public a disservice by overlooking these and presenting the churches as perfect societies.'¹¹ Again, the difficulty seems to be when 'personality clashes, lifestyles, power struggles and pressure group activities' are *all* that are covered.

¹⁰ Dart and Allen, *Bridging the gap*, p.12.

¹¹ Cooney, 'Putting the church in the limelight', p.520.

The way forward

There are many sources of discontent in the relationship between religious representatives and journalists, but there is also recognition of the value of the other's role. There are many positive suggestions that come from both sides, as to how the relationship might be improved. These suggestions fall into four main categories. Firstly, the need for a change in attitude to media relations by religious organisations. Secondly, the prioritising and provision of resources for media relations. Thirdly, the need to ensure that practical strategies for change are put into place, especially with regard to the way in which media relations offices should operate and how journalists should be trained: the aim being to improve the knowledge and professionalism both of religious representatives and journalists. Fourthly, the need for collaboration with one another in the media and religious spheres in lobbying for high standards both in public service broadcasting and journalism. Some of the journalists and religious representatives see these standards as being under threat from a competitive and profit-driven media environment. A news media with high standards of excellence is also likely to be fairer and more balanced, the religious representatives say.

The main change in attitudes which journalists want to see is less defensiveness and a move away from a culture of secrecy. Religious representatives explain that once you have been 'burnt' by a negative experience with the media, you are less inclined to trust it. Jim Cantwell, former director of the Catholic Press and Information Office, makes a comment which (although he makes it specifically in relation to the Catholic Church) could well sum up a needed change in attitude for the media also. He says:

If people could understand the nature of journalism, they would not be inclined either to exaggerate or to underestimate its importance, and would therefore treat it openly without being naïve.

The idea of religious organisations treating the media openly, without being naïve, would please many journalists. However, if journalists covering religion had a similar motto,

that would please many religious representatives too, who frequently complain that some journalists show all the signs of carrying a lot of 'baggage'. Some of that may be because of difficult experiences with the Catholic Church in particular, as Colum Kenny points out in an article in *Reality*.¹² In the view of Sr. Elizabeth Maxwell, secretary-general of CORI, it may stem from what she terms a 'loss of self-esteem, sometimes occasioned by harsh treatment by somebody that represented the church for him or her.'¹³ On other occasions, hostility may arise due to an ideological standpoint, for example from a brand of secularism which is antipathetic to religion. Whatever the reason, an attitude by journalists of openness to religion without naivete, would be seen as an improvement by some religious representatives.

If a fundamental change in attitude by the churches and mosque to the media came about, this might be reflected in a change in the way in which media relations offices are funded. Currently, as has been pointed out in Chapter Six, the Catholic Church spends a relatively modest amount on media relations and communications, given that there are over 3,400,000 Catholics in Ireland.¹⁴

There is a clear preference for lay-people as media relations officers among journalists, and some religious representatives such as Bradley, Hoban and Cooper. This may be because lay people potentially have experience in the world of media relations or journalism. Perhaps it is an indication that the need for such experience is recognised important, that the Catholic Church currently has two lay people in its national office. Martin Long, a lay man, was appointed as director of the Catholic Communications Office in October 2003¹⁵, replacing Fr. Martin Clarke who has become director of the Diocesan Communications Office in Dublin. Brenda Drumm continues in her post as communications officer. Some journalists, such as Rachel Andrews, state that lay people are less likely to be personally invested in the role to the extent that they treat journalists'

¹² Kenny, 'Is the Irish media anti-Catholic?'

¹³ Maxwell. E. Nov.29th, 2000.

¹⁴ [Http://www.cso.ie/principalstats/cenrel1.html](http://www.cso.ie/principalstats/cenrel1.html)

¹⁵ <http://www.catholiccommunications.ie/Pressrel/20-october-2003.html>

questions as an affront to their most cherished beliefs.¹⁶ On the other hand, a commitment to religious belief is not seen by some journalists as a handicap, but rather as an asset. For example, Lynas is commended for the fact that it is not just a job to him, because he also has a strong commitment to the Presbyterian Church. However, Lynas, who is arguably the press officer who is most highly thought of among journalists interviewed for this thesis, rates competence as a media relations officer as being more important than religious conviction (as does Jim Cantwell).

The journalists would like to see media relations offices working in a more 'journalist-friendly' fashion. For example, Little speaks of the need to receive church documents well in advance, and to be briefed on them, as they are often complex. Cooney believes that a lobby system with regular meetings that are both formal and informal, would make life much easier for journalists, and would help to break down mutual suspicions. There is disagreement, still, on the role of the media relations officers, with some journalists, notably Cooney, believing that they should provide access to a broad sector of opinion within the church, to what might be called 'dissenters' from the official line. The issue of dissent is a thorny one, and unlikely to be easily resolved to the satisfaction of journalists such as Cooney. Some church people are sympathetic to his viewpoint, including the late Fr. Joe Dunn, who believed that the Catholic Church in particular cuts itself off from a source of growth when it tries to ostracise dissenters. Oliver Maloney, former director-general of RTE, points out that the first Christians were themselves dissenters.

For the Muslims who are interviewed, the question is not so much about dissent, but of who should be considered eligible to speak on behalf of the Islamic community. Their organisation is democratic, with elected representatives who are chosen to speak, so they resent it when someone with no representative capacity is interviewed as if he or she were a spokesperson.

¹⁶ Andrews. Jan 21st, 2002.

It is not just religious representatives who need to change. As pointed out elsewhere, the charge of lack of knowledge is a common one that is levelled against journalists. One suggestion is that the training of journalists should take specialisation into account, whether that be in 'politics, economics or religion', to quote McGarry. Clarke concurs, and believes the churches should co-operate in offering modules on religion in Ireland to journalists during their training. There is another area where collaboration is seen as possible, and that is in supporting public service broadcasting and high standards in journalism, where the religious organisations could take an active role. Little and Cooney feel most strongly about such a move. For example, Cooney says that he believes that there would be a positive response among journalists to church support for high journalistic standards. Concern for journalistic standards, and the protection of journalists against commercial pressures to treat serious issues as if they were 'soap operas', in Cooney's phrase - is important common ground that could help in bridging the gap between religion and media.

Final comments

It is clear that there are a number of complaints which certain religious representatives and journalists have about each other. The journalists find religious organisations, in particular, the Catholic Church, defensive and secretive; religious representatives believe that journalists carry a lot of 'baggage' which colours their reporting. Journalists complain that religious people do not understand the constraints under which journalists operate; religious representatives think that some journalists, particularly non-specialists, are ill-informed about religion. Journalists think that religious people confuse the institution with its message, and protect the *institution* at all costs; religious representatives believe that journalists only know how to cover religion when it resembles politics.

There are those who would feel less strongly about certain of these divisions. It is notable, for example, that Lynas, who is seen as the most effective and efficient press officer by journalists, has few complaints to make about the media. Likewise, Dardis believes that it is better to concentrate on relationships than on complaining, and even

those journalists whom he thinks are biased to some degree, are still open to dialogue, in his opinion. Tom Hayes, Director of Communications for the Catholic diocese of Cork and Ross, is critical of his church, of its failure to come to terms with the demands of a media-dominated society, and its reliance on a mechanism like the Bishops' Conference. Little, while critical of the Catholic Church's handling of scandals, is careful to say that 'it is impossible to generalise about the church's response' to scandals, and is generous in his praise of the church's social mission. Ryklief, while angry about some coverage of Islam, singles out McGarry as a journalist who has been very fair to it. While the grievances are real, the situation is more complex than broad brush-strokes indicate.

The first and most important need is for a change in attitudes by both sides, which will only come about if there is serious internal discussion in the churches and mosque about media relations. All the Christian church representatives report suspicion on the part of members of their churches towards the media. This is often reflected in a failure to prioritise media relations. At best, this is foolish. The churches have decreased in influence in recent decades. This decline in influence means that their ability to communicate their message is compromised. It appears that adherence to religious organisations in general is in decline across Europe. In an analysis of data from the European Values Study 1999, Breen concludes that the identification of oneself as religious and the time spent in church is highest in the older age cohorts. He poses a series of questions, such as whether this means that issues like caring for others and concern for those in poverty is also decreasing as a result, and concludes that it is. This seems to suggest that erosion of Church influence should not only be of concern to religious people, but to the wider society.

Suspicion of the media and reluctance to work with them does nothing to remedy the loss of influence of religious organisations. As Dardis points out, the time is long past for the message to get through regarding the high priority of work with the media. After all, the Second Vatican Council closed in 1965 and it mandated a much more open dialogue with the world. It appears to be the case that many of the religious representatives find themselves between a rock and a hard place; attempting to hold a dialogue with a media

which the members of their own religious organisations often do not like or trust. They may also suffer from lack of resources. For example, while it is good that the Church of Ireland has appointed a director of communications, Janet Maxwell, her job description as given in Chapter Six above, seems more suitable for at least two people. However, the most important thing is not resources – it is the mindset of those who are in authority.

The most important element of good media relations is not money, but an attitude of willingness to conduct a dialogue. Cantwell is quoted earlier as saying that the media should be treated openly, without being naïve. Failure to be open is immensely damaging, a lesson which the Catholic Church in particular seems to have failed to learn, but which the Church of Ireland also seems to have failed to learn about Drumcree. Because religious organisations advocate high standards of honesty and integrity, when these standards are not adhered to in their media relations, the resulting public disillusion is great. A distinctive ethos must permeate religious communication. Commenting on the Pope's statement on World Communications Day, 2001, Archbishop John Foley, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, cautions Catholic communicators 'never to lie to journalists and never to run from them'. He goes on to say that the first principle of all communication, but especially by the church, is 'never, ever, tell a lie.'¹⁷ This might seem very obvious, but it is not always adhered to. Sometimes even the perception of telling lies is enough to destroy credibility. The classic example is Cardinal Connell's statement that the Dublin Archdiocese had not compensated anyone for child sexual abuse. In strict terms, this is true. However, a loan had been given to Fr. Ivan Payne to compensate Andrew Madden. A loan is not identical to compensation. Yet in the public mind the assertion was a fudge, a spin, the kind of equivocation which they expect from politicians and not from prelates.¹⁸ A simple statement of fact, that the Archdiocese had used funds that were not taken from church collections to give a loan to a priest to compensate a victim, would have meant that the Cardinal's credibility was not damaged. It is not enough not to tell a direct lie. Truth and transparency must prevail.

¹⁷ Zenit news agency. 'Pope warns of spin.'

¹⁸ Kenny, 'Canon law' can be spun to measure'.

Truth and transparency can only become the norm if there is institutional commitment to openness. It has been widely acknowledged that there has been a culture of caution and secrecy in the Catholic Church.¹⁹ This is a most difficult culture to work within, compounded by the fact that it is also a hierarchical culture. As Inglis puts it, the Catholic Church has a difficulty with those who have no official authority being seen to have authority.²⁰ In other words, because the church operates in a hierarchical fashion, lay people, or sometimes even religious representatives who are not lay people, can be treated as being outside the information and decision-making loop. This can translate as an unwillingness to give sufficient freedom to media relations officers to make an input into the formation of policy, and not just to act as people who have to sell policy. There is a danger that if this attitude prevails, that media relations officers will be called in to clear up messes which perhaps could have been avoided if they had been consulted in the first place.

In fairness, this hierarchical thinking also afflicts the media. During my time as a researcher in religious programming in television in RTE, I noted producers were sometimes unhappy if a qualified lay person were suggested for interview, often requesting a priest or preferably a bishop. In order to be seen to have credibility, it must be clear that a spokesperson is fully informed and has authority to speak. Otherwise they will not be acceptable to either religious people or the media. In order for lay spokespeople to achieve this status, there would have to be a major change in outlook, both in the churches and in the media.

If the churches were to develop a greater attitude of openness to media, it could lead to the kind of informal and formal contacts so desired by Cooney; in other words, a lobby system. The experience of political journalists shows that this would not solve all problems. However, it would improve the flow of communication.

¹⁹ See, for example, Conway, 'Touching our wounds', p. 265.

²⁰ Inglis, 'Irish civil society; from Church to media domination', p.64.

At the moment, the Catholic Church is far from seeing reporters in as professionals who should be facilitated and helped to do their job, insofar as it is possible. No matter what the negative experiences of the past, it is still unfair to treat journalists as if they are all suffering from bias and baggage. What is clear is that relatively simple things would make an enormous difference to how religious media relations are conducted in Ireland, including the basic courtesy of returning telephone calls. (See McGarry's experience regarding Micheal Ledwith, former president of Maynooth, in Chapter Four.) It would be a good investment of time if each of the churches and the mosque analysed what it wished to achieve in media relations, identified best practice both here and abroad, and set up regular structures of communication with major media outlets. These structures of communication could involve annual or twice-yearly meetings with, for example, editors of national newspapers and representatives of national radio and television stations, where in Cooney's phrase, 'grievances could be aired', as well as gratitude expressed for good practice. There may be a place for ecumenical and inter-faith co-operation here that would help smaller faith communities establish relations with the media: why not share expertise?

Vast though the demands on religious representatives are, particularly when a story becomes international news as the clerical sex abuses cases in recent times did, Ireland is sufficiently small to establish working relationships with every journalist and producer who regularly covers religious issues at a national level. As far as I can see, there has been no attempt to do this systematically. A working relationship would mean a degree of trust being built up, which would allow complaints to be aired on both sides. This is particularly true in relation to the Catholic Church. At the moment, there is acute frustration on both sides, with journalists perceiving a culture of obstruction, and communications officers perceiving an unwillingness to present any positive aspects to the Catholic faith. This benefits no-one, but will not be changed until there is a real culture of engagement in every diocese. Media outlets, too, will have to relinquish their prickly independence, and realise that constructive relationships are not to be confused with being in another institution's pocket. The media can be defensive, too.

If, as Little says, journalists feel a 'vocation to expose wrongdoing', it might explain some of the reasons why so many stories about religion concentrate on scandals and personality clashes. Quinn's point about the coverage of religion is a good one, which is as we saw that quite often the media fail to cover a broad range of material that is of interest to religious people. The analogy with education makes sense. An education correspondent will cover clashes and disagreements, but will also report on matters that are of interest to the stakeholders in education, which may or may not be controversial. There is not enough of this kind of reporting on religion. This is not always because of decisions by journalists, as McGarry points out. Editors and newsdesks also have to be persuaded that there is a market for religion stories, which they sometimes doubt.

There is a need to explore models of journalism other than investigating wrongdoing and to move beyond always covering the controversial. That there should be more stories about how faith affects the lives of ordinary people is highlighted by Steinfels, but is acknowledged as difficult to achieve.²¹ The smaller churches and the mosque suffer particularly when the media concentrate only on scandals and personality clashes, which the Catholic Church is perceived as providing in abundance. The chances of achieving a presence in the media are diminished due to the fact that the limited space given to religion is dominated by this kind of coverage. There is not much space left, except perhaps for dutiful coverage of the Presbyterian General Assembly or the Methodist Conference. The mosque remains invisible except when it engages in inter-faith activities, or when international events draw attention to Islam, which is not a desirable state of affairs from the point of view of Muslims, who resent the conflation of politics and Islam.

The churches may fail to commit resources to religion journalism, but so do media outlets. When beginning this research, there were only two specialist reporters on religion employed on the staff of a media organisation in the Republic of Ireland, McGarry and Little. The *Independent* group of newspapers had no religious

²¹ Steinfels, 'Constraints of the religion reporter', p.56

correspondent, a weakness which was brought home to this writer on one occasion when I found myself in the position of identifying bishops to a reporter from the *Irish Independent* when standing outside the Bishops' Conference meeting in Maynooth. David Quinn was appointed to his post as religious and social affairs correspondent for the *Irish Independent* in September 2003. All three, McGarry, Little and Quinn would admit freely that they have no specialist background in the area, but learnt 'on the hoof', although Quinn has spent a number of years as editor of a privately-owned Catholic weekly paper. It should be noted that religious representatives have the most difficulty with the general reporter who has absolutely no background in religion and who is assigned at the last moment to the story. There is a need to take religion seriously as a valid worldview, and to move beyond the 'quintessential Enlightenment profession' described by Dionne.²² Scepticism is the stock in trade of journalists, but it can be applied in a way that does not always presume bad faith, or a conspiracy to evade giving the truth on the part of those being examined.

On the basis of this research, it is reasonable to presume that there are two principal dangers in relation to religious media relations. The first is the adoption of a policy of non-engagement, characterised by Cooney in relation to the Catholic Church as the stereotype of the 'tight-mouthed church spokesman'. The problem is that the 'tight-mouthed spokesman' just provokes the media into searching more deeply, so that some stories acquire 'legs' which they would not have if the church had been more open in the first place. This is true of all attempts to cover up the truth and not just for the Catholic Church. The second danger is to try to have a very slick style of marketing the religious organisations. To begin to veer into the realm of 'spin' and concern with 'image-building' would appear to be at odds with the moral codes of the great world religions. Media relations should take its place as part of a wider commitment to communication and honesty within religious organisations. As Orme-Mills says, 'Successful PR is not the same as effective communication.'²³ Effective media relations cannot be a substitute for honesty.

²² In 'Religion and the media – three 70th anniversary forums', p.28.

²³ Orme Mills, 'The drainpipe model of communication', p.524.

Co-operation in protecting high standards in journalism, which Little and Cooney in particular see as coming under attack, is an important meeting place for religious people and journalists. Such standards are also important to religious people, in order to preserve space for important objectives such as the discussion of values. However, there are some ways in which the priorities of religious organisations and the media will never converge, and that is probably healthy. As Cantwell points out, the media, particularly newspapers, are essentially commercial, profit-driven organisations. None the less, there is no doubt that relations between religious organisations and the media could be greatly improved. In the case of the Christian Churches, a mandate for better engagement with the media exists in documents like *Communio et Progressio*, *Aetatis Novae*, and *Christian Principles of Communication*. What is being suggested is not a radical departure, but an application of principles which have been enunciated for decades.

During the course of this research it became clear to me that there has been very little systematic thinking about the nature of religious media relations by those who are practitioners in this area and by those who employ them. In the Catholic Church in particular, there is little evidence that the hierarchy have taken this issue seriously to date, though there are one or two individual bishops who appear to have a natural affinity for communication. Those 'at the coalface,' the religious representatives, have little time to develop a coherent theory to guide practice, because the nature of the job is that a media relations officer is always dealing with crises. This means that there is almost no chance to reflect and see what should be distinctive about religious media relations. This is unfortunate, given the fact that standards are set higher for those who attempt religious media relations. Keenan points out that the harm done by clerical sex abuse is compounded by the revered position held by those who have committed the abuse.²⁴ A similar dynamic operates concerning truth and honesty, although the consequences are obviously much less serious than in the case of sexual abuse. Because religious organisations advocate high standards of honesty and integrity, when these standards are

²⁴ Keenan, 'Child sexual abuse: the heart of the matter'.

not adhered to in their media relations, the resulting public disillusion is great.

Conversely, when religious media relations are carried out in a way which is open, honest and professional, it enhances the reputation of a church or mosque, and may function as a form of pre-evangelisation or preparation for *da'wa*, which is one of the stated aims of religious representatives. At the time of writing, the Catholic Church is putting a new structure in place in the national office for communications. It has appointed a new chair of the Advisory Board for the Commission for Communications, Mark Mortell,²⁵ whose background is in marketing (for example, he was in charge of the launch of Heineken in Ireland.) This appointment may signal a greater degree of commitment to media relations on the part of the Catholic Church but it is impossible to judge at this stage. It is to be hoped that it does not signal a naïve belief that marketing strategies can be transferred from the business world that Mortell is more familiar with, to the Catholic Church. A religious organisation should never become a brand competing for market share. A new director of the national office, Martin Long, has also been appointed. Given that his background is in political public relations and the insurance industry, it will be interesting to see whether the re-structuring of the office and the commission will concentrate on developing a distinctive model of media relations, tailor-made to the needs of a religious organisation.

When it comes to the relationship between journalists and the media, Oliver Maloney sums up usefully as follows:

On close examination, the visions of society which responsible church people and journalists favour would not, I suggest, be all that far apart; the core values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are admired by most Irish journalists.... I find it useful to remember that harmony refers to a state in which tensions are maintained in balance; it does not mean the absence of tension. That seems to me to be a realistic aspiration for the relationship between media and church in the years ahead.²⁶

²⁵ <http://www.catholiccommunications.ie/Pressrel/19-may-2003.html>

²⁶ Maloney, 'Learning from each other', p.195.

In the future, perhaps it may be possible to move to a situation where tensions are maintained in balance, rather than just maintained, as they appear to be at present.

Suggestions for future research.

Perhaps inevitably, the Catholic Church dominated this research, both because it is by far the biggest religious organisation in the Republic of Ireland, and it is also undergoing turmoil as wave after wave of scandals break. The needs of the Islamic community in relation to the media could provide material for a thesis in themselves. Also, it would be of interest to investigate further those places where a healthy working relationship appears to have been established by religious organisations with the media. For example, it could be useful to examine exactly what is thought by journalists to work so well in the Presbyterian Press office, and to undertake research to establish if it has to do with the relative absence of scandals and the still healthy position of respect afforded the Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland. Lynas acknowledges that these reasons are a factor. Could it also be that the Presbyterian Church impinges less on journalists in the Republic of Ireland, because it is a minority Church in the Republic, and is therefore treated somewhat more benignly? Journalists come into contact with the Catholic Church at every turn, in education, health, social services and during political controversy centring on moral questions. Further afield, anecdotally, as mentioned by some of the interviewees and in the literature, the Catholic Archdioceses of Milan and Denver are perceived to be operating a high standard. These very different places could provide ample material for further study. For example, in Denver, religion journalists have access to the telephone number of the Archbishop, and his director of communications says that they do not abuse it. It would be intriguing to see how such a level of trust has been reached. Some research on coverage of religious issues would also be of value, to establish whether the subjective assessment of some religious representatives that there is bias and lack of balance in the coverage of religion, is accurate. As has been pointed out in Chapter Five, some case studies involving research on newspaper reports in 1992 of the Bishops' statements on the Maastricht Referendum, on the abortion referenda of that

year, and on *Work is the key*, the Bishops' Pastoral on Unemployment, show that the overall coverage was balanced.²⁷ Research on specific issues such as coverage of clerical sexual abuse of children might clarify if there is bias against the Catholic Church which is reflected in disproportionate attention being given to this issue, or whether the amount and type of coverage is about right.

Finally, this thesis did not look at the question of the influence of opinion columnists and leader writers. It may be that the perception of religious people that the media is biased against them is formed more by the reading of such columns than by news reporting. Quantitative research on the balance among standpoints to be found among opinion writers might provide some insights into the degree to which such columns are fair to religious people and their beliefs.

Insofar as it was the principal aim of this research to establish what is the current state of the relationship between the journalistic and religious spheres in Ireland, to see what works well in that relationship and what does not, and to propose some elements of a model, it is to be hoped that the research has established that the main requirement for effective media relations is a change in mindset on the part of religious and media organisations which is then translated into practical measures.

²⁷ Hanley, 'Religion in Irish newspapers: 3 case studies.'

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWEES

Questions for churches and mosque representatives

1. What is your official job description?
2. Have you received any training for this job? If so, what was the focus of your training?
3. What is the day to day reality of your work like?
4. What do you see as the central values that you are trying to communicate?
5. Do you see it as part of your role to try to communicate some sense of the sacred through your work in the media, or is media not the place for this?
6. What's wrong with the way in which media treat religion?
7. What's right about the way the media treat religion?
8. What are the most difficult and most rewarding aspects of your work?
9. Does the church/mosque have anything to learn from the world of public relations?
10. Are there limits to the value of a public relations model as used, say, by the corporate world? In other words, does an explicitly religious model of PR exist, or should it? How should church/mosque communications be different, if at all, from corporate communications?
11. How have the church scandals affected your work? How well do you think the Catholic Church has handled the scandals? What could it have done differently?
12. How would you rate your church's/mosque's commitment to, and expertise in communication with the media?
13. If you had a free hand, what would you change about the way your church/mosque deals with the media?
14. Is there a role for your church/mosque in some form of media education that encourages critical consumption of media products?

Questions For Journalists/Producers

1. What is your official title?
2. How did you come to be involved in religious journalism/religious broadcasting? Did you receive any particular training for it?
3. What is the day to day reality of your work like? What are the difficult or pressurised areas?
4. Do you see dealing with religious matters as the same or different to any other area you have worked in?
5. What's wrong with the way the churches/mosque communicate?
6. What's right about the way they communicate?
7. Do you see differences between the various churches in their approach to media people? How would you rate each of the churches/mosque's commitment to and expertise in communication with and through the media?
7. (a) Do the churches/mosque have anything to learn from the world of public relations?

(b) Are there limits to the value of a public relations model as used, say, by the corporate world? In other words, does an explicitly religious model of communication exist, or should it? How should church/mosque communications be different, if at all, from corporate communications?
8. If you had a free hand, what would you change about the way the churches/mosque communicate with and through the media?
9. Are there inevitable differences in emphasis and values between religious people and media people? If so, where do you see those differences arising?
10. It is a frequent complaint of religious representatives that people in the media are not sufficiently informed about religious faiths or traditions.
Do you think this complaint of lack of sufficient knowledge is justified? Why does it happen, if it does, and can anything be done about it?
11. Do you think it is possible to communicate some sense of the sacred through the media (specifically news and features) or is the media not the place for this?

12. How well do you think the Catholic Church has dealt with the scandals that it has faced? What could it have done differently?

Questions on PR for Mr. Pat Heneghan

1. What has been your own involvement with churches/mosque over the years as a public relations person?
2. What have been the most difficult issues you have been asked to assist with?
3. What do you consider the central core of public relations to be?
4. Have the churches anything to learn from the world of public relations?
5. Are there limitations to what public relations can do for the churches/mosque?
6. The public sometimes has a negative image of PR, calling it "spin". Does this association in the public mind damage churches when they make use of PR?
7. How well have the churches (and it is principally the Catholic Church which has been affected) dealt with scandals? What could they have done differently?
8. The church has sometimes been accused of hiding behind legal and PR people when it came to crises in the church. Is that fair comment?
9. Are there any issues that you have been involved in which you would do differently now?
10. Is the Catholic Bishop's Conference an unwieldy mechanism unsuited to the world of media? How could it be changed?
11. Are there fundamental differences of values and aims between media and religious people? Between PR personnel and religious people?
12. What do you see as the challenges facing the growing Islamic community? Can PR help?