There is some question and concern regarding the influence of the media on society and how this may affect the religious and moral makeup of the world’s culture. In his message regarding the importance of the media at the 42nd World Communication Day, Pope Benedict XVI discussed the role and influence the media has made on the life of individuals and society (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008). This writer sees the message that is provided by Pope Benedict XVI as one which asks us to look at the importance that the media has become to our culture and to work together to make sure that the messages of moral and religious teachings are also promoted for the present and future of humankind.

In his message, Pope Benedict XVI discusses how the media can contribute to society through its disbursement of information and news; the spread of literacy and socialization; and the development of democracy and dialogue among people (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2008). However, as a downside, Pope Benedict XVI continues to explain that the media can also have the risk of becoming an entity that loses its unbiased status and leads humanity down a path that would not be to humankind’s best interests due to the media’s passivity of following the dominant interests of the day. This could provide devastating results if this message is not in the best interest of the masses as individuals would hear the message of the dominant force and not hear the words of peace, love and forgiveness. Pope Benedict XVI continues to say that while claiming to represent reality, the media can oftentimes legitimize or impose distorted models of personal, family or social life or even create the possibility for evil, which could have a very negative affect on the world’s culture. To acknowledge why these concerns are valid, one must understand what culture is and how it is and can be affected by the media, especially with regards to the theological community.

Culture is defined by Wikipedia (2007) “as all the behaviors, ways of life, arts, beliefs and institutions of a population that are passed down from generation to generation and can be understood as the way of life for an entire society” (p.1). It provides the codes by which a society lives, such as its language, dress, religion and rituals, as well as the norms of behavior that is considered acceptable or non-acceptable through its laws and morality. The importance of the subject of culture is its continued influence on society, especially in regard to its codes and norms of behavior and how these affect our perceptions of our roles as humans.
The late Pope John Paul II did believe that culture affects us as humans as well as influencing thought and behavior (Dailey, 2008). However, on the other hand, as humans, he believed that we also personally contribute to the formation of culture. There is a sort of symbiotic relationship between culture's influence on humans and how we can as humans, in turn, influence culture. When providing his definition of culture, Pope John Paul II discussed the theological dimension of culture as humanity seen through aspects of criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and lifestyles of humanity (not actually his definition!). The former pope furthers this by stating that “there is only one culture: that of man, by man and for man” (p. 2). This is an important message as it indicates that a society’s culture is pivotal and humans can move it to a higher or lower plain depending upon where one places ones’ sight. Pope John Paul II’s idea of moving culture to a higher, more satisfying plain urges us to seek it through theological thinking and faith.

Pope John Paul II saw that there are disasters for humankind’s relationship with regards to culture. These disasters he considered as a tragedy for culture and a tragedy for the faith. In a tragedy for culture, Pope John Paul II describes cultures break with faith as the anxiety which comes from a world without God where one looks at the self as absolute and earthly affairs as a value of life (Dailey, 2008). The other tragedy, tragedy for the faith, Pope John Paul II describes as Christianity being delegated to the private sphere and being removed from social life. This tragedy makes it more difficult for people to hear and understand religious values as they are unconsciously being pressured to follow the models and thoughts that are being spread by the current secular culture.

These issues, which were addressed by Pope Benedict XVI and the late Pope John II, can be seen especially by the vast amount of information that is available through the media, which in some instances tends to promote religion or faith in a way that is counterproductive for the human spirit. The media through books, television and movies sometimes seeks to explain God and the Church through ways that are also counterproductive to Church doctrine. They normalize the Bible and the traditions and rituals of the Church and the Holy Trinity in such a way that lessens their importance and even faults them for the ills of the world, versus its savior. There can also be a distortion of early Christianity that destroys the essence of what it truly means to humankind and presents it as a mythical, history lesson. This action trivializes and weakens the message of God and promotes the idea of self as one’s master.

Two such examples of the dialogue presented on culture and the media by both Pope Benedict XVI and the late Pope John II can be seen in the movies of the Golden Compass and the Da Vinci Codes. The Da Vinci Code first started as a book written by Dan Brown and was then made into a movie (Fordham Center on Religion & Culture, 2006). The plot centers on a Harvard professor who gets involved in a mystery regarding secret documents that have been hidden since the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ by the Church. In the story the Church does not want this information to be revealed as it would destroy its standing in the Christian world. The slanderous message on the Church through this book demeans and undermines the very heart of Christianity and promotes a culture where one does not see its importance and puts its faith elsewhere.
Another movie, The Golden Compass, which was also from a book about a young girl who searches for her missing friend and ends up in a parallel universe where a person’s soul is transformed into the alter ego as an animal (Phan, 2007). An evil system called the Church which answers to the Vatican Council supposedly kidnap children for experimentation. At the end of the story the young girl finds a golden compass that reveals a coded message to any question asked by the user. Through the golden compass, the young girl is able to find the missing friend and destroys a character who is known as “God”.

These movies are just two examples of how the media’s influence could affect culture by promoting doubt about Christianity and diverting young people from truth and a relationship with God. Although there are more examples of how the media lessens the validity of religion in general through its snide remarks and eye rolling, these two movie examples were very prominent in their denigrating of the Catholic Church in general. The problem with such this type of media presence is the underlying layers of doubt it can promote especially with regards to the young who are often seeking truth. Both of these movies had a great deal of press because of the negative reaction by many different church leaders. However, their input was seen more as showing that they either had something to hide, that they did not want the “truth” to emerge, or that they were being religious fuddy duddies who could not see a fairy tale for what it was, a fairy tale. In fact the furor about these movies probably promoted more people seeing them because of the publicity (which the studio heads loved) than would have normally seen them.

This, this writer believes, is what both Pope Benedict XVI and the late Pope John II were alluding to. The point where the shift in the culture sees that movies like this; sanctioned by the media, are acceptable; and the message that is really being promoted; that of anti-religious beliefs, is becoming commonplace and normalized. The issue to this is clear; this undermining of religion clears the way for our culture to follow a new path, one without a higher moral life. There does not need to feel guilt or strife around subjects we ponder, such as abortion, stem cell research, genocide, the death penalty, assisted suicide and divorce. Because what is better for our selves today, is how we would make our choice. There would be no moral question. Nor would there be the opportunity to follow God’s plan, to connect to him through Jesus Christ as we, ourselves, would have the answers to our problems.

What kind of world or culture would this present? A world and culture of chaos with little love for one another, nor trust for anyone; a culture devoid of a hopeful spirit that sees the beauty around them and basks in Gods love; in other words a shell of a life with no meaning. St. Francis De Sales best says this in his writings when he states, “provided that the name of God is sanctified, that His majesty reigns in you, and that His will is done, then the soul cares for nothing else” (Dailey, 1997, p. 38). St. Francis provides us with the message that our conforming our will to the will of God gives us perfection of the spiritual life (p. 39). Without this, our life is without meaning. To make sure a culture or world without the spiritual life of God, as noted by St. Francis does not come to fruition, we need to heed the message presented by Pope Benedict XVI about the media’s influence on our culture. We need to advocate for humankind through presenting the truth of God’s meaningful message for the continued spiritual and moral prosperity and of the world.
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