

Television

The 700 Club's Anti-Humanist "Documentary"

Paul Kurtz

An anti-humanist TV film entitled "Humanism: Let Their Eyes Be Opened," is now appearing on television throughout the country. Originally produced for the "700 Club" by the Christian Broadcast Network (CBN), it has been aired several times on this worldwide network and on many local affiliated stations. Thousands of copies of the film have been sold or made available to churches, schools, clubs, and other local groups.

I am portrayed on this film as a "leading humanist spokesman" and perhaps because, as such, I am the main target, I have received scores of sympathetic letters and phone calls from viewers who protested the grossly unfair representation of the humanist position. Many have urged me to make formal charges against CBN of intentional misrepresentation.

Although the film purports to be a documentary account of humanism, it presents only a distorted caricature. According to the film, humanism is the chief villain in American society, and is responsible for the breakup of the family, the degradation of American values, drug abuse, pornography, teenage pregnancy and licentiousness, the murder of unwanted infants (abortion) and old people (euthanasia), the increase of violence, and the decrease of test scores in our schools. It repeats the fundamentalist litany of charges: Humanist Manifesto II and situation ethics are wicked theories undermining God and country, the humanists have taken over the schools, and America will follow the path of the Roman Empire to sin and destruction.

It is obvious even to the most dis-

passionate viewer that the "700 Club" programs are totally one-sided presentations. The roles played by Pat Robertson and his co-host are those of preachers asserting that Jesus will save the world. Intermingled with the Holy Gospel are constant high-powered sales pitches for funds and constant testimony to the efficacy of "faith healing": "I had cancer, and am now cured, Pat," reports one viewer. "My arthritis has completely disappeared since I took the word of the Lord," says another. Right-wing political messages are also sandwiched in during the show and justified by biblical injunctions.

Does the Fairness Doctrine apply to religious broadcasting in America? There are now hundreds of television and radio stations advocating CBN's holy message full-blast, attacking and condemning their assorted foes — agnostics, atheists, liberals, socialists, do-gooders — without contrasting or dissenting points of view ever being heard. The propaganda is not simply religious, but moral, political, and economic as well.

The Fairness Doctrine is rarely applied today, and never is it applied to religious programming. In an incredible decision in the early sixties, the FCC ruled that religion was "not a controversial matter of public importance" and hence a citizen could not request balanced presentation. However, the unremitting attacks on secular humanism are an even more serious matter since individuals and organizations are being defamed and libeled and surely should have the right to respond.

My participation in the CBN film began last year when I received a call from Larry Quesenberry, who identified himself as a television producer. Quesenberry asked if I would grant him an interview. He said that, in his judgment, the Christian fundamentalists had been unfair to the humanist posi-



tion and that with this interview he hoped to make a more accurate presentation to Christian audiences. I agreed to the interview.

Two weeks later he called again and volunteered an apology for not fully identifying himself as an associate of Pat Robertson and the Christian Broadcast Network. He explained that he had once met with Madalyn Murray O'Hair for an interview and that when he mentioned CBN she refused to be interviewed on camera. He thought that I might do the same. I told him that I appreciated the clarification and was still willing to give him the interview provided he agreed to present my views fairly. He assured me that he would. I thought it would be a significant milestone since CBN had consistently excoriated humanism and had never as far as I knew actually had a humanist on any of its shows.

Quesenberry arrived in Buffalo one sunny day with a crew of two. He told me that he was aware of the Fairness Doctrine and again assured me that he intended to film me in order to give a more equitable presentation of humanism on CBN.

Quesenberry supported President Carter in the election campaign last year, and he apparently accepts many of the views of humanists on social and moral issues. Pat Robertson is an ardent Reaganite, and Quesenberry was not sure that Robertson would agree to use the film of my interview.

I spent more than seven hours in in-depth

Paul Kurtz, editor of FREE INQUIRY, is professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

discussions with Quesenberry on the new campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo. I maintained the following general position: (1) Humanism is one of the oldest philosophical and ethical traditions of Western civilization. (2) Humanists base morality on human reason and experience, not on the Bible. (3) Humanism affirms that there are basic ethical principles and values of enduring human significance, (4) that we ought to be concerned with human happiness, social justice, and moral responsibility, and (5) that, because of competing values and principles, moral choices are often difficult to make and decisions depend upon reflective inquiry in concrete situations. (6) Humanists believe in a free and democratic society that encourages the development of moral responsibility and individual autonomy. (7) They emphasize the preciousness and dignity of the individual personality and are opposed to repressive forces in society that attempt to undermine freedom.

Quesenberry asked me a number of questions: What did I think of abortion, euthanasia, pornography, homosexuality, divorce? I tried to present a balanced philosophic position. I focused on the principle of tolerance, arguing that it was essential in a pluralistic society, and expressed the hope that his Christian friends would extend humanists the right to dissent from their views.

Quesenberry had assured me that he would do what he could to present my views fairly to the CBN audience, and he did—at first. The students at CBN University, an affiliate of the TV network, published in their magazine *Focus* a portion of the interview verbatim, without any editing, although it was followed by extensive criticism. I was delighted to see that they had presented a view differing from their own. Then pieces of the interview began appearing as spots on the TV network, invariably quoting me out of context. Eventually a “700 Club” program featured the film that included the interview.

Preceding the showing of the film, at least thirty minutes of the program were devoted to editorial comment by Pat Robertson, in which he bitterly attacked the humanists. These attacks were repeated after the film. The technique used in the film was to show a clip of a response from me during the interview and then follow it with a graphic scene perverting my meaning or holding it up to ridicule. For example, I said that I believed in freedom of choice for women and the right to abortion. This was immediately followed by a photograph of a trash con-

tainer filled with aborted fetuses. Deleted from the film were my qualifications that abortion should not be used indiscriminately as a method of birth control, that the decision to abort should be a reflective one, and that whenever possible abortion should be done in the first trimester.

Quesenberry asked what I thought about telling the truth. Was it an absolute? I replied that I believed that truth telling was a general ethical principle that we ought to abide by. “Always?” he asked. I said that there might sometimes be exceptions and gave the example of not informing a person who has suffered a massive heart attack of the seriousness of his condition if his reaction to the information might endanger his recovery. The impression that the film conveyed was that I believed lying was justified.

When I said that I believed in defending the autonomy of moral choice against repressive social institutions, this was followed by pictures of pornographic bookstores, young people taking drugs, and gay discos. I was arguing for diversity in a pluralistic society, but I also made it clear—and this was left out of the film—that moral education is essential in a free society and that individuals should be encouraged to develop an appreciation for enduring moral, intellectual, and aesthetic values. Following my aborted statement, commentators interposed: “Humanists believe in ‘doing their own thing.’ Humanists believe in situation ethics, where anything goes.” “For humanists, there are no rights and wrongs.” This was followed by a photograph of a lifeless young man, the obvious victim of a drug overdose.

The crude distortion of humanist ethics continued with an attack on “values clarification” programs in the schools. Onalee McGraw, a vociferous critic, referred to a hypothetical moral problem discussed in many classrooms as the “lifeboat problem”: If there are 18 people on a lifeboat that cannot stay afloat with more than 12 aboard, who should be thrown overboard? Among those in the lifeboat are a religious figure, a black militant, a doctor, and a pregnant woman.

To raise the issue in class proves, McGraw said, that humanists believe in no truths and no enduring values. She had completely missed the point. Moral dilemmas are often used by ethics teachers (not necessarily humanists) not to indoctrinate students into anything but as pedagogical devices to illustrate the need for patient moral inquiry in situations where all of the choices may have evil consequences. Such exercises can develop moral sensitivity. Those who believe that the Bible should be

the sole basis of moral choice apparently believe that the sum and substance of morality are absolutes—“Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not”—and are insensitive to the subtle nuances involved in many moral decisions. They gloss over the fact that even those who use the Bible as a guide may disagree about fundamentals. Religious believers have differing opinions on divorce, abortion, and other moral issues.

The CBN film is not so much an attack on humanism per se as it is on philosophical ethics—philosophers since Socrates and Aristotle have attempted to apply reason to the moral life, and the implication of this is not unbridled hedonism or licentiousness as fundamentalist critics aver. Thus the film demonstrates an anti-intellectual approach to ethics and a failure to comprehend the complexities of moral choice. Far from offering a balanced view of humanism, the film presents a blatant distortion.

When I confronted Larry Quesenberry with my dismay, he told me that he had done his best but that the film had to present a “Christian viewpoint.” He strenuously objected to the extreme bias of the show, particularly in the comments made before and after the film, and the generally very narrow point of view presented by CBN and the “700 Club.” To show his displeasure, Quesenberry resigned from the organization.

This incident raises a question: Do the hundreds of religious television and radio stations have an obligation to the public to present balanced positions? Or does the First Amendment principle of separation of church and state—to which humanists are committed—mean that, although all other broadcasters must be guided by the Fairness Doctrine, religious programming is totally exempt? And should they also be exempt when they discuss controversial political issues, economic issues, and moral issues that are not simply religious? Granted that their religious views should be free of governmental regulation, should this freedom apply to the maligning and impugning of others?

Given the growing power of the electronic churches and their use of radio and TV for ulterior political and social ends, do they thus enjoy a privileged position in society virtually immune from criticism? Surely religionists have every right to advocate their position, but the efforts of religious preachers to use the public airwaves to advance positions of moral, economic, and political concern without the obligation to present response or dissent must trouble all those who are concerned with defending a free society. •