The Tyranny of Public Image
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In our visual and media-saturated culture, it is no longer the corporate world, and the world of movie and rock stars who are stuck on their public images. Now every level of social and civic organization and institution—including the school and the university, the local church as well as church denominations at large, every little social or hobby group, everyone connected to the world-wide web, even the teenager on Facebook has a public image to tend to and exploit.

On the one hand, this has helped to democratize culture, making the world ‘flat’ as Thomas Friedman puts it. So we now have, through the electronic media, a functioning international social and cultural reality which has become the main arena for the presentation of the public self. On the other hand, this situation has its dark sides. This world-wide web of self-promotions is now so pervasive that to be left out of it is to be almost anonymous and voiceless. And there are many of the truly voiceless and needy who are outside of this venue for self-representations. Real local and social communities have been shrinking for some time due in part to the split between work and home. Now electronic ‘communities’ are further replacing real people communities as places of socialization and cultural interchanges. However, these virtual communities on the web lack stability, since they are based on fragile loyalties of changing pragmatic and momentary interests.

Not only are we now constantly besieged by a sea of self-promotions, the fluidity of the electronic media makes it possible to craft multiple public images which are only partially true, or entirely fictional. The net effect is that we are losing the ability to tell the real from the manipulated images. In fact, it is possible to feel that we ourselves are nothing more than images of our own making, and of the projections of others. The question posed by the witch in Snow White is also ours—“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of us all?” But in a world of fluid, floating images, what is the reality?

Christians, like everyone else, find it easier to live by virtual images than by hard realities. It is this ease which is so dangerous. We consume the visual images of the media daily, but we have yet to confront the true power of these images over us.

An image once it takes hold of our imagination has a power to manipulate us, to shift our focus from what is actually before us, and within us, to what we would rather see, and what we can manipulate to our satisfaction. The truth is, we overwhelmingly prefer the manipulated image to reality. Reality in a fallen world is messy, ugly and difficult; it does not satisfy us or capture our hearts and minds the way images do. But the process by which our preferred image takes over our sense of reality is subtle and often subconscious. As reality slides out of our view, the results can be distortive to ourselves and others, and even fatal in effect, as in cases of anorexia.

The seductive power of the media makes it easy to fall in love with a self-image which better suits our purposes and desires. In all ages of history, our sinful nature makes true self-understanding, whether corporate or individual, difficult, if not impossible to come by. But in our current situation, the power of images married to an all powerful and pervasive
technology has turned our visual culture into a very potent enchanted spell. So we find ourselves living the conundrum posed by the Chinese philosopher Zhuang-Zi (4th century BCE) who reported such a vivid dream of flying about as a butterfly that when he woke and found himself lying on the ground, he had to question whether he was a man who dreamed that he was a butterfly or whether he was really a butterfly dreaming he was a man.

Not only does the electronic media deliver daily to us the self-image we prefer to see, it has also become our chief liaison with our working reality. An image or program posted on the web can take on a life of its own. If it is already on the web, it is on its way to being the truth, and the more we immerse ourselves in this ‘possible truth’ the more easily it becomes the truth.

Because the public image is both the desired goal and the means of achieving that goal, it is all too easy for our planning and strategies to become abstract endeavors mediated by the visual screen, and by public pronouncements. We guide and shape by electronic remote control, instead of building genuine connections to the people involved. The attraction of the electronic media is that it allows us to bypass the messiness of dealing with real people, and the confrontations of real communication which must dig deep into roots of misunderstandings and conflicts, of our blindnesses, pride, and prejudices, in short, all those things which undermine the public image we wish to keep. And yet these are the very places where the true work lies.

The question we are left with is this: Is it possible in today’s media-oriented world where so much communication depends on public imaging, for real progress to be made in Kingdom work without such self-advertising? Consider how most Christian and pseudo-Christian projects and programs are dependent on publicity drives and campaigns. Consider also the concerns of Christian organizations about the way newspaper reportings of events affect their public image. Can a public institution be viable, can it even survive, without being driven by self-promotion and a carefully crafted public image?

A possible response is to consider how, as Jesus started his public ministry, the Devil tempted him to announce his divine identity through a dramatic public display of supernatural power. There might be a lesson to be learned in Christ’s rejection of this self-promotion. Perhaps only radical saints like Francis of Assisi and Mother Theresa dare follow this path.

If there is no getting around self-advertisement in today’s world, what must accompany such marketing is a vigilant zeal for truth-telling, where claims are backed by facts and responsible service that match the claim. We must also resist the temptation to use the electronic media in ways which undermine true human contact and community. Whatever a Christian institution’s goals, they can remain truthful and real only as they are anchored in genuine community and real human relationships, where faithful ministering would dispel any illusion and pretension towards public posturings. In a truly functioning Christian setting, people and truth cannot be sacrificed for the sake of image-keeping.

The only way to keep the over-concern for public image from taking over is to cultivate consciously and intentionally within the Christian community, open dialogues and debates, self-critical discussions, times for listening, and face-to-face communications. The tyranny that public images have over us demands that we counter their effect through an equally strong demand for true accountability. This in our time must be part of the renewal of our Christian mind.