

Book Reviews

Michael W. Higgins, *The Muted Voice: Religion and the Media*. Ottawa: Novalis, 2000.

In June 1998, church leaders and media representatives got together in Ottawa for the first "Faith and the Media" conference in Canada. Initiator of the event was John Longhurst, a Mennonite journalist with a passion for helping the church share its good news through secular media. Two recurring themes shaped the Ottawa discussion: 1) The media don't understand religion and are only after the sensational; 2) The church doesn't know how to "use" mainstream media and expects special treatment. Heated debates moved both sides to reconsider their stereotypes.

In the fall of 1998, Michael Higgins, an English and religion professor, author, documentarist and columnist, continued the discussion at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, where he lectured on the role of religion in mainstream media. The title of these lectures, "The Muted Voice," indicates Higgins's concern about the marginalization of religion, although it is hilariously ironic in relation to the lecturer himself. Higgins is no muted voice, in either religion or the media. As he puts it, silence is "a topic on which I can speak with inexhaustible ignorance" (20). Highly conscious of his own voice and a gleeful name dropper, Higgins promises that this book will be "chatty, anecdotal, autobiographical . . . replete with quirky insights and peppered with occasionally acidic asides" (7). The polemical style makes for entertaining reading.

This book is a tilt at the media based on Higgins's considerable experience in radio, television, and the press. A committed Roman Catholic, Higgins nevertheless recognizes that people's attitudes are shaped far more by secular media than by religious ones. So, while spirituality may be a hot topic in the media these days, he notes that it is portrayed as a "chicken soup for the soul" kind of self-fulfilment, the opposite of Christian spirituality. Higgins is also deeply concerned with what novelist Timothy Findley calls "our civilization's falling away from articulation," the result of both television's "airy incoherence" and academia's "dense incoherence" (25).

Coverage of religion in the media tends to focus on politics and society, not on spiritual life or faith. "The only time they drag out religious studies

professors to make any kind of national commentary is usually when there's a religious crisis, a scandal, or the pope is coming for a visit" (31). In television, religion is used as backdrop or "sanitized product; it's religion as commodity" (47). This marginalization means that religion becomes "an unreflected, unmediated, often trivialized subject" (31). While Higgins realizes that denominational religion is not a good sell, he expects the media to treat religion like other cultural institutions – the media's task is that of "clarification, of instruction, of reasonable stimulation, and of information" (27). This requires religion reporters who are at least as informed and committed to their subject as reporters on politics or economics. At the same time, the church must open itself to public scrutiny if it wants to be taken seriously. While the media can be cruel and unfair, the church cannot withdraw from the public arena, Higgins says.

Granted, religious faith is an elusive subject on which to report. But Higgins is baffled that Canadian media are so timid in analyzing the personal faith of public figures: "sexual predilections are a matter of historical record, but the very foundation of one's values, teleology, self-definition, is not?" (78). Too bad we don't have his comments on the media frenzy around Stockwell Day's religion. Higgins also sees a vital role for religious commentators speaking about their own faith in the public arena: They should "help explain the tradition at the same time as entering publicly into a critical dialogue with it, a dialogue marked by love, honesty, and fidelity" (79).

Higgins's experience and passion for the subject make this a valuable little book; the chatty style opens the debate to any reader. One could wish for more subtlety at times; for example, Higgins holds up British, and even American, media as superior to Canadian (34-35), but instead of developing the point he simply repeats it (68-75). While this book is not meant to be a systematic or scholarly approach, it does include a good bibliography for further study.

MARGARET LOEWEN REIMER

Associate editor, *Canadian Mennonite*, Waterloo, ON