

Friday Night Theology, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

Quality Statistics?

Once again, it would seem the media have been misleading us. Yesterday, it was [revealed](#) that in the 2005 British Comedy Awards the winners of the People's Choice Award were not in fact the people's choice. Despite Catherine Tate receiving more votes, the prize was actually given to Ant and Dec. For some reason, the production team simply decided they didn't agree with the public and so chose their own winner.

Now, we might expect this kind of thing from the tabloid media (by which I include ITV) but something similar has been evident in the broadsheets this week. On Thursday, both the [Times](#) and the [Telegraph](#) gave significant coverage to the latest *Religious Trends* report which apparently showed that Christianity is "on its knees" and that "Muslims will outnumber Christians by 2035".

In its report, the Times showed a picture of a church with about 20 people in the pews and suggested that this was "typical," and the Telegraph claimed that "fewer than a million people attend church every Sunday." But are all these reports accurate? Of course not.

As the [Church of England](#) have pointed out, the comparison between Christianity and Islam is only valid if you compare "like with like" – in other words, the numbers attending Christian services compared to the numbers attending Mosques. So for instance, the Telegraph seems to think it valid to compare the proportion of Muslims who pray (not necessarily at Mosque) with the proportion of Christians who attend church. This is as crazy as saying that opera is more popular than cinema because the numbers who hum themselves an aria each week are higher than the numbers who go to the pictures.

Similarly, in its published graph, the Times compares *weekly* attendance by Christians with estimated *annual* attendance by Muslims. The director of research who produced the report has called this coverage "seriously misleading". The Telegraph figure of less than a million attending each week is simply erroneous as any [survey of church attendance](#) confirms. In addition, according to the [2005 church census](#), the *average* church congregation was 84, four times higher than the picture the Times calls "typical".

There are then two very different dangers for all of us in this. The first is to be taken in by media misrepresentation and believe everything we see and read. We need to maintain a healthy scepticism towards those who are meant to inform us, including the so-called quality papers, as well as be ready to challenge those who are taken in by such reports.

But I suspect the greater challenge for us is to ensure that we are not caught up in this kind of falsehood. The whole book of 2 Corinthians concerns Paul's defence against those who would misrepresent him and the gospel he proclaims. Yet he does not resort to their techniques but instead says, "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, we speak before God with sincerity." (2 Cor 2:17) And again, "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use

deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience." (2 Cor 4:2)

For Christian leaders, this means we do not exaggerate the size of our congregations or the significance of our ministry. And for all of us, it means we lead lives of absolute authenticity and integrity. The world may need to lie to get its message across but we don't have to.

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