

News Values vs. Gospel Values

Religious Messages in the Media – Case Study of Celebrity Gossip Column “Virtues and Vices”

Abstract

By conveying religious messages through a media communication channel, researches often point to the “news non-value” of religious events. This is a conflict between “news values” (headed by conflict) and “gospel values” (which are Christian virtues). However, some religious topics are also interesting for the secular media. Among them, the most popular are the stories and fortunes of well-known people (and their private lives). The Slovak weekly, *týždeň*, has published a regular column of Virtues and Vices, since 2011, in which celebrities - including many Christians - openly talk about their strengths and weaknesses. This study offers a content analysis of the presented virtues and vices; answering the question, What (Christian) virtues and their negations are of interest to the secular media?

Introduction

In the research concerning the relationship between the media and religion, there has always resonated the question of why religious events are generally not of interest to the media. Or, if they are mentioned in the media, they are shifted to a largely distorted plane of irrelevant circumstances and their deeper message remains unnoticed. Several researchers (González Gaitano & Mundadan, 2004; Contreras 2007; González Gaitano 2009; Gazda 2009; Rončáková 2011a, 2012) agree that traditional media news values correlate very poorly with religious events and phenomena. Therefore, such matters are handled through a conflict prism, sensationalism, mystery, or disclosure, with an emphasis on what was marginal (or even what was not).

The question of the transmission and portability of the “religious message” through the media, was also raised in one of my previous researches (Rončáková 2010). Based on in-depth interviews, focus groups and Delphi expert groups¹, I have reached, among other things, a definition of two different “values”:

- thanks to “news values”, the report becomes a journalistic report;
- thanks to “gospel values”, the religious message becomes a religious message.

The religious message is an evangelising message about God's love for man, about salvation, about God's impact within human life and about God's work on this earth. It is reflected within important events and actions through the so-called gospel values, which can be largely identified with virtues.

The religious understanding of virtues is described in special theological literature. For the purposes of our research, a classic list of virtues and their opposites - vices, or profligacies, is very suitable, which we find, for example, in St. Hildegard of Bingen². It contains 35 such pairs:³

¹ For more on the methodology, see: Rončáková 2010, p. 9 – 38.

² Cp.: Rajčan Zaviš 2007, p. 108.

³ St. Hildegard categorised and localised the virtues and vices in even more detail. According to her, the first seven are in the head, while the first five correspond to the sensory organs; characteristics 8-15 are located on the body, in the part from the shoulders to the hips; characteristics 16-22 are spaced on the section from the

Tab. No. 1: List of virtues and vices by St. Hildegard of Bingen

	Virtues	Vices
1.	<i>amor caelestis</i> (love of heaven)	<i>amor saeculi</i> (love towards the world)
2.	<i>disciplina</i> (discipline)	<i>petulantia</i> (exuberance)
3.	<i>verecundia</i> (modesty)	<i>ioculatrix</i> (jocularity)
4.	<i>misericordia</i> (compassion)	<i>obduratio</i> (ruthlessness)
5.	<i>Divina victoria</i> (divine victory)	<i>ignavia</i> (resignation)
6.	<i>patientia</i> (patience)	<i>ira</i> (anger)
7.	<i>gemitus ad Deum</i> (belief)	<i>inepta laetitia</i> (cynicism)
8.	<i>abstinentia</i> (abstinence)	<i>ingluvies ventri</i> (feasting)
9.	<i>vera largitas</i> (generosity)	<i>acerbitas</i> (bitterness)
10.	<i>pietas</i> (benevolence)	<i>impietas</i> (spitefulness)
11.	<i>veritas</i> (truth)	<i>fallacitas</i> (deceptiveness)
12.	<i>pax</i> (peace)	<i>contentio</i> (contention)
13.	<i>beatitudo</i> (happiness)	<i>infelicitas</i> (misery)
14.	<i>discretio</i> (discretion)	<i>immoderatio</i> (excess)
15.	<i>salvatio animarum</i> (salvation of soul)	<i>perditio animarum</i> (souls destruction)
16.	<i>humilitas</i> (humility)	<i>superbia</i> (pride)
17.	<i>charitas</i> (charity)	<i>invidia</i> (envy)
18.	<i>timor Domini</i> (awe of God)	<i>inanis gloria</i> (vainglory)
19.	<i>obedientia</i> (obedience)	<i>inobedientia</i> (disobedience)
20.	<i>fides</i> (faith)	<i>infidelitas</i> (disbelief)
21.	<i>spes</i> (hope)	<i>desperatio</i> (despair)
22.	<i>castitas</i> (chastity)	<i>luxuria</i> (lustfulness)
23.	<i>iustitia</i> (justice)	<i>iniustitia</i> (injustice)
24.	<i>fortitudo</i> (strength)	<i>torpor</i> (numbness)
25.	<i>sanctitas</i> (holiness)	<i>oblivio</i> (neglect of God's affairs)
26.	<i>constantia</i> (stability)	<i>inconstantia</i> (instability)
27.	<i>caeleste desiderium</i> (longing for the heavenly)	<i>cura terrenorum</i> (worry over the earthly)
28.	<i>compunctio cordis</i> (openness)	<i>obstinatio</i> (stubbornness)
29.	<i>contemptus mundi</i> (contempt for the world)	<i>cupiditas</i> (passion)
30.	<i>concordia</i> (harmony)	<i>discordia</i> (discord)
31.	<i>reverentia</i> (reverence)	<i>scurrilitas</i> (scurrility)
32.	<i>stabilitas</i> (consistency)	<i>vagatio</i> (restlessness)
33.	<i>verus cultus Dei</i> (true service to God)	<i>maleficium</i> (witchcraft)
34.	<i>pura sufficientia</i> (pure modesty)	<i>avaritia</i> (greed)
35.	<i>coeleste gaudium</i> (heavenly joy)	<i>tristitia saeculi</i> (world-weariness)

We can also mention classic news values, collected in different lists and categorisations, depending on the author (e.g. Tušer 2010, p. 127 – 129; Višňovský 2014, p. 71 – 100). Among the basic ones include:⁴

- conflict, dispute, war;
- sex, erotica;
- elite (emphasis on the involvement of authorities in a given phenomenon);
- emotionality;
- story;
- property business, wealth;

hips down to the knees; characteristics 23-30 are located from the knees down to the calf and characteristics 31-35 are localised from the calf down towards the ground.

⁴ Cp.: Rončáková 2011b, p. 71.

- curiosity, bizarre, sensational (often inflated to inaccuracy);
- novelty, amazement;
- mysteriousness (Obscurity);
- revelation (someone concealed something);
- paradox (mismatch with the expected);
- practical impact on daily life;
- humanity;
- correlation with other events.

Methodology

When thinking about the media coverage of religious messages, it is common to emphasise the need to comply, in some way, with the news values and to apply at least some of them in part. Not losing the message - so that both sides are satisfied. We decided to investigate this breakthrough of news values and gospel values on unusual material - texts directly devoted to virtues and vices, which have been published in the regular section, "Virtues and vices", since 2011, by the elite Slovak magazine, *.týždeň*. They take the form of a lifestyle conversation with a well-known person, who is supposed to reveal their virtues and vices, so it is a kind of "deeper" lifestyle, a superstructure of common gossip, about hobbies and sensations from professional and family life. Therefore, we asked ourselves the basic question:

- what virtues and vices were presented in the texts?

That means, what virtues and vices went through the journalistic sieve and were accepted as interesting enough for the media. We then investigated:

- which of these virtues and vices concerned men / women / believers / non-believers?
- which virtues and vices often occurred together?
- how were these virtues and vices related to news values?

The research sample was compiled from 100 interviews, selected from four years of *.týždeň* (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014)⁵, always 25 interviews from the second half of the year. The interviews were subjected to a mixed quantitative-qualitative content analysis. In addition to the basic interview data (date, respondent, gender), we recorded especially what virtues and vices were presented within the text. At the same time, we were recording whether the respondent was a religious Christian - namely from two perspectives: whether it is publicly known about them and whether they presented themselves this way in the interview.

Of the 100 respondents, 72 were men and 28 were women. We counted 23 believers, of which 11 were publicly known.

Tab. No. 2 Believing respondents

	known	unknown	total
expressed themselves	7	12	19
did not express themselves	4	77	81
total	11	89	

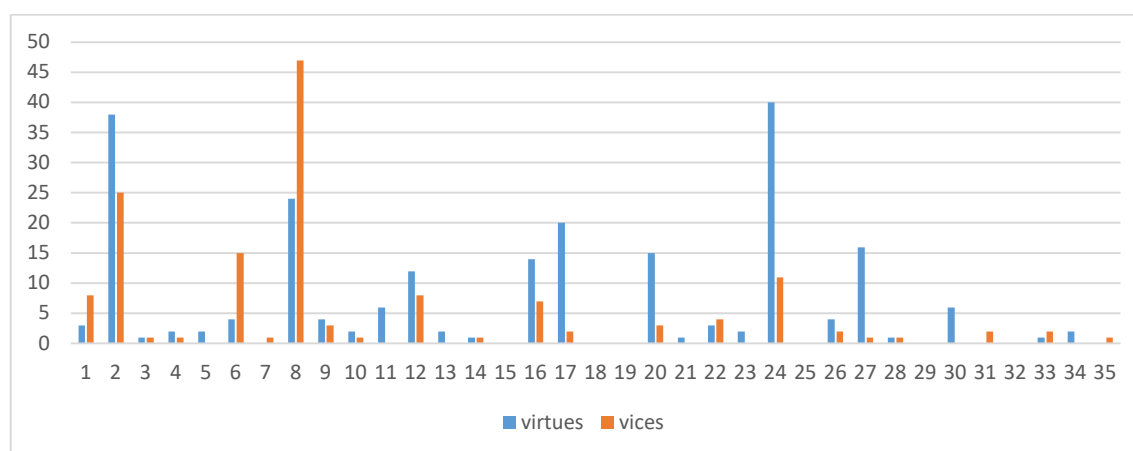
⁵ We chose these volumes for practical reasons, because *.týždeň* makes them available for free; all the newer volumes in the archive cost money.

Findings

Altogether, we found 373 virtues and vices in the examined texts, of which 226 were virtues and 147 were vices. Thus, an average of 2.26 virtues and 1.47 vices per person, however, these numbers were relatively volatile and depended on various factors: personality type, sincerity, willingness to reveal, and maturity and depth of personality. Some have remained more or less on the surface just with their hobbies and rituals, while others have provided almost an “inquiry of conscience”.

A variety of interests, intense curiosity, interest in happenings around them, and interest in information, experiences, creativity and activity were often presented as certain “virtues” in interviews. However, this kind of internal adjustment cannot be identified with any real virtue, it is rather a personality trait, which can be implemented both honestly and wantonly.

Graph No. 1: The occurrence of virtues and vices



Some of the list of traditional virtues and vices did not apply at all to the interviews: souls destruction/salvation of souls (15), vain glory/awe of God (18), disobedience/obedience (19), neglect of God's affairs/holiness (25), passion/contempt for the world (29)⁶, restlessness/consistency(32). It is clear that these are virtues and vices reflected from the position of a deeper spiritual life, or the pursuit of one. Some other characteristics of this nature - that is to say, the requiring of a conscious intensive relationship with God and a willingness to speak about Him - have been noted in minimal, or negligible, amounts.

The vice of “jocularity” (3) we have, for example, attributed to a respondent, who pleaded to landless, uncontrolled chattiness in which he disregards others. The vice of “ruthlessness” (4) has been identified in the context of excessive criticality and pedantry for which the person is “bad to others”. The virtue of “divine victory” (5) has occurred where respondents have declared the opposite of resignation and escapism: they act as mediators, are optimistic that everything can be resolved, and it is worth doing things the best one can. We attributed the vice of “cynicism” (7) to a respondent, who confessed that he just could not keep irony to himself. “Instability” (26) was noticed in cases where the respondent confessed to fluctuation or the inability to finalise resolutions (to stop smoking). We attributed the opposite to those, who are able to persevere even in an activity that they are not very successful in, they go for a goal, desire, idea. For “scurrility”, as an unworthy

⁶ Concerning passion vs. contempt for the world, in some cases this could be considered, however, we have registered them, for the sake of simplicity, under No. 8 (feasting/abstinence).

opposite of “reverence” (31), we considered, for example, dependence on information, when a person hangs onto the news and has to have a little bit from each corner, or backchat and disrespect for authorities. As “witchcraft” (33), we evaluated the behaviour of two respondents: one lights up candles to expel evil spirits, and the other intensively practices Qigong, and “works with energy” to such an extent that he “cannot exist without it”. The opposite - “true service to God” - was noted in a respondent who declared disrespect for occult things and Satan. We found the virtue of “pure modesty” (34) in a respondent who “prefers a clear conscience, rather than money”, as well as a votary with whom “the church did not have a penny of clothing expenses in two years”, because he lives on donated items. And finally, we have identified one mention of the “world-weariness” (35) in a respondent, who has fallen into alcoholism and depression, although he later got out of it.

There remain 12 virtues and vices from the 35 (i.e. a third), which have been repeated more often. Of these, three were clearly the most significant: exuberance/discipline (2), feasting/abstinence (8) and numbness/strength perceived in the sense of laziness and diligence (24).

Discipline and strength led amongst the virtues. Within discipline, internal organising and self-discipline issues were most frequently mentioned: respondents regularly exercised, played sports, practiced playing a musical instrument, were able to get rid of addiction (e.g. smoking). This virtue was closely related to industriousness, diligence, and vigour. Which, however, often bordered on workaholism.

Obviously, the most common mentioned vice was feasting, as the opposite of abstinence. We recorded it among almost half of the respondents - as if this was (among well-known personalities) almost part of their lifestyle. The most common was a predilection to food, alcohol and clothes shopping. Shoes, wine, designer items, sweets, modern technology and cigarettes were often mentioned, but there were also weapons or underwear. Several respondents declared a passion for quality: when food, then good quality food, and so on.

To a lesser, but not negligible, extent, there occurred, for example, “love towards the world” (1), behind which we understood mainly workaholism, at the expense of children, family and relationships. The vice of “anger” (6) has been repeated among the impatient, arrogant people, some of whom confessed to “furious manifestations” or “destroying things in anger” and “the ability to verbally harm people”. We have attributed the virtue of “truth” (11) to those who, as a motto, have both internal and external truthfulness, profess the principle of “not doing wrong things” and prefer to talk problems out, before keeping them inside themselves. We have noticed “contention” (12) there, where respondents confessed to conflicts within the family and a tendency to quarrel. For the virtue of “humility” (16), quite typical was declaring an effort, purposeful work for oneself: respondents often realised that talent and success are not their merit, success and failure alternated, that it is important not to succumb to the intoxication of one's own abilities and not to underestimate others. In the case of “charity” (17), as opposed to envy, there was repeated sincere kindness, well-wishing, empathy towards other people, such as patients, pupils, colleagues and children, who the respondents liked to listen to, they gave them time and were inspired by them. For the sake of “longing for the heavenly” (27), we have classified a sort of “half” desire for heaven, because it also involved non-believing people, who felt they did not want to live just for work and this world, but needed silence and something beyond them. They searched for it in nature, music, the “energy” of sacral buildings, yoga ... Respondents spoke about “the need to break away from worries, enjoy people, achieve an inner peace”. One of them, “the first-wife’s fatal illness taught that some things are irrelevant”. These respondents were often non-believers, but receptive to transcendence. As the photographer, Juraj Kováčik, said: “I am not a believer, but I do not feel it is a great victory. One has a box in his head, designed to believe in something, and as soon as it is empty

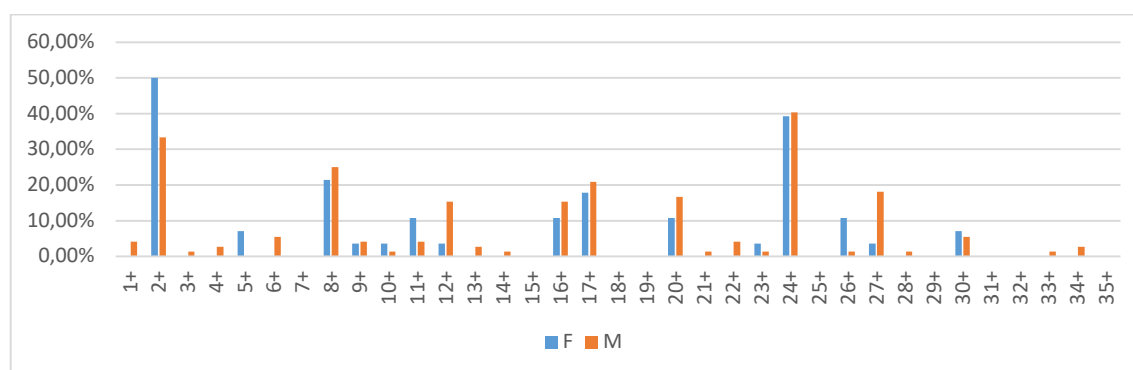
there, when there is nothing meaningful, one must be careful not to suck in any old thing there. I feel that emptiness, but I can't fill it, to suppress my reason, to deny what it tells me.”⁷ Some of the respondents declared a direct desire for deep inner unity, harmony - to whom we attributed the virtue of “harmony” (30), although it was not a Christian Concordia, but rather a satisfaction with life as it is, in simplicity or eventually about seeking unity and harmony through Christian mystics and also Zen masters.

Already during the research, it was obvious that some virtues and vices often occur together. This was particularly true about “discipline” (2) and “strength” (24), which had penetrated 12 occurrences - thus a third of the disciplined were also diligent. There is also a connection between “humility” (16) and “charity” as the opposite to envy (17), where there was penetration in seven incidents - thus half of the humble people, also avoid envy. Among the vices, there was an increased incidence of “exuberance” (2) as opposed to discipline among respondents, who confessed to “anger” (6) - in seven occurrences - and among respondents, who confessed to “numbness” (24) - in six occurrences. Thus, both angry and lazy were half non-disciplined at the same time. We have not noticed a special connection of the most common vices of “feasting” (8) with some other characteristic - it was distributed very evenly among all virtues and vices.

Special mention should also be made of the simultaneous occurrences of virtue and vices from the same category - thus, one respondent was both “feasting” and “moderate” (8). It was not rare, as in some areas many of them managed to have an ascetic life, and in other areas they failed. Or they were consciously trying to fight certain vices - with alternating success. This phenomenon related almost exclusively to characteristic No. 8; and partly to numbness/strength (24).

We compared the incidence of the rates of virtues among men and women as a percentage, as there were only 28 women in the sample, while there were 72 men. In terms of virtues, men and women were fairly balanced - except for the women's supremacy in the fields of “discipline” (2) and “stability” (26). The proportion of men prevailed more strongly in “contention” than in opposition to peace (12) and in “longing for the heavenly” (27).

Graph No. 2: Virtues - a comparison between men and women

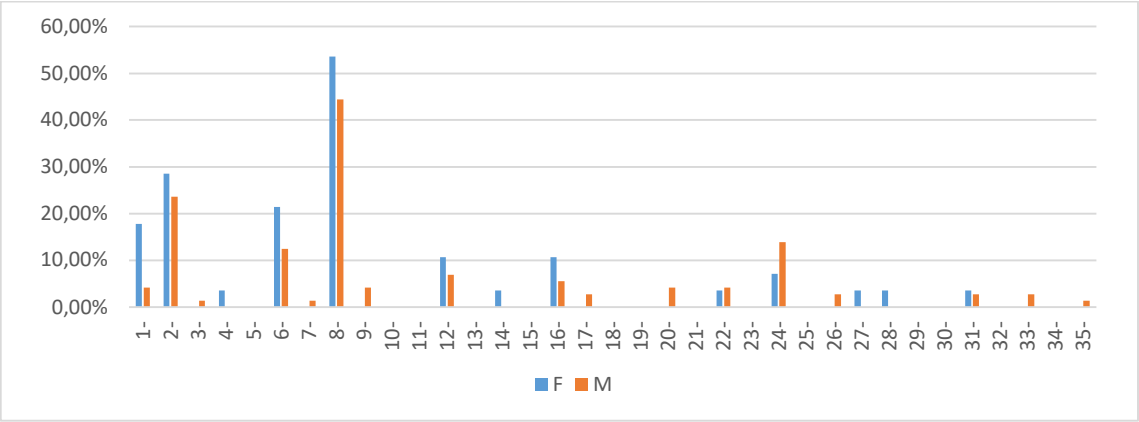


In vices, women mostly led, especially in the “love towards the world” (1), which we assigned to the neglect of children, the family and relationships, in favour of devotion to work. Women also

⁷ AKÁCSOVÁ, Elena: *Juraj Kováčik: Taká divná neposednosť je vo mne* (Such a strange restlessness is in me). 2012/34

confessed more to “anger” (6) or “feasting” (8). In men, “numbness” (24) was more common. For men alone, we have found “bitterness” (9), “disbelief” (20), “instability” (26) and “witchcraft” (33).

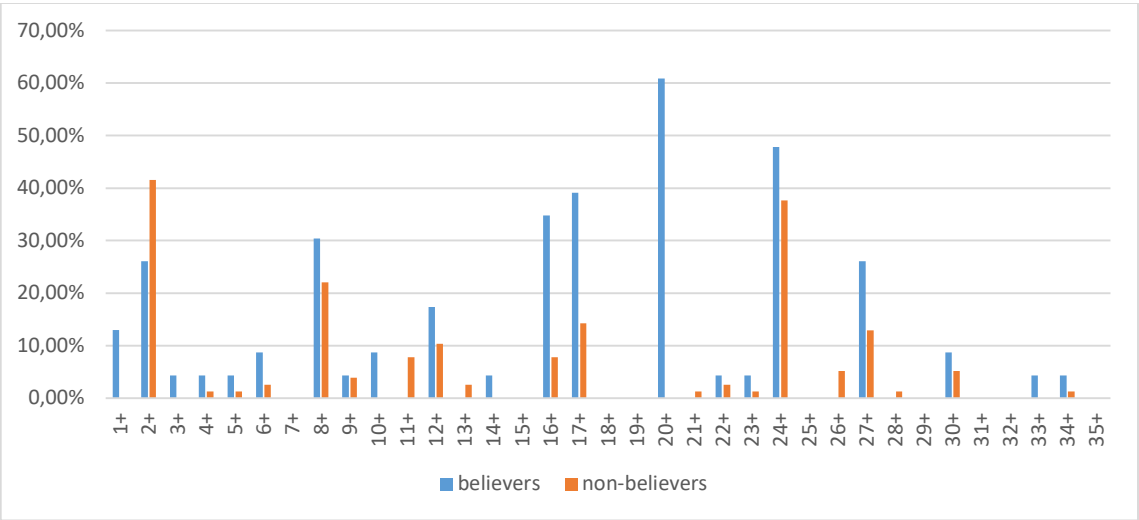
Graph No. 3: Vices - a comparison between men and women



For the purpose of comparing believers and non-believers, we have merged believers, who explicitly subscribed to the faith in the conversation, and those whose faith is publicly known, although they did not comment on it. We got a count of 23 believers. When comparing, we also worked with percentages here.

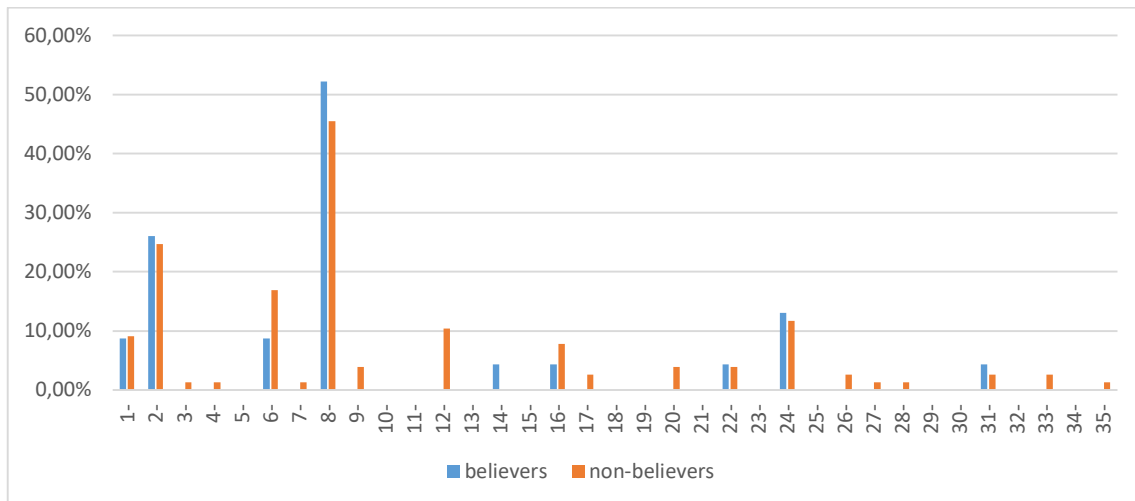
The proportion of believers was greater for each of the virtues - except for “discipline” (2). Only believers were naturally aware of the virtue of faith (20) and a “love of heaven” (1). They also prevailed very much in the virtues of “humility” (16) and “charity” (17).

Graph No.4: Virtues - comparison of believers and non-believers



The vices were fairly balanced in both believers and non-believers. There was a slightly higher incidence of “feasting” among believers (8) and a lower incidence of “anger” (6).

Graph No. 5: Vices - comparison of believers and non-believers



Interpretation and Conclusion

Based on the presented findings, we can conclude that even in a media discourse directly focused on virtues and vices, a mass medium as a transmission “medium” is able to transmit only some kind of messages about virtues and vices. It is not a space suitable for the intimate sharing of the inner spiritual experience, and even persons with a deeper spiritual life must be content with an inkling of their messages. If we also attributed some of the presented qualities to virtues such as “longing for the heavenly” (27) or “divine victory” (5), they remained, so called, half-way through, as if in a sort of secular design. “The desire for heaven” was thus represented by any desire for silence, for getting into the depth of one’s inner self - albeit without the background of Christian faith. We called the “divine victory” the opposite of “resignation”, that is to say, the optimistic viability that certain people not only experienced, but also spread around themselves.

Internal discipline, strength and abstinence - and their opposites - proved to be the most media-friendly virtues and vices. These were qualities with which the respondents were not afraid to let out to the public and into the media space - and which were also sufficiently interesting and attractive to the mass media. Internal discipline has often been combined with strength, and exuberance with numbness. At the same time, discipline and strength were more typical of non-believers and women. At the same time, they were more confessing that their hard-work borders on workaholism and is at the expense of children, family, and relationships, which they felt as guilt and negative. On the other hand, men talked more about their numbness.

The vices of pride and envy - and their contradictions of humility and charity - were also quite distinctly presented. Both were characterised by a pair occurrence (humble people were also striving for love for their neighbour), one a deliberate effort (people were aware of the tendency towards the pride or envy and declared a conscious effort to cultivate the opposite) and also a more frequent occurrence among the believing respondents.

If we confront our findings on media-presented virtues and vices with traditional news values, we can point out several contexts.

First of all, the selection of respondents in the Virtues and Vices section alone meets the news value of the elite.

The most commonly presented vice of “feasting” and its opposite of “abstinence” (8) correlate with the news value of property and money, as it has often been immeasurable in shopping (clothing, shoes, whatever) and a hobby of luxury and expensive things (designer products, quality things, modern technology). At the same time, the respondents indirectly pointed out their status and allowed readers to virtually enjoy such a hobby, even though they themselves do not have the resources to cultivate it.

At the same time, this vice has a certain link to the news value of everydayness, a connection to the necessities of everyday life, as in today's consumer society, it is a very frequent temptation to which many are subjected to.

One of the most typical news values of conflict is found in the confessions on the internal fight against vices, which the respondents are aware of and try to overcome.

In this context, we can also talk about the news value of the paradox, as publicly known, successful, admired and popular people more or less openly confess to their weaknesses and imperfections. At the same time, we find here the value of the human dimension of things and phenomena.

The news value of mystery appears in talking about deeper spiritual virtues when the respondents point to the transcendental side of life, a mystery that transcends us, in front of which they stand in amazement and seek to find what is essential in their lives.

The preferred news value of sex and eroticism deserves special note. In the Virtues and Vices section, the journalist Elena Akácsová regularly asked respondents about their relationship to the opposite sex and their weaknesses in this respect, however, hardly any people commented on this topic: in our sample it was only seven respondents, three of whom dispose of virtue (chastity) and four of vice (lustfulness) in this area. They were all men - except one woman in the vice's category.

Thus, if we have revived the eternal question of religious-media research with this study, whether “gospel values” penetrate “news values”, and thus whether gospel values are alias virtues that are interesting for the media, our little research has confirmed the earlier findings that this penetration is relatively small and relatively superficial. The media portability of deeper spiritual messages remains questionable. In other words, the usability of the media for evangelistic purposes is questionable.

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