

PAC – Phonologie de l'Anglais Contemporain

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Christmas interview of a television evangelist

If television evangelists are anything like the rest of us, all they really want to do in Christmas week is snap at their families, criticize their friends and make their neighbours' children cry by glaring at them over the garden fence. Yet society expects them to be as jovial and beaming as they are for the other fifty-one weeks of the year. If anything, more so.

Take the Reverend Peter 'Pete' Smith, the 'TV vicar' who sends out press releases in which he describes himself as 'the man who has captured the spirit of the age'. Before our 9 a.m. meeting at his 'media office' on Crawshaw Avenue, South London, he faced, he says, a real dilemma. Should he make an effort 'to behave like a Christian'-throw his door open, offer me a cup of tea-or should he just play it cool, study his fingernails in a manner that showed bored indifference and get rid of me as quickly as possible? In the end, he did neither.

'As a matter of fact, John', he says in a loud Estuary English twang, 'St Francis said, 'At all times preach the gospel and speak whenever you have to'. But hey, he didn't mean 'Be on your best behaviour and be happy all the time'. I could have been extra-polite to you, but the real me would have come out as I was talking. You cannot disguise what you are.'

'And what are you then, Pete?'

'Well, I'm a Christian, John. I've been one since I was 14. And I know for sure that Christianity will be judged more on who you are rather than what you have to say about it. Many church leaders don't appear to understand this. They think we can only be really Christian when we are ramming the doctrine of the Creation down people's throats. But if you try to force-feed people they get sick of it and think you're a pain. It's seen as the job of a Christian leader to wear a dog-collar and dress in purple and always be talking about the real meaning of the New Testament. In reality, that turns people right off!'

In many ways, 'Pete' Smith looks exactly how you'd expect a high-profile, born-again Christian to look: tall, handsome, clean-cut and evenly sun-tanned. He has those scarily white teeth that TV evangelists tend to have, and he doesn't wear a dog-collar. In fact, when doing his various religious programmes on Sunday mornings, he has been known to wear a black leather jacket instead, in casual mode. Today, the look is more business-like: metal-rimmed glasses, a grey suit, a blue open-neck shirt, and fashionable black shoes with large buckles. Smith is 44 but he looks a mere 24.

During the whole interview, there wasn't any talk of the poor or the needy but only of his forthcoming trip to China in February and the masses waiting for his message there. I ventured a few questions relating to the charity trust he founded some ten years ago and which, it is generally agreed, employs eight hundred staff and runs schools, hospitals and hostels around the world. And what about the gambling organization he has been willing to advise? Is that a temporary activity or might it be true that he has accepted to be paid to sit on its Board of Directors? Which side is religion on these days? Does money matter? It was as if I had launched a few missiles in his direction. He just sighed in answer: 'I'm only human, John. God knows I do my best and often fail, But it's no skin off my nose if our enemies sneer at some of the good work we do. Truth will out.'