The Theory and Practice of Religious Broadcasting

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"THE Church must get on the air; the Church must demand, buy and use time on radio and television; the Church must reach this country's men and women through these increasingly popular media." This is an often heard cry in these days. It is a demand for very practical action. And in response the Church in some areas is rushing into the field, and in others is bemoaning her lack of funds, talent and interest.

One cannot help but recognize the great amount of time spent by many thousands of souls before the television set or the radio. In response to this fact the Church is talking in practical terms, and is rushing to supply a religious tone to at least some aspects of these media. This is necessary and praiseworthy, but there is also the danger that practicality may outweigh the theological considerations involved in the use of broadcasting tools. Too often it is not recognized that a decision about the value and validity of these means of communication, and a study of the basic assumptions which lie behind any policy of religious broadcasting should precede, or at least accompany, practical efforts.

The problem of communication in the twentieth century is being fully studied in several quarters. A discussion of religious broadcasting touches on a small but significant area of the overall discussion, and as such is of interest not only to the potential and actual broadcasting clergyman, or to the radio and television committee member, but also to the parson or layman who is concerned about the effect of the mass media on modern listening and viewing man. The practical and the theological cannot therefore be divorced. The particular layman or clergyman is faced with radio and television at every turn and is himself a product of the mass media to some extent; the committee member is to plan practical programmes from a particular theological standpoint; the amateur broadcaster will write, speak and move in definite ways which will demonstrate his beliefs about the communication of religious truth. But a great deal of practical instruction is necessary as well, as must be all too clear to anyone who listens to religious programmes by amateur broadcasters.

This article will touch on both practical and philosophical problems connected with religious broadcasting. These "touchings" will be brief and inconclusive. The writer believes that the present need is not so much for producing a set of answers as it is for raising the questions. The actress Siobhan McKenna has said that in her childhood she was never allowed to

attend the cinema because her father believed that it would curb her imagination. It is my hope that the raising of a few questions might result in fresh, imaginative practical approaches to the mass media, based on sound theological thinking about their uses.

While it is specifically religious broadcasting with which we are concerned, it should be remembered that this is not the only Christian broadcasting that is being done. A broad view of the mass media will see truths about man and his sin, and about a world without God, in many films and dramas that could not be called religious. As long as Truth is being demonstrated, Christians can and should support the productions. The use of such programmes and films in a positive manner by the Church can do much to reach a far wider audience than can those with an enunciated religious content. The work of the Church is to witness to the truth of the Gospel, and this can often be done most effectively in so-called secular programmes. This was the belief demonstrated by the CBC in its television production, for example, of a space-ship adventure story on Good Friday of this year. The time given for the hour-long drama replaced the usual Friday night boxing in Toronto; in order to keep the fans before their sets a play was chosen that apparently had much more tense excitement than pious religion. The impact of the close of the play on the ordinary listener justifies this means as one method of presentation of Christian truth.

The field of "Christian broadcasting" is too large to be tackled here. In limiting this article to the theory and practice of religious programming and broadcasting techniques, I shall quote a passage from the thought-provoking book *The Communication of the Christian Faith* by Hendrik Kraemer, and use his comments as a basis for this discussion.[1]

An important part of the time of many people is filled by the modern technical means of information and propaganda: television, radio, and cinema. These are the media through which they obtain their "education," to use a great word for a very ambiguous thing. We cannot enter into all the implications of the media of mass communication, their pending between instrument of culture or of barbarism, the problem of "Christian" films, "Christian" radio, "Christian" television. The fundamental thing to be said is that the term "mass communication" is very ambiguous. Genuine communication is always *personal.* There are cases in which mass communication becomes personal, but in the present state of mass communication the combination of these two words "mass" and "communication" is apt to contain a misleading delusion. A great deal of what is produced by these media is propaganda, or a drugging away of the emptiness of countless people, molding the feelings and thoughts according to a pattern which makes them passive tools. Out of commercial considerations, money and inventiveness are lavishly spent. This is not the only thing that can be said about the mass media, but it should be said first, because these media have enormous demonic potentialities and realizations. They also have good potentialities. It should especially be said to and in the Church, and among Christians who with great diligence and devotion try to use these media, as it is said, for the witness to the gospel. In all these diligent efforts there is often a

1. Hendrik Kraemer, *The Communication of the Christian Faith.* Copyright, 1946, by W. L. Jenkins, The Westminster Press. Used by permission.

dangerous optimism, which regards communication as a quantitive proposition, forgetting that the crucial point is not to use them, but to *change* them. What we need is not a rejection of these media, which merely will be continuously perfected, but a critical use of them, a building up of our own criteria and style and a struggle with their demonic, culture-destroying tendencies.

The first statement with which we should deal concerns the time-consuming nature of the mass media. With the radio in the background during the day, and the cinema or televison providing entertainment in the evening, today's families are bombarded with from four to twelve hours of listening material each day. This presents opportunities both for "culture" and for "barbarism." While much of today's activity is described as watching television this often accompanies other necessary work, particularly on the part of women. Mending, ironing and the like are tasks which require enough attention so that really creative thinking is prohibited, but they are not absorbing enough always to fulfill a creative need. The radio and television can both be used to implant ideas into this "background vacuum," so that this area of listening and viewing should not be overlooked.

On the other hand, it may be argued that when so many people are using radio and television as a "drugging away of emptiness" that the airwaves should be filled with as much sound religion as is possible, in the hope that this will come to mean at least as much as the usual background noises.

The traditional soap-opera material maintains high popularity; this kind of escape from or substitution for reality is antagonistic to a Christian view of life. Programmes with educational content, on subjects ranging from cooking and housekeeping to child psychology and politics all contain possibility for good, and can present truth in their own fields.

But on the negative side, by subjecting himself to the demands of the mass media, man forces himself into the position of a passive consumer in which any necessity of initiative or action is obviated. The audience appears as a mass to be entertained, and seldom is a response required. We immediately see that the development of this passive condition is at odds with the Christian doctrine of man, for his will is scarcely ever involved. The danger inherent in a constant maintenance of the consumer attitude is that man may become unable to make a response—whether it be a value judgment, an arousal to action, a desire and search for knowledge, or a recognition and response to God's call.

There is another way of defining the dangers in the mass media. D. R. G. Owen wrote in this Journal last January that the modern view of education "insists that the human being learns best by participating in some activity" and that group activities are superior to individual ones. There is almost no active participation by the home audience in a radio or television show, and the listener is often alone. While the new emphasis on visual education gives a boost to television possibilities, these two stresses of modern education indicate the difficulties involved in a dependence on these media.

If the Christian Church were to deal with these problems by preaching

against the use of radio and television, it would not only achieve nothing, but it would lose a good deal. As Mr. Kraemer writes, the point is to change the media, not to reject them. On the other hand the Church cannot find herself in the position of being so willing to "go along with today's world" that she finds herself controlled by its secularism. We must accept the fact that man is using and will use these media, probably increasingly. But granted this, the job of the Church is to decide what kind and what calibre of material man must receive in order not to become merely a passive consumer. The great popularity of radio and television sales techniques offers the temptation to present Christianity in the same manner that the sponsor presents his soup or soap. It is not a simple matter to praise or condemn these efforts. In the same way that modern Church architecture attempts to express contemporary religion, there is validity in daily remindings of Christian heritage or duty presented in such a way that the eye and ear are attracted. For example, in Holy Week the CBC presented one minute "promos" of stylized drawings, music and readings to illustrate the events of the Passion and placed these during station breaks.

The use of contemporary sales technique, unless carefully guarded, offers this question as the criterion of success: "Are the commercials paying off in bigger attendance at Church, higher morality, etc.?" And even more important in the long run is the question, if man accepts the "sales pitch" type of propaganda, religious as well as secular, is the Church then guilty of worsening man's passive condition rather than taking upon herself the task of inciting him to a constructive response?

While what is popular may not be considered "good" for our purposes, one must remember that people cannot be forced to listen to what "the Church" thinks is worthwhile. In many places the listener can switch to another station or channel, or he can always refuse to listen at all. We are fortunate in Canada to have a criterion other than public desires to guide programming. Stations which depend on local sponsors for their revenue must produce what the largest number will listen to, whereas the CBC is able to take a longer view, and to consider the benefit—cultural and educational as well as in entertainment—of the country as a whole. This of course does not solve the problem. A low rating for a programme of high culture content does little to change the patterns established by constant plugging of material of low quality. However, and this is of greatest significance for those interested in religious broadcasting, the general category into which a programme falls is not enough by which to judge it. A programme of popular music can conceivably be a far better programme—technically, culturally, and spiritually—than a particular religious programme. The name "religious" does nothing to guarantee quality, and may indeed be given to a programme which fulfils some of the demonic potentialities of which Mr. Kraemer speaks.

The person concerned with the presentation of Christian truth on a religious programme needs to decide what it is that the religious programme

is going to communicate, and to whom. The method of presentation varies greatly depending on the audience and on the content. We can divide the functions of religious programmes into four: proclamation, education, entertainment, meditation or worship. These are interchangeable to some extent, and perhaps in the listeners' or viewers' minds—except for school broadcasts—the function of entertainment takes precedence. If this is generally the case, it obviously follows that good programming must be entertaining: that is, it must hold its hearers first by its merits as a programme. Only then will it be able to convey its content so that it will be received positively.

Proclamation of the Gospel is the job of the preacher, who declares what God has done, generally by an open, direct method. Education includes the lecture, the film on, for example, the Holy Land, the dramatized Bible story or life of a religious leader, the panel discussion or a programme of music which is planned to instruct the hearer. Meditation or worship involves the devotional talk or reading, the live church service or constructed services, and devotional music. Over and above these functional divisions is the overall purpose of the Church, which is to bring individuals into relation with God.

It is at this point that the importance of Mr. Kraemer's statement becomes clear—"genuine communication is always personal." It is the individual who must be touched and converted. While earlier we pointed up the difficulties of communication caused by the isolation of the radio listener and television viewer, here a positive inference may be drawn. The listener hears and sees one man speaking to him and to his condition. This is a situation of personal communication, and if the individual is arrested by the first few moments of listening, it is then the task of the broadcaster to supply him with content. An acquaintance with the numbers of listeners indicated in an audience survey report seems to convey to many amateur broadcasters that the microphone before them is a soap-box in Hyde Park which they can use, in the same way as a soap-box, to reach thousands. It is instead the person alone or in a small company who listens. A shouting political speaker on the air suggests the scene of a convention hall; as a member of the radio audience you "listen in" on what is being said. This is very different from the quiet manner of another political speaker who breaks through the listener's thoughts with "information for you" about corruption, planning, and so forth.

An insistence on speaking directly and simply to the individual is especially necessary in devotional talks, and it is these which most clergymen find themselves requested to give. There is a belief in nominal Christian circles that it is not so much what a parson says that influences one's religion, as his personality. Not everyone is given a "warm and winning" personality, of course, but this at least points up the truth that unless genuine communication is established between two people, the words that are spoken are of little value. On radio it is the voice alone which must establish this personal bond. On television it is easier, because eye-catching techniques may hold the

viewers long enough for the bond to be established. In either case a sense of directness and honesty must be conveyed to the audience.

Both the content and the method of presentation relate to the desired and the actual audience. The distinction between the words "desired" and "actual" is important for the occasional broadcaster, because there is obviously little point in beaming a particular talk, reading or play at a teen-age audience, for example, when the surveys show that elderly shut-ins form the main body of the audience at that time. It is only with new or occasional programmes that one can attempt to gain the attention of a particular group.

The large percentage of listeners to programmes of announced religious content are more than nominal Christians. Very few of these programmes reach the avowed agnostic. There are however, dial twisters who may be arrested by the sound of a voice, or fringe listeners who give a speaker two or three minutes chance before switching off. These possibilities combine to make direction at a single group difficult, but in general the choice between proselytizing, encouraging in the faith, counselling or educating can be made.

This breakdown of audience listening must guide the Church in these areas where a great deal of money is to be spent. If the most immediate task seems to be evangelization of the masses, then a different approach—and a different budget—are needed, than if the primary aim is to make the worship of the Church familiar, and available, to those who cannot or do not participate in person.

There are many devout Christians who do not, and will not, listen to religious programmes as a general rule. If religious study and meditation are balanced well with the time that they do devote to radio and television entertainment, there is no reason to try to change this. But we should attempt to determine the differences between those who listen and watch and those who do not, because this discovery will aid planning, and influence the course of religious broadcasting.

What is the listener seeking? We have divided religious broadcasting into four functions from the viewpoint of the Church using the airwaves. This is another equally important question. If we decide that such and such a programme could fulfill the teaching function, and we find that the people, who have tuned into the programme are looking for companionship, we are not likely to retain their interest. Many listeners are seeking comfort or strengthening; they ask for gentle encouragement, not conviction of sin. Others are looking for a direct answer to a problem which they do not want to take to their pastor in person. The companionship of the worshipping community can only be gained by the shut-in over the air. Whether all these reasons are valid is a question that can only be decided after they have been accepted as facts. If a man asking for a spiritual pat on the back is to realize the necessity of admitting his sinfulness, we must start where he is to take him to where he needs to go. This is clear in personal counselling, where clergyman and parishioner meet fact to face, but is easily forgotten when only the microphone or camera faces the speaker.

We have put forward the idea that there are a great many ways to do religious broadcasting, which involve different audiences, different material and different techniques. It only remains to add that these probably also need different men. One cannot do before a microphone what one is incapable of doing away from it. One's own limitations and special talents must be considered as primary guides. The mass media are too important to the contemporary mission of the church to have to deal with prima donnas who are primarily concerned with their own artistic futures. On the practical individual level the Church needs men who can weed out the best speakers, readers, lecturers among themselves, and who will then see that these men are the ones who are heard on the air. The policy of 'a turn for everyone,' regardless of talent or training, harms both the Church and the medium.

What then is the place for religious broadcasts? Should they be announced as such and put into the schedule so that those who wish to hear them may be well notified? Should they be designed to entertain and attract the ear and eye of the secular hearer? Should they be slipped into the schedule, secular-coated, with no demonstration of religious content until after the audience is well settled? These are three possible ways of answering the questions of religious broadcasting, and each is valuable in its own way. Each method raises more questions—of content, audience and technique.

So we come full circle, with, as I stated in the beginning, questions raised and left with no set of answers supplied. The pressing need is for thoughtful consideration of the theological considerations which give birth to religious broadcasting, and a specific application of theory to the detailed techniques of practice. And here as elsewhere is needed courageous imagination, to attempt the new and daring in order to make the news of redemption come alive to this century.