

# THE GLOBALIZATION OF AMERICAN TELEVANGELISM

By Jeffrey K. Hadden

■ The advent, growth and development of religious broadcasting seems to indicate a clear example of God's providence in human history. Yet today, more than ever, will success in the use of radio and television in world evangelization threaten its future or enhance its ability to reach those who have never heard?

## In The Beginning

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

Thus begins the sacred texts of Christendom. In the 19th century there was another beginning; the beginning of the electronic communication revolution. To evangelical Christians who take seriously Christ's commandment to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15), this revolution is not just one among many significant scientific advances in the 19th and early 20th century. Rather, it is perhaps the paramount event in history since God sent his Son to offer atonement for human sin. The ability to transmit the voice and the visual image of the preacher has, for the first time, made it possible to reach all humankind with the Gospel message.

It is not accidental that evangelical Christians should single out electronic communication as a development of such importance. While the fundamental rudiments of electronic communication were unfolding in the United States, England and Italy, a millenarian movement of profound importance was unfolding in England and the U.S. Inspired by John Nelson Darby, dispensational premillennialism postulated a new eschatology which forecasted the imminent return of Christ. But Christ's return was necessarily contingent upon fulfillment of his commandment to preach the gospel to all the world.

In this context, the confluence of belief that the end of history was near and the creation of broadcast technologies took on a special significance. For those who became involved in religious broadcasting, this medium was early

recognized as the instrument God had provided to make possible the fulfillment of Christ's Great Commission.<sup>1</sup>

To the secular mind, this perspective is baffling and even preposterous. The electronic communication revolution which has brought us radio and television was merely the logical culmination of hundreds of experimental successes and failures which unfolded during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In secular histories of broadcasting one finds virtually no mention of religion or religious broadcasting.<sup>2</sup> But those evangelical Christians who have so effectively harnessed the airwaves for the purpose of propagating the Gospel know a different history. For them, the unfolding of the mysteries that gave birth to radio and television had profound providential guidance.

If the hard nosed secular cynic sees the evangelical "creation [of broadcasting] story" as utter nonsense, one who listens attentively and with an open mind will soon understand why some evangelicals attribute so much significance to the development of broadcast technology as well as why they are so deeply committed to mastering the use of this technology. An examination of the development of electronic communications from their perspective presents to unbelievers an almost unnerving sense of the intertwining, indeed seeming inseparability, of the milestones of broadcasting and acts of faith. To believers, this history provides a confirmation of God's providential hand. Let me briefly recount a few central milestones in their creation story.

If it was Samuel F. B. Morse's diligence that led to the installation in 1844

of the first successful telegraphic line connecting Washington and Baltimore, Morse himself seemed clearly to have experienced a sense of awe, even sacredness in what he was doing. This is evidenced by the choice of his first transmission: "WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT!" (Head, 1972:108).

Radio, as we now know it, began in 1896 with Guglielmo Marconi's discovery of wireless communication, but the first successful voice transmission occurred a decade later when a Canadian engineer, Reginald Fessenden, beamed a signal from the coast of Massachusetts to ships at sea. The date was December 24, 1906, Christmas Eve. The content of this first transmission was a religious service which included a violin solo (Gounod's "O Holy Night"), readings from the gospel of Luke, and the singing of a sacred song (Handel's *Largo*).

Religious broadcasters, to the person, agree with broadcast historian J. Harold Ellens that "[i]t is not without significance that the first voice broadcast was a Christian religious celebration" (1974:16). Given the rapid expansion and experimentation with wireless transmission, any number of persons might have been the first to transmit a human voice. But God chose this time, the eve of the birth of Christ, and this man, a devout Christian who understood the significance of his act, to foretell the most significant development of the 20th century. Of all the developments in the history of broadcasting, this is the most central in the creation story. But there are other developments which may be seen as signs of God's providential engagement.

Radio station KDKA in Pittsburgh became the first commercially licensed

station to transmit programs for the general public. Their programming commenced on November 2, 1920 with the reporting of the Harding-Cox presidential election returns. Two months later on Sunday evening, January 2, 1921, KDKA claimed the first remote broadcast and the first broadcast of a church service. It was also an ecumenical service of sorts. To be as unobtrusive as possible, the two engineers, one Roman Catholic, the other Jewish, decked themselves in robes and sat with the choir at the Calvary Episcopal Church located some ten miles from the transmitting studio (Armstrong, 1979: 19,20).

Marconi, who left Italy for England when he was unable to drum up interest in his experiments, returned to his native land to provide technical assistance in the construction of Vatican Radio, an instrument created for the purpose of communicating with Catholics around the globe. The task accomplished in 1931, it was Marconi, the "father of radio," who introduced the Holy Father to the world in the inauguration of first global network (Browne, 1982: 306).<sup>3</sup>

Before Franklin Roosevelt's radio "fireside chats" to a depression stricken nation, or Adolf Hitler's use of radio to arouse Nazism in Germany, or Winston Churchill's use of the BBC to calm Londoners during the *blitzkrieg*, Father Charles E. Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest from Detroit, was the first person to attract a large and loyal radio following.<sup>4</sup> Many evangelical Christians, then and now, would not want to associate themselves with either Coughlin's religious or political messages. But the unequivocal lesson of Father Coughlin's tenure as a broadcaster is that he demonstrated how a charismatic figure can utilize the airwaves to mobilize the masses.

From a modest beginning in October, 1926 on station WJR in Detroit, Father Coughlin rapidly broadened his base and in 1930 commenced broadcasting nationally on CBS. By 1932 his audience had reportedly reached forty-five million weekly.<sup>5</sup> By 1934 Coughlin's mail was reported to have "exceeded that of every other human being" and *Fortune* magazine heralded Coughlin as "the biggest thing that every happened to radio" (Ellens, 1974: 57).

Perhaps even more telling of his pop-

ularity in America was a survey conducted by a Philadelphia radio station. When listeners were asked if they would prefer Father Coughlin or the New York Philharmonic on Sunday afternoons, Coughlin won by an amazing 187,000 votes to 12,000 for the Philharmonic (Barnouw, 1968: 46)!

Much of Coughlin's popularity can be attributed to his appeal to the working classes and underprivileged during the depression years. But in spite of his enormous popularity, Coughlin did not succeed in molding his loyal radio audience into a social movement army.<sup>6</sup> What he demonstrated, however, was the potential for a fiery charismatic orator to move the masses.

The development of the technological capability to transmit video images did not lag far behind audio transmission. The British Broadcasting Corporation began operating a limited television service in 1936 and RCA excited visitors to the 1939 World's Fair in New York City with the exhibition of a television system. But World War II displaced parts and personnel in this emerging industry (Bogart, 1972:8). It didn't take long after the war, however, before the development of television took off, much like the explosion of radio in the early 1920s.

When television became available to the masses, religion was again on center stage. Roman Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen was the first superstar of television. The television industry generally attributes this acclaim to comedian Milton Berle, but when Sheen and Berle were aired head to head, the Bishop pulled the larger audience. Sheen's combination of a simple inspirational message, punctuated humor, his flowing crimson robe, the "angles" who erased his blackboard and the close up camera shots capturing the twinkle in his eyes, made him the top figure in all of television until a church superior, alleged to be jealous of Sheen's success, forced him to give up his telecast.

After the formative years, and the prominent role played by Roman Catholics in the milestone events cited above, the Catholic Church has not been a major player in the development of the burgeoning religious broadcasting industry in the U.S. Given that Roman Catholics constitute the single largest religious body in the U.S., they are conspicuous by their absence. But the

absence of Catholics is no more conspicuous than that of all the major Protestant denominations. Of the ten largest religious bodies in the U.S., only the Southern Baptists have a significant presence in media. And the Southern Baptists, of course, are a conservative evangelical body.

The religious airwaves in America are dominated by those conservative evangelicals who, from the beginning, envisioned broadcast technology to be God's way of making possible the fulfillment of the Great Commission. But it was not always this way. For the first quarter-of-a-century of broadcasting, evangelical broadcasters fought a losing struggle to keep a foothold in broadcasting. Their adversaries were not only the secular broadcasters who didn't particularly want to deal with them, but also liberal Protestant broadcasters who were in competition with them. Liberal Protestant periodicals were quick to label the emotional style and fund raising techniques of evangelicals as "religious hucksterism." Only gradually did the balance of power shift to the evangelicals.

### From The Margin To Domination

From the time the networks began to form in the mid-1920s, evangelical broadcasters had a progressively difficult time getting on the air. By the mid-1940s they had become firmly convinced that the networks and the liberal Protestant traditions were actively engaged in a conspiracy to keep them off the air. In 1944 evangelicals created the National Religious Broadcasters as a step toward redressing their grievance.

The first official act of this newly created trade organization was to retain a Washington-based communications attorney. Second, they created a code of ethics which placed distance between themselves and certain broadcasters the liberal church traditions had explicitly labeled "radio racketeers." Third, they petitioned the networks to reconsider their policies. And, fourth, they lobbied the Federal Communications Commission for help in ameliorating the unequal distribution of air time. One of the most important policy decisions they made, commencing in 1956, was to hold their annual meetings in Washington. It didn't take long before they began to learn their way around political circles in the nation's capitol. Their annual

Congressional Breakfast brings scores of dignitaries from Capitol Hill, and the annual Federal Communications Commission Luncheon usually finds most of the Commissioners at the head table.

The most important breakthrough for evangelicals came in 1960 when the FCC handed down a ruling which erased a long standing distinction between free (sustaining) air time and commercially sponsored programming. Prior to this ruling, radio and television stations had been reluctant to sell air time and the free time they allocated, went largely to more "mainline" or "establishment" religious traditions.

The Communications Act of 1934 gave the FCC the authority to license individual stations, which amounted to a monopoly of a scarce commodity. There was a tacit understanding that those who were granted the monopoly owed the community an unspecified amount of "public service" broadcasting. The significance of the FCC ruling was that stations could now sell air time and also receive "public interest credit."

Evangelicals rushed in and bought up all the available air time and the liberal Protestant and Catholic traditions, which had received air time free as part of the "public service" arrangement, found themselves unwilling or unable to pay for air time. As a result, they were mostly squeezed from the air. The technological advancements of the 1970s and 80s have all worked to enhance the advantage gained by the evangelicals in the 1960s. Communication satellites and the expansion of the number of channels available for transmission created the opportunity for broadcasting entrepreneurs to create religious networks. The invention of the video tape made it possible for many more would-be broadcasters to inexpensively get in on the action. The availability of the religious networks provided an outlet for the distribution of programs. And the expansion of cable during the 1980s has significantly enhanced the opportunities for religious networks to deliver their programs to households across the country.

Religious broadcasting in the U.S. now exists on a vastly larger scale than in any other nation. In fact, it exists on a scale beyond the recognition of most Americans. Furthermore, it is presently

experiencing a period of enormous growth.

In 1985, *The Directory of Religious Broadcasting* reported a total of 1,043 religious radio stations and 96 religious television stations in the U.S. The 1989 *Directory* shows these figures increasing to 1,485 and 336 respectively. This represents a 42 percent growth in radio and a 265 percent growth in television stations. The power of these stations ranges from very low to large enough to blanket major markets. The most recent *Directory* reports a total of 648 organizations producing religious radio programs and 476 organizations producing religious television programs. For both radio and television production, this represents a little better than a 25 percent growth in a half-a-decade. Furthermore, the number of organizations producing radio and television programs for distribution outside the U.S. has grown in this same time frame from 211 to 301, an increase of 43 percent.

One important explanation for this phenomenal growth is the fact that several relatively new evangelical schools have created departments or schools which offer degrees in radio and television broadcasting. CBN University,

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Liberty University, Jimmy Swaggart Bible College, and Oral Roberts University are a few of the more visible schools. In colleges and universities of the proselytizing traditions, the broadcast curriculum is very popular. Thus, in addition to the traditional practice of producing graduates who go out and start new churches, these broadcast oriented schools are now producing a generation of graduates who are going out and raising the money to start radio and television stations.

How much future growth this burgeoning industry might sustain is difficult to estimate. At the present time there is very little commercial sponsor-

ship for either religious radio or TV. If religious broadcasters are able to make a breakthrough in commercial sponsorship (advertising) then growth could likely be sustained for perhaps decades. Without a commercial breakthrough it seems fairly clear that growth will necessarily taper off for lack of financial resources.

In addition to its sheer size, religious broadcasting in the U.S. has three defining characteristics. First, as noted above, broadcasting is *dominated by conservative evangelical traditions*. Of the seventy-five or so syndicated television broadcasters, the large majority can be classified as either fundamentalist or Pentecostal. A similar preponderance of conservative traditions is found in syndicated radio. And the vast majority of religious radio and television stations are owned by religious conservatives.

Second, there is very *little denominational censorship* of religious broadcasting. While some individual broadcasters belong to denominations, they operate their radio/television ministries outside any authority structure of denominations. Many of the broadcasters pastor churches, but they have independently incorporated their broadcast ministries as autonomous *parachurch* structures, answerable only to boards they have hand selected.

Third, the vast majority of religious broadcasting is *quasi-commercial*. In television, broadcasters purchase the time to air their programs from local stations. Unlike normal commercial broadcasting, where advertisers purchase time, most religious broadcasters use a proportion of their air time to solicit contribution from audiences. Others offer premiums, like books, jewelry, records and cassette tapes in exchange for a donation of a specified amount. Over the years, the amount of sustaining (free) time offered by local stations and networks has diminished to less than five percent of all religious broadcast time. Most religious broadcasting on radio is aired over non-profit religious stations. Both the stations and the syndicated broadcasters whom they air seek contributions from the audience or offer items for sale.

The question may still remain, why can't the "mainline" religious traditions

get in on the action?<sup>7</sup> There are several reasons. First, as should be implicit from the discussion above, religious broadcasting has found its niche within the broader context of the free enterprise system. Evangelicals have a product to sell. The product is Jesus Christ and his gift of salvation to those who will accept. Evangelicals are energetic and enthusiastic proselytizers. They are not ashamed of the Gospel, nor are they ashamed to ask others to contribute financially to their work. Both on and off the air, they are unrelenting in their appeals for money to support their ministries.

Notwithstanding the expressed intent to evangelize among the unsaved, the natural constituency for evangelical broadcasters are believers. As a group, evangelical believers tend to be more deeply involved in experiencing and practicing their religion. The advent of religious broadcasting provided yet another way, not an alternative for them to involve themselves in their faith. Furthermore, evangelicals have a tradition of generous giving.

All of this adds up to a success formula for evangelicals that the mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions cannot match. To begin with, the liberal church traditions have rather more reserved notions of evangelism, witness, and Christ's commandment to spread the Good News. They tend to believe that Christian witness is exhibited in the character and quality of one's life. The very thought of confronting one's neighbor or fellow worker to ask if he or she is saved is, to put it mildly, rather tacky if not downright abhorrent. In a word, heavy-handed proselytization is not a part of the mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions. Furthermore, most of them consider both the on and off air fund raising appeals of evangelicals to be down right tasteless.

So, where are they to raise the funds to support radio and television ministries? No denomination has sufficient discretionary budget to support the high cost of national television. A national television program could only be financed with a very large philanthropic gift, or a fund raising campaign.

Instructive of the latter is the case of the United Methodist Church, the third largest religious body (behind Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists) in the U.S. In the early part of this decade the

Methodists launched a \$25 million fund raising campaign. Their plan was to purchase a major metropolitan area television station and with the profits from this station develop and pay for the distribution of religious programming. The campaign was a dismal failure. In the end, they had a difficult time paying back the \$1 million they borrowed for the campaign (Lyles: 1982:685).

There are many reasons why the Methodist effort failed and why other denominations would not likely have much success with a capital campaign. Denominational bureaucracies are cumbersome structures for the creation of new initiatives, especially when the initiative requires a significant capital outlay. Resources are scarce and people have different priorities. Even if a denomination could agree on a strategy that everyone could get behind, they would still face the problem of deciding who, among the many worthy preachers in the denomination, would be the featured speaker.

The mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions simply don't have the organizational structure or fiscal resources to successfully compete with the evangelical broadcasters. The entrepreneurial model, free from the constraints of church bureaucracy, is simply a more efficient means for developing a television ministry.

In the battle for access to the airwaves, representatives of mainline Protestant traditions have substantially been reduced to protesting the FCC policies that have effectively squeezed them off the air and criticizing the evangelical broadcasters.

So what is the future of evangelical religious broadcasters in the U.S.? On the one hand we have seen the evidence of sustained growth in both radio and television. On the other hand loom the televangelism scandals of 1987 and 1988. Clearly the sexual and financial scandals in the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart ministries did tarnish the public image of all broadcasters. But not all ministries were hurt, and some that immediately felt the shock waves recovered fairly quickly. The financial and audience losses of some of the major broadcasters provided the opportunity for other broadcasters to attract new listeners and viewers.

There is no question that religious

broadcasting in America is now going through a major shake up and period of transition. In the end, I think religious broadcasting will be strengthened rather than weakened by the scandals.

There are some interest groups in the U.S. who would like to get the religious broadcasters off the air altogether. The scandals provided them the opportunity to promote this perspective. It is very unlikely, however, that this will happen. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which grants free exercise and free establishment of religion, serves as a powerful protection against Congressional legislation or Federal Communications Commission regulations which would treat religious broadcasters differently from other broadcasters. As long as the U.S. pursues a policy of maximizing access to the air waves, religious broadcasters will not be excluded.

As religious broadcasting struggles in the U.S. to overcome the negative effects of the scandals, I think we can expect to see renewed efforts at developing international broadcasting. The final section of this paper examines the role of American in international broadcasting in the past and explores the prospects for an expansionist role in the future.

### The Global Quest

The *World Radio TV Handbook* recently identified 27 international religious broadcasting organizations (Frost, 1985). Of these, four may be identified as major organizations: Far East Broadcasting Association (FEBA), Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC), Herald-ing Christ Jesus' Blessing (HCJB), and Trans World Radio (TWR). Three of the "Big Four" were founded and are operated by Americans. The fourth, FEBA, is a British organization. In addition, as noted above, there are more than 300 American agencies producing programming for foreign transmission. Much of this material is broadcast over one of the three major networks.

The first international evangelical radio station was HCJB and they went on the air from Quito, Ecuador on Christmas Day of 1931. Vatican Radio had commenced broadcasting in February of that same year.<sup>8</sup> In the beginning, they broadcast two hours daily on shortwave radio in Spanish from a converted sheep shed. From this location high in the

Andes mountains, their signal could be picked up in much of South America.

The expansion of international broadcasting was a latent and unanticipated consequence of World War II. Surplus equipment offered the foundation of a global radio ministry as abandoned war radio transmitter stations were resurrected as international outposts for missionary transmissions.

Robert Bowman, who established the Far East Broadcasting Company in Manila in 1948 and Paul Freed, who founded Trans World Radio in Morocco in 1954 were the most successful of the religious broadcasting entrepreneurs.

Bowman's objective, from the beginning, was to reach Chinese with the Gospel message. With voluntary contributions, FEBC soon had transmitters spread across several Far East islands beamed toward China. Within a few years, FEBC was broadcasting in 36 languages and dialects to both mainland China and parts of Asia. Bowman has retained a strong interest in Asia, and in reaching persons in nations where missionary activity is prohibited, but his operations have become global. In 1987, FEBC operated internationally 32 international broadcasting stations with transmitters in five nations. They had a broadcast schedule of 300 program hours daily in over 100 languages and dialects. Their 1987 operations budget was \$10.9 million.

Freed used a Nazi propaganda transmitter base in Tangier, Morocco to launch Trans World Radio's global ministry. From this strategic location TWR could reach people in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and behind the Iron Curtain. In 1956, just two years after its launch date, TWR was broadcasting in 20 languages and reaching 40 nations via two 10,000-watt transmitters. In 1987 TWR had transmitters in seven locations with a total transmission power of 4.4 million watts. Programs were broadcast in more than 75 languages. TWR has a staff of 700 and in 1987 their operations budget was \$18 million.

HCJB has retained its location in the Andes mountains as its headquarters and focal point for transnational broadcast operations. In addition, they have developed a multi-media presence in Ecuador which includes AM/FM radio

and television. Over the years HCJB has expanded their operations so that by 1985 they had personnel in 22 countries. This staff seeks to develop programming that is appropriate and sensitive to the diverse cultural regions where they broadcast. In addition to covering South and Central America and the Caribbean, their signals are beamed into the South Pacific and, in the evenings, to Eastern Europe. Their total operating budget for 1987 was \$9.7 million, representing a growth of 13.8 percent over 1986.

International electronic evangeliza-

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tion has three significant foci or targets. The first thrust of religious broadcasting activity is aimed at what I would call forbidden territories. This includes the Communist nations of Eastern Europe, the USSR, and China and virtually all of the 40 nations in which the majority of the population is Muslim. A considerable proportion of the resources of international broadcasting has been expended in developing transnational radio signals which can reach those peoples of the earth whose governments do not permit religious broadcasting, or in the case of Islamic nations, prohibit Christian broadcasting.

A second focus of broadcasting activity has been aimed at non-Christian nations of the Third World. The non-Muslim nations of Africa, especially nations with large proportions of tribal religious traditions have long been a favorite target of broadcasters and missionaries. In the Far East, broadcasting can claim some role in the rapid growth of Christianity in Korea and is likely to play an increasing role in the immediate future.

The third target involves evangelical missionaries and broadcasters engaging in head on competition with Roman Catholicism. This effort is substantially, although not exclusively, located in Central American and South America.

In Brazil and throughout Central America Pentecostals have experienced very significant growth. Broadcasting seems to have played an important role in this growth.

The combined efforts of transnational religious broadcasters is quite impressive. Robert Fortner, an authority on international broadcasting estimates that the three major transnational broadcasters alone produce approximately 20,000 hours of programming each week in over 125 languages. This makes them "the largest single international radio users, broadcasting more hours per week in more languages than any other transnational service," according to Fortner (1988:1). The 1983 *Annual Report and Handbook* of the BBC reported that the total external broadcasting services from the ten largest national exporters was 9,459 hours (in Head, 1985:343). If Fortner's figures are reliable, the religious broadcasters far exceed all other transnational broadcast-

ers.<sup>9</sup> Even if these figures represent a substantial overestimation of broadcast hours, it is still evident that we are looking at a significant world-wide presence.

The sheer volume of broadcasting tells us nothing about the size of the audiences they are reaching or their effectiveness in communicating their messages to their audiences. Audience research is not a highly developed science, but existing research suggests that transnational broadcasters typically do not draw large audiences. Still, one can reasonably conclude that if transnational broadcasting were totally ineffective some countries, particularly the Soviet Union, would not spend large sums of money to jam the signals.

Compared to other major transnational broadcasters like the BBC, Radio Moscow and the Voice of America, existing audience research suggests that the religious broadcasters do not fare particularly well. The religious broadcasters, however, are skeptical of audience studies and prefer to rely on their mail as an indirect indicator of audience penetration. No broadcaster systematically publishes figures on mail volume, and the wide range of figures which periodically appear in their publications gives cause to question the accuracy of at least some the numbers reported.

One major broadcaster recently published a brochure in which they claimed to have reached a milestone of 500,000 letters in 1978, but nowhere in their literature could I find an update for total mail volume. Perhaps a more reliable figure comes from a broadcaster claiming the receipt of 91,000 letters in 1988 from 127 countries (Goerzen, 1989:14). More frequently, one finds figures for specific programs.

An interesting datum was recently reported by the Far East Broadcasting Company. Transmitting to all 11 time zones in the Soviet Union, FEBC claims that *glasnost* has had a dramatic impact on their mail from the USSR. Prior to *glasnost*, FEBC was receiving approximately a dozen letters a month. This meager response began to change significantly in 1988 and, by March 1989, the mail room received 1,623 from the USSR (Haage, 1989:10).

Just as it is difficult to assess the accuracy of the claims about mail volume, we have no way of estimating what mail volume might indicate in terms of audience size. It does seem reasonable, however, to assume that the proportion of listeners who write has to be a very small ratio of the total listening audience.

All of this leaves us with the unsatisfactory, but unavoidable conclusion that we don't really know what kind of impact the transnational religious broadcasters are having. There is undeniably a global presence. Those who are engaging in this broadcast activity are receiving sufficient positive reinforcement to encourage them not only to continue, but to expand their broadcasting activities. But just how much collective impact they are having is unknown and probably unknowable by measures that would satisfy the criteria of social science inquiry.

My own assessment is that they are likely having a greater impact than their critics would acknowledge, but they are probably significantly less effective than their own propaganda claims.

I began this inquiry by noting that rhetorical zeal for reaching all the world with the Gospel before the Second Coming of Christ has undergirded evangelical interest in broadcasting from the beginning of radio. Even casual listening to American broadcasters will reveal that this rhetoric continues unabated today. But if we apply the standard of re-

source allocation, it quickly becomes evident that the rhetoric is not matched with resources.

In 1987 the three giant international religious broadcasters had a combined budget of \$38.6 million. By comparison, the three largest U.S. television broadcasters had combined budgets in excess of \$400 million. The total budget for domestic radio and television broadcasting in the U.S. most certainly exceeded one billion dollars in 1987. It is very doubtful that the total U.S. sponsored transnational broadcasting reached one-tenth of that sum.

Most of the American televangelists have some involvement in international broadcasting, but their actual outlays for transnational broadcasting tends to be small. The Christian Broadcasting Network, which probably has the most extensive engagement in foreign broadcasting, spent \$8.1 million (4.6 percent) of its 1987 budget for this purpose.<sup>10</sup> Compared to U.S. expenditures for religious broadcasting, thus, the international effort is meager. If the effectiveness of international religious broadcasting to date is unclear, I think it quite likely that both the volume and effectiveness of this activity will increase significantly for the balance of this century and well into the next. It is unlikely that any nation will ever experience the sheer volume of religious broadcasting that we have in the U.S. At the same time, it seems quite probable that in many countries the character of culture and politics will, in some measure, be shaped by religious broadcasting. This will not happen merely by an increased volume of broadcasting, but by significant enhancement and sophistication in the delivery and content of the broadcasters' messages.

I would cite two important reasons to expect a significant thrust in global broadcasting activities during the final decade of the 20th century. First, there has been a veritable explosion of enthusiasm for reaching the whole world with the Gospel by the year 2000. David Barrett, editor of the celebrated *World Christian Encyclopedia*, has identified 230 separate plans for evangelizing the world by 2000! Most of these evangelism efforts involve the utilization of broadcasting and/or other instruments of electronic communication, e.g., films, video cassettes and audio cassettes. Furthermore, there is evidence to indi-

cate that many of these programs are cooperating with other efforts, sharing resources, avoiding duplicated efforts, etc. Some of the major transnational broadcasters have entered formal agreements in order to try and maximize their impact (Frazee, 1989:12).

A second factor which bodes for increasing efforts in international broadcasting is the tremendous advances in broadcasting technology over the past couple of decades. Increasingly sophisticated delivery systems, including direct broadcast satellites which have sufficient power to be received by small antennas, reduce the cost of getting messages almost anywhere. And the rapidly declining cost of audio and video cassette opens a world of programming opportunities.

An attempt to develop a detailed analysis of how the emerging technologies will be adapted to the interests of international religious broadcasters would be premature at this point. Nor can we precisely specify how the broadcasters will become more sophisticated in the delivery of their messages. But some general perimeters are evident. In considerable measure, these perimeters are discernible from the lessons learned by U.S. broadcasters.

The most important lesson of American radio and television is that broadcasters are learning how to discern their audiences and deliver a message to them. The big news in radio broadcasting during the past decade-and-a-half has been the recognition of market segmentation. Taking advantage of both the FM and the AM bands, highly segmented broadcasting has emerged to meet the needs of many highly diverse interest groups.

The explosion of community Christian radio stations reflects a recognition of and a taking advantage of this market segmentation. The local community station provides an outlet for local religious news and broadcasts as well as an expansion of opportunities for syndicated programming.

Religious television broadcasters too have come to recognize the need to target broadcasts to their natural constituencies. This was a lesson that didn't come easy. From the advent of videotape and the subsequent rapid expansion of program syndication, until the mid-1980s, American televangelists operated on the principle that "more is

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better." The major broadcasters got their programs in virtually every market in the country and, in the major markets, they bought multiple time slots. Gradually they came to recognize that audience size and revenues were not simply a function of saturation, but that time slots were very important and that some markets were much better than others.

During the 1970s, the emergence of satellites provided a technology for a much more efficient delivery system. Pat Robertson, recognizing this, created the Christian Broadcasting System. He was followed by Jim Bakker (PTL Inspirational Network) and Paul Crouch (Trinity Broadcasting System). During the 1980s, the rapid expansion of cable systems in the U.S. provided the means for receiving religious broadcasts without the high costs of buying time for syndicated telecasts in every market. Systematic research conducted by CBN revealed that satellite to cable was a much more economical and efficient delivery system.<sup>11</sup>

From the beginning, the transnational religious broadcasters have had an abiding commitment to reaching those who have not heard the Gospel message. Some critics would say that they have had an obsession with reaching those in the forbidden zones, e.g., those in Communist and Muslim nations. With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that a good bit of their broadcasting was based on the assumption that if they could penetrate into zones where missionaries could not preach, that God would miraculously use their culturally naive words to reach the hearts of those who had no background for comprehending the Christian message. And like their counterparts in the U.S., they operated on the assumption that more is better. They have built more powerful transmitters, broadcast more hours, and translated into an ever greater number of languages on the assumption that all of these efforts would reap dividends of saved souls according to a formula that only God almighty understood.

It is unlikely that the major transnationals are going to significantly abandon these assumptions or their preoccupation with reaching the multitudes in Communist and Muslim nations. But what we can expect, as a new genera-

tion of leadership takes over these organizations and new organizations become significant players, is a more sophisticated and subtle approach. We can expect to see programming that meets specific cultural needs of the audiences they are seeking to reach. And,

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**The new generation of international religious broadcasters will be much more adept at asking hard nosed market questions. What is the evidence that we are reaching the audiences we want to reach? How many are we reaching? Are we effectively communicating? What is the evidence of results?**

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in direct proportion to their ability to meet indigenous needs, they will have an opportunity to introduce Gospel messages. And they will learn to do so in ways that are sensitive to the cultural traditions of their specific audiences.<sup>12</sup>

The new generation of international religious broadcasters will be much more adept at asking hard nosed market questions. What is the evidence that we are reaching the audiences we want to reach? How many are we reaching? Are we effectively communicating? What is the evidence of results?

This new pragmatism will lead broadcasters to invest their resources where they can see that they are getting results. As the pragmatists consider the results of their efforts, they will eschew spending money to get their programs on the high powered transmitters of TWR, HCJB and FEBC. Emphasis, rather, will be on segmenting markets where they can more readily assess the impact of their work. This will likely lead to an emphasis on broadcasting in countries that are open to missionaries. The success of pentecostals in Central America is a good illustration of how missionaries and broadcasters have worked together with indigenous Christians with considerable success (Poloma, 1986; Smith, 1988).

Three broad strategies for broadcast evangelism can be identified. The first is the *transnational* strategy. A significant proportion of the international effort to date can be so characterized. American broadcasters, working in varying degrees with indigenous folk, have

sought to beam broadcasts into nations without the authorization of local officials.

A second strategy is to create *syndicated programming* which is adapted for broadcasting within specific nations. This may involve (1) merely translating programs into local languages, (2) adapting programming, or (3) creating programming for specific nations and cultures.

All three of these methods of syndication have been used with some effectiveness in Central America (Smith, 1988). In a four nation survey conducted in Central America before the revelation of Jimmy Swaggart's involvement with a prostitute in New Orleans, Dennis Smith found that Swaggart had a phenomenal name recognition of 73 percent. Among non-Catholics, the recognition was 84 percent (Smith, 1988:77). Several other radio and television evangelists had name recognitions above the 50 percent level, testifying to the power of broadcasting to capture public consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

In a pragmatic marketplace, success will attract more vendors. Pentecostals have clearly had some success in many countries throughout Central and South America. Hence, others are certain to follow. The fact that a single language opens most of the continent will be another incentive attracting more broadcasters.

The third strategy for developing international impact is to *work with indigenous leadership*. Successful indigenous evangelists, wherever they are located, can be expected to try and expand their ministries by radio and/or television. The new pragmatists will recognize the value of providing technical and financial support.

Over the next decade, the rush to evangelize the world by the year 2000 is likely to lead some of the newcomers to international broadcasting to repeat the worst mistakes that were earlier made by the now maturing transnational broadcasters. Zealotry and cultural insensitivity will make Christian broadcasters very unpopular in some regions where broadcasting and missionary activity is today at least tolerated. But there will also be successes.

The religious broadcasters of the ear-

ly 21st century will learn from both the excesses and the successes of the late 20th century.

Beyond the borders of the United States, there are two very significant developments emerging that have relevance for global religious broadcasting. The first is occurring in Western Europe and other democratic nations; the second is a Third World phenomenon.

If the BBC has long represented a paragon of responsible and culturally enlightened broadcasting, admired and emulated by other nations of the free world, it has also had a stultifying impact on popular culture. It has now been three decades since pirate stations began broadcasting from the North Sea. Today, most informed persons would agree that the pirates did much to stimulate the broadening of the range of broadcasting options in Europe (Head, 1985: 112-16). Most of Europe has taken steps toward expanding broadcasting opportunities in a manner that has some similarity to the American commercial model.

The second development in broadcasting can be succinctly characterized as the battle over the New World Information Order (NWIO) principle. NWIO is a declaration of communications sovereignty by Third World nations against the developed nations. The declaration maintains that the *free flow doctrine* of communication, which is embraced by the United Nations Declaration of Freedom of Information in 1946, is not really free flow, but a one-way stream of cultural indoctrination.

Military colonialism, according to the NWIO advocates, has been replaced by a neocolonialism in which communication flow is the foundation for dominance economic and cultural dominance (Head, 1985: 378-394). Much of the West, but especially the United States, sees the case as overstated and, further, that it results in an unholy alliance between Third World countries and totalitarian regimes.

Both of these developments have implications for the future of international evangelical broadcasting. Some scholars feel that the opening up of commercial broadcasting options in Europe will, sooner or later, result in the transfer of the already limited religious broadcasting to the commercial stations. There under the laws of the free market, religious broadcasting will die for lack of in-

terest. This analysis could be correct insofar as it goes, but it ignores the fact that evangelicals were among the major advertisers on the pirate stations (Head, 1985:114; Harris, 1970: 55).

There are two potential lessons here. First, if religious broadcasting were to effectively disappear from Europe, it could well invite a return of the pirates. This time the pirates would be evangelicals committed to the proposition that God's law and purposes stand above the laws of men. Assuming the broadcast pirates were Americans, it could create international diplomatic rifts. But potentially more important, the fact that the broadcasting had been declared illegal could help stimulate the development of an evangelical movement in Europe.

The second implication emerges in the context of the growing sophistication and increasing inexpensive broadcast technologies. In a sense, transnational broadcasting is a form of pirate broadcasting. At least it is so viewed by nations that do not welcome the invaders. Domestic pirating is usually associated with revolutionary activity, such as Fidel Castro's illegal broadcasts from the mountains in western Cuba. But, in fact, domestic pirating is more common than is generally recognized. It occurs in many forms including what might be called "electronic graffiti" (Head, 1985: 112). The potential for domestic pirating is much greater than anything we have seen to date.

It seems quite unlikely that any nation could stop the flow of audio and video cassettes across its borders. Further, Direct-Broadcast Satellites are popping up all over the world. In short, the prospects of keeping materials out of a country are virtually impossible. And light weight mobile equipment could be very difficult to track. While it is no doubt far-fetched to predict that the Third World will become infested with evangelical broadcast pirates, it is not unreasonable to imagine that there will be some instances. And, further, it is possible that these *banditos* could have a significant political impact in some regions if not entire countries.

The more probable route for evangelical broadcasters to make significant inroads in the Third World is by holding out attractive contracts to the leaders of resource poor nations. The leadership of the Third World is not

uniformly committed to the NWIO philosophy. But even some who are find themselves, nevertheless, short of both money and technological know-how to develop broadcasting capabilities.

Some evangelical broadcasters will be in a position to offer the broadcasting equipment along with the manpower to install and run both radio and television stations in exchange for the right to produce some limited amount of religious broadcasting. And some Third World leaders are likely to find the exchange sufficiently attractive that they will discount the prospect of the evangelicals making any significant proselytizing inroads in their country. And as HCJB has done with the government of Ecuador, the broadcasters may be willing to make agreements to avoid broadcasting that would be critical of the government. Further, Third World nation leaders will likely assume that they can evict broadcasters if they become troublesome.

### Conclusion

From the very beginning of radio transmission, evangelicals have viewed broadcasting as having a unique place in their eschatology. The transmission of the human voice, and then visual images, is a special gift which God has provided to permit the completion of the Great Commandment to preach the Gospel to all the world.

During the 20th century, this theology has interfaced with ever expanding broadcast technologies in a free market economy to produce a religious broadcasting empire that is quite unlike anything else in the world. In this paper I have attempted to explain how this has happened as a requisite to examine the potential for religious global conquest via the airwaves.

Religious broadcasters already represent the largest single component of transnational broadcasting. While there is reason to question how effective they have been, I have tried to indicate how they might well become more effective in the future. I hope I have presented sufficient evidence and reasoned speculation to encourage others to join in developing a better understanding of the evangelical Christians efforts to utilize the airwaves to spread the Gospel.

Finally, but not parenthetically, future inquiry should also explore the role of broadcasting in both the growth of Is-



lam and its radicalization in some sectors. Broadcast content in Muslim countries is strongly influenced by the Islamic faith. Saudi Arabia has developed a powerful transnational broadcast capability. The potential for Muslims to use the airwaves to proselytize may be equal or even greater than the evangelical Christians.

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## Notes

1. It is highly significant to note that religious broadcasting in the United States is dominated by those who are committed to a premillennial theology. The postmillennial traditions, principally liberal Protestantism, have simply not found broadcasting to be so central to their mission. Their concern, to be theologically consistent, is to be about the business of building of God's kingdom on earth in advance of Christ's return. While radio and television can be useful for this purpose, they must be used with care and are not necessarily essential. At the very least, broadcasting does not have as high a priority.

2. See, for example, Eric Barnouw's highly respected three volume history of broadcasting in the United States (1966; 1968; 1970).

3. Whether Vatican Radio was the first international radio station boils down to a matter of semantics. In 1927 Holland commenced broadcasting beamed at Dutch citizens beyond their borders. Germany in 1929 and France in 1931 followed suit. In none of these instances is the intent international but, rather, to reach citizens or expatriates abroad (Browne, 1982:48-9). In 1974 Radio Moscow claimed first use of radio for the transmission of "foreign" languages (1923) and propaganda in a dispute with Romania (1926). These claims may or may not be legitimate but, if legitimate, the transmissions appear to have been short-lived (Browne, 1982: 57). Vatican Radio, thus, appears to be the first transnational network.

4. Adolf Hitler's skills in utilizing radio to arouse public emotion is well known. His rise to power, however, involved little use of radio. Regular radio broadcasting began in the German Reich in late 1923, but the broadcasting format was substantially entertainment. News and public affairs broadcasting was limited and tightly controlled (Hoffman-Riem, 1988: 91). Hence, it was not until after the National Socialist ceased power in 1933 that Hitler was able to begin using radio as an instru-

ment for movement propaganda.

5. The audience estimate of 45 million appears fairly consistently in a number of resources. I have not been able, however, to locate a primary source or an explanation of how this estimate was reached. This estimate, like the claims of television broadcasters before 1980, is likely an exaggerated figure. The total population of the U.S. in 1930 was 123 million and there were approximately 75 million adults. To have achieved an audience of 45 million would have constituted approximately 36 percent of the total U.S. population. While it is generally believed that radio audiences were higher in the early years of broadcasting, it seems unlikely that Coughlin would have achieved such a large following. Still, there can be no doubt regarding his extraordinary popularity.

6. There are many explanations for why Coughlin did not succeed in transforming his radio audience into a significant social or political movement. Part of the reason, at least, rests with the fact that Coughlin's positions were erratic and inconsistent, and he lacked specific programs to address the problems he identified. Coughlin's biographer Charles Tull described the priest as "a frustrated, disgruntled demagogue lashing out at the world around him" (1965: 246). Continued Tull, "to catalogue him left, right, or center is impossible; the man is simply too erratic to be so neatly classified as a particular species of political animal" (1965: 246).

7. In the fall of 1988 an interfaith coalition of "mainline" churches launched a cable TV network called VISN (Vision Interfaith Satellite Network). The idea for the network was claimed to be in the planning stages for several years. However, the collapse of PTL provided momentum for the effort when Tele-Communications, Inc., one of the larger cable TV companies in the U.S. and a carrier of PTL, offered to loan an estimated \$5 million for start-up costs (Associated Press, 1988). By the summer of 1989 VISN was broadcasting 18 hours a day with at least 22 religious bodies cooperating. At this writing, the organization continues to face serious financial difficulties. The leadership is publicly optimistic, but the prospects of this network getting through the initial period of high start-up costs are difficult, at best.

8. From the onset, Vatican Radio was viewed as an instrument for the Pope to communicate with Catholics. It has never been conceived as an instrument for change in the Church or reaching out to communicate with non-Catholics. Over the years there has been little content that reflected the ongoing ferment in the Roman Catholic Church. It transmits the official church position, but little news or discussion of the vital debates occurring in the church. Donald Browne wrote recently that "[m]ost listeners would find to this day that much of the station's programming is uninteresting and/or incomprehensible to any but theologians" (1982: 307).

9. Fortner does not detail how he derives this figure. Resources I have from these three broadcasters report a total number of broadcast hours which exceeds the 20,000 hours per week Fortner reports. Hence, he is not merely relying on the broadcasters figures.

10. Before the scandals and subsequent financial crisis, the Jimmy Swaggart Ministries appears to have been expending considerable resources for international broadcasting. Some ministries clearly have used international broadcasting as a come-on to encourage donations. Jim Bakker (PTL) repeated made claims of significant international broadcasting projects in order to raise funds. Charles Shepard (1989) documents that these claims were substantially a sham. When Bakker did make good on promises to assist others with international broadcasting, it was usually because he had his back to the wall and was forced to make good on public promises.

11. CBN initially had a broadcast schedule consisting exclusively of religious programming. PTL and TBN followed with the same format and, indeed, carried many of the same programs. CBN then shifted its broadcast format to family oriented programming, limiting religious broadcasts to its flagship program, "The 700 Club," and a few additional hours of religious broadcasting. Advertising time is now sold on the non-religious programs and these revenues provide significant resources for other CBN activities, including CBN University. Heritage USA and PTL Inspirational Network declared bankruptcy in 1987 and in 1989 it was purchased by a Canadian businessman.

As of this writing, the number of cable systems carrying PTL Inspirational Network has shrunken dramatically and it is unlikely that the network will survive. Largely unnoticed by the American press, Paul Crouch has quietly developed TBN into a network of considerable strength. In addition to being carried over many cable systems, TBN owns over 100 television stations, including 12 full-power UHF stations. In early 1989, the net worth of TBN was estimated at \$500 million (Pinsky, 1989). Crouch, thus, has become the major broadcaster of religious programming in the U.S. In addition, there are a number of smaller religious broadcasting networks. And, most of the major broadcasters are still using syndication for delivery. Syndicated broadcasting will continue into the indefinite future, but it seems clear that satellite transmission to cable systems is clearly the most efficient method to reach the religious marketplace.

12. Critics of transnational evangelical broadcasters site many examples of cultural insensitivity. Fortner (1988), for example, relays a story which illustrates how the Gospel message may be completely misunderstood. Among the Zanaki of the Lake Victoria region, it is common practice for a thief to knock on the door of the hut they aspire to burglarize. If they hear no noise they proceed with their mission, but if they can detect movement inside the hut, they make a quick exit. In contrast, an honest man will call out the name of the person he wants to see. An insensitive missionary or broadcaster who quoted Christ "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Rev 3:20), would be telling his Zanaki audience that Christ is a thief (Fortner, 1988: 9-10).

13. Smith (1988) does not provide sufficient methodological detail to have confidence in the statistical representativeness of his sample in the four countries surveyed (Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador). Still, it seems clear that Smith, who is not very sympathetic to the broadcasters, was not intentionally sampling so as to exaggerate the broadcasters impact. ■

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