



RESEARCH TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

The Electronic Church

In the last twenty or thirty years the fundamentalist, evangelical tradition has gained a new momentum not only in the United States, where it has found its more characteristic form, but in Western Europe and in other parts of the world. One of the most dramatic indicators of the increasing significance of fundamentalists is the dominant presence of evangelical preachers in the public mass media and the striking adaptation of the revivalist format to the television medium. What has been considered a minority tradition in Christianity, restricted to regional "Bible Belts" or to marginal lower-status groups with their "Store-Front" churches, has come to centre stage due, in no small part, to the image projected in the mass media.

There is now increasing discussion of the implications of the new centrality of evangelical fundamentalism not only for the general religious culture of Christianity, but also for the national culture of countries where Christianity is a significant factor in national life. Virginia Stem Owens in *The Total Image*, Jeffrey Hadden and Charles Swann in *Prime Time Preachers*, and authors of many other books and articles are concerned with the social and cultural influence of the evangelicals and, specifically, the influence of their peculiar use of the television medium.

The presupposition is that a religion is not just a set of personal beliefs and practices but a broader world view and ethos. Christianity has always been composed of many different cultural traditions tracing themselves back to charismatic founders of religious movements or to regional cultural differences. When one tradition becomes more central to the communications network of Christianity, it tends to influence in some way all other traditions. The rise of the charismatic renewal movement in Roman Catholicism and in other more institutionalised, liturgical churches is but one example. The increasing centrality of a particular tradition also means that it will interact more directly with national political, economic and socio-cultural activities, drawing many values from the national culture and, in turn, reinforcing these trends. In the U.S. the New Right, represented in the political forces which brought the Reagan government to power, saw the increasing importance of the fundamentalist religious groups and skillfully brought them into the New Right coalition as part of a mass popular base. And, as a particular form of Christianity becomes more imbedded in a national culture, the national culture has a further feedback into the general religious world view.

This issue of Research Trends in Religious Communication begins a review of the current research on the cultural influence of the electronic church and the evangelical fundamentalist tradition out of which the electronic church has emerged. We start with a selection from Peter Horsfield's recent comprehensive survey of research in the U.S. on religious broadcasting. Horsfield's review of the "facts" and the major issues provides a valuable basis for the further commentaries. In the Religious Communication section of the first number of 1982 we will continue with a review of studies by Virginia Stem Owens, Hadden and Swann, Michael Real and others.

Are Evangelical Broadcasters Shaping American Culture?

Peter Horsfield. *Christian Television Broadcasting: An Analysis of the Debate on Current Theological Issues in Relation to the Relevant Empirical Research*. Unpublished Dissertation. Boston University Graduate School, 1982.

A central point in Horsfield's analysis is that in 1979 91.6% of the top twelve religious programmes in America, accounting for around half of all national airings of religious programmes, were produced by independent or denominational Protestant evangelical or fundamentalist bodies. The Roman Catholic Church and the National Council of Churches of Christ, whose constituency alone represents more than 70% of the U.S. church population, in 1979

had their particular tradition represented in only one major religious programme.

Horsfield's comprehensive analysis of the existing research data shows that many of the claims made by evangelical broadcasters regarding audience figures and religious influence are exaggerated. However, there is evidence that the dominance of one religious tradition in the media may be contributing to significant shifts not

only in American religious values and practices but also to broader changes in American culture.

Who Views Religious Television

Although national surveys vary in their estimates, Horsfield concludes that between 19 million and 36 million adults (24% of the American population) watch at least *one hour* of religious programmes *each week*. A further percentage occasionally watches a religious programme, and many more have seen a religious programme at some time, notably prime-time specials such as those of Oral Roberts.

In this audience, there are roughly twice as many women as men (especially for the evangelical programmes), and, among both men and women, roughly two-thirds are 50 years or older. This follows a general trend in TV viewing: older people, especially older women, tend to spend more time watching TV, and older people tend to watch more TV with a serious content. An exception in the overall trend is the one Roman Catholic programme listed among the top ten in terms of audience size, *Insight*, which has 22.5% of its audience in the under-18 sector, 40.7% in the 19-44 sector and a higher proportion of men in the adult population (44.1% female and 33.1 male). The *Insight* programme is also the only programme which uses "sustaining time" (public-service time granted by the stations).

Viewing of religious programmes, especially the more traditional evangelical "revivalist" programmes, tends to decrease with higher education and income levels. Sectors with more education tend to be attracted by novel, informative religious programmes, but this again follows the trend for general TV viewing.

The single important factors drawing people to religious TV is degree of interest in religion and church affiliation, with Protestants watching more than Roman Catholics or Jews. However, church membership and regular attendance are not, in themselves, as good predictors as frequent devotional practices such as regular reading of the Bible or other devotional reading. Viewing is especially high among the more fundamentalistic, pietist Protestant groups and is highest among those who say they have had a conversion experience. The Princeton Study of Evangelical Christianity in 1978 found that only major prime-time programmes — Oral Roberts and Billy Graham — and locally-produced religious programming were able to draw a significant percentage of the general public outside of the core group of evangelical Christians.

There is also evidence that the audience growth for the major evangelical programmes in America peaked about 1977 and has since leveled off or has declined, probably because the potential audience has now been saturated.

Are They Evangelising the Unchurched?

Evangelical and other religious broadcasters maintain that one of their primary objectives is to reach and convert the unchurched and non-Christians. However, the 1978 Princeton survey found that only 28% of the unchurched in America say that they have heard or watched a religious radio or television programme within the last 30 days. In another Princeton survey in 1978, 18% of those who watch religious television programmes claimed not to attend church at all, and another 18% claimed that they attend church less than once a month. Many of the unchurched or non-Christians who view religious programmes are likely to be heavy TV users who watch more of all sorts of TV. They may also include people who have stronger religious interests but are a "non-joining" type of person who feels that one can be a good Christian without attending a church or people who find it difficult to attend church because of age or infirmity.

Generally, the television medium and Christian programmes in particular (at least as these are now presented) have a limited capacity to reach the groups that are furthest from religion: adolescents and young men, the better educated, the physically active and those

Peter Horsfield

In his comprehensive study of religious broadcasting, Peter Horsfield has examined virtually every piece of research carried out on this subject in the U.S. from 1950 to 1980. So far, this appears to be the most exhaustive survey of what we know about the use and influence of religious television and, specifically, the evangelical "electronic church". Horsfield brings to this study the insight from his experience as a Methodist minister and from experience in media work in his native Australia (1052 Waterworks Road, The Gap, Q 4061, Australia).

Horsfield's study is to be published in mid-1981 by Longman of New York under the title: *Religious Television in America: Its Influence and Future*. We are happy to announce that this book will be part of the series, "Communication and Human Values" sponsored by the Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture in association with the World Association of Christian Communication (WACC). By special agreement with Longman, this book will be available at a special discount price.

actively involved in self-enriching activities. There is little evidence of any wholesale and profound attitudinal change through religious radio or television. The impression given of large numbers of conversions or of bringing many people back to the church exaggerates the reality.

Those who do respond are generally people who have always considered more active religious practice as a viable option in life. For the unchurched, one of the most important functions of religious broadcasting may be keeping active involvement open as an attractive option to be acted upon when there is the right kind of personal invitation or other direct personal contact.

For the great majority of steady users of religious programmes, the function is not conversion but a source of inspiration, companionship and counselling for active Christians, especially among those of the fundamentalist, evangelical tradition. It is an alternative for "spiritual reading" among those who are heavy TV users. Horsfield observes, however, that, with the present inspirational formats, there is little evidence of content directed particularly toward ethical and theological behaviour in its Christian viewers. The present programming may be emotionally reassuring, but it does not explore or challenge ideas of what it means to be a Christian in today's world.

Do Broadcasts Increase Local Church Attendance?

Evangelical broadcasters claim that they support or complement the work of local churches by increasing levels of motivation and attendance and by helping people in spiritual problems not attended to by local pastors.

In general, however, there is little evidence that Christian programmes increase the membership of the church by winning new members. If renewed practice is associated with media campaigns, the key factor is the follow-up of personal contacts.

The counseling service provided by many evangelical programmes through computerised letter correspondence and telephone call-in may in some cases be helpful. But research suggests that much of this is at best superficial "reassurance" and, at worst, may lead the lonely and alienated away from the direct interpersonal support from friends, pastors or more competent counselors.

Horsfield concludes that the primary contribution of Christian programming may not be specific effects such as conversion or increased church attendance, but in creating awareness of the Christian faith in general as a viable life option, in giving visibility to particular churches and expressions of the Christian faith over others and in providing members of particular Christian traditions

with support through recognition and cohesive exposure. Thus, the first significant influence is strengthening the belief system and internal dynamism of evangelical religious sectors. Secondly, among both evangelicals and in the general public, the dominance of one

kind of religious broadcasting cultivates a more positive attitude toward the fundamentalistic, evangelical religious traditions and builds an inclination toward the general cultural values and world view associated with that tradition.

The Electronic Church and the Development of American Religious Institutions

Horsfield highlights six aspects of evangelical broadcasting that interact with and reinforce developments in American religious culture.

1. Decline in the "Liberal", "Prophetic" Mainline Churches

The strength of the evangelical tradition in broadcasting is associated with a decreasing or stagnant membership in the mainline churches and a corresponding growth in the evangelical, fundamentalist groups. Most interpretations of this trend do not attribute this directly to the churches taking strong social positions (such as racial justice) antagonistic to conservative feelings, but to a shift in American culture away from more institutionalised patterns of personal values, especially among the young. This shift has hit those churches and denominations with membership among the more educated, individualistic, urban, affluent sectors and with a theology linked to the culture. The evangelical churches do not depend so much on recruitment among college youth and have a theological system which draws the elderly and more conservatively inclined from the mainline churches, especially from those churches with similar roots in a Calvinist, pietist tradition. At a time when many Americans are frightened or wearied by the rapid social changes of the 1960s and early 1970s, the fundamentalists offer theological continuity, distinctiveness and clarity in life style and morality, and the maintenance of a coherent belief system.

The presence of the evangelical tradition in the more visible mass media, especially the witness of prominent figures in public life, has placed before people tangible, understandable symbols of "the American way of life" that people can use to construct a meaningful picture of their world. The paid-time religious broadcasters have been able to involve their listeners in activities such as sending in contributions to keep the broadcast on the air and to continue the missionary, conversion work of the church so that there is a sense of momentum and accomplishment in the church.

2. Making Religion More Private, less Communitarian

Theologically, the evangelical broadcasters reaffirm the belief that one can find an authoritative basis for truth and guidance in life in the private reading of the Bible just at a time when institutional authority appears to be in disarray and the source of much skepticism. There is also an emphasis on personal conversion as the centre of religious experience and a highlighting of private, family morality as sufficient to ensure public order and justice. In an era when the social context and social norms appear to be confused, offering little guidance, fundamentalism offers a simple, flexible, private belief system.

The opportunity for approved religious activity in the privacy of the home before the TV set and through the mail reinforces a general American trend toward the individualism of religious experience in an increasingly differentiated, fluid society. Horsfield cites growing evidence that the electronic church encourages what is already becoming a strong belief among Americans: that one can be a "good Christian" without any involvement in a local Christian community or in an institutional church. Although many evangelists claim that they are supplementing the work of the local church and directing people toward local congregations, content analyses of 15 major programmes fails to record any mention of

the local church. Many TV evangelists record large numbers of conversions, but the evidence shows that few follow this up with more systematic instruction in the Bible or the Christian faith and fewer still are led to the ministering context of the Christian community.

General television viewing tends to reduce active Christian devotional practice, and there is some evidence that watching religious television may become a functional alternative to involvement with a local church, especially among those estranged from their church. The inadequate concept of evangelism on television runs the risk of creating the illusion that these programmes are a complete church in themselves. This can cultivate the peculiar "show-biz", "television" style of Christianity with its admittedly superficial response to personal problems and issues of morality. Casting religious television in the television images of success, wealth and self-gain at the expense of equal stress on the demands of obedience and service inherent in the Christian faith may satisfy individual aspirations but it does not serve as a basis for Christian community.

3. Socio-Political Philosophy

For various reasons the electronic church has shown in its message a marked preference for a laissez-faire, free enterprise, market system in political and economic spheres as well as in religious practice. The emphasis is on personal experience of conversion and individual morality; whatever problems might arise from the concentration of economic and political power can eventually be solved with the aggregate of individual good deeds. Indeed the Bible is used as a argument for the Christian's obedient acceptance of the appropriate authorities.

In the religious sphere nearly all of the prime-time preachers began as free lancers often with vague denominational ties and have fought their way to the top of religious prominence from humble beginnings. Evangelicals much prefer a free-enterprise system in broadcasting that is open to those with the money to buy time rather than public broadcasting systems that regulate according to social objectives of a public philosophy. In Europe, for example, the evangelical fundamentalists are fighting for private broadcasting systems supported by advertising as a means of gaining access to the mass media.

All this fits very well with the philosophy behind a private-enterprise system of television with the emphasis on the individualising of problems and issues and on taking the conservative interpretation of events in news, documentary and drama. While the mainline churches have questioned sharply the hard-sell ambience of the American model of television, the evangelicals have no qualms in adopting the same selling, advertising format for their presentation of Christianity. In their programmes the evangelicals have appealed to the symbols of success in a free-enterprise system with the way they dress, the invited guests and the promise that religion will help them get ahead in the world.

4. Attitudes Toward Technology

The evangelical tradition in America has long viewed the technology of the mass popular media in a utilitarian manner, simply a channel to announce Christ and increase conversions. Unlike more institutionalised churches, they are not concerned that

technology in itself might embody negative social values or come in an institutional package that will ultimately compromise the gospel message and corrupt the pattern of Christian life. For evangelicals, the morality of technology lies in the morality of the user and his purpose. Television is a tool to be used within the terms dictated by the tool.

The American pietist, revivalist tradition came into existence in the early 19th century at the same time as the mass-market, popular media such as the penny newspaper. From its inception the religious revival used every trick of the popular media. Thus, everything in the revivalist tradition fits neatly into that most mass-market of media, television. The charismatic preacher becomes the prime-time star. The emphasis on quick, dramatic conversion seeks the same type of effect as advertising. The popular gospel singing and the witnessing of prominent personalities easily takes on a variety and talk show format. The spectacular mass tent meetings move directly into the superbowl atmosphere.

This utilitarian attitude toward the media and the tradition of mass popular preaching has led to the quick adoption of computer technology and mass mailings to create a quasi-personal audience loyalty and audience financial support. Like most television, the emphasis is on what looks good, what will catch fleeting attention, what is consonant with continuing financial support and what will get the programme on more stations and hold them there.

This attitude grows out of and reinforces a broader value: the new technology is automatically a God-given gift and that technology, not human planning, sets the pace for our social institutions.

5. Conflicting Concepts of Mission

Evangelical, fundamentalist theology sees the central thrust of Christianity as external preaching of the gospel to non-Christians and the unchurched. This is perceived as competitive struggle between God and the devil for the soul — “winning souls for Christ”. Participation in this competitive struggle is essential to Christian discipleship and is desirable even between Christian groups because it acts as stimulus to better performance. Every minister, every member is judged in terms of success in gaining conversions and promoting the numerical growth of Christianity. This attitude of competition along with the rigid conservatism of fundamentalism has made any kind of ecumenical cooperation with these groups difficult, especially in the area of broadcasting.

Mainline denominations have tended to interpret mission less as competition and more as internal nurture, development of Christian community, cooperation and as action for changing the structural social conditions that make Christian life possible. The free-lance competitive preacher, a virtuoso performer in his own right, is not encouraged. The more institutionalised churches do not easily generate stars for television as does the revivalist tradition.

The competitive spirit of evangelicals fits easily into a society centred on mass-marketing and reinforces the values of a competitive, upwardly mobile, entrepreneurial culture.

6. Influence on Public Broadcast Policy

In the early stages of American broadcasting, the major networks wished to avoid having to decide between competing evangelical preachers whose sensationalist revival style was often considered unacceptable to the religious tastes of the majority of Americans. Instead, the network chose to provide time for religious programming through arrangements with authoritative organisations of the three major faiths, Protestants, Roman Catholics and Jews. This coincided with and supported a general policy embodied in the 1934 U.S. broadcast legislation which required broadcasting stations to provide sustaining time as a public service, and religious programmes were considered not “private enterprise” but a service to the general public cultural needs.

The free-lance revivalist preachers thus lost access to the major

networks, and for more than 40 years they fought this arrangement, arguing that anyone who could pay for the time should have access.

As the advertising, profit ethos increasingly pervaded American broadcasting, the broadcasters were attracted to the possibility of turning the “Sunday-morning ghetto” to an economic advantage by selling time to the revivalists, and they pressured the Federal Communications Commission to change the sustaining-time rule. The 1960 decision of the FCC that stations could meet their obligations to provide public-interest broadcasts by accepting paid-time programmes opened the doors to the evangelicals who were already perfecting their techniques of public fund-raising through the media to support their broadcasts.

In effect, this gives the television industry the power to decide on the evolution of a major area of religious values. Never before have the churches been so heavily dependent on commercial interests for the development of their mission. The conservative broadcasters have abetted and cooperated with this questionable tendency by acquiescing to the interests of the broadcast industry.

Can Religious Television Be “Saved”

Virginia Stem Owens in her book, *The Total Image*, argues that religious broadcasters, whether evangelical or liberal, cannot avoid collusion with the broadcast industry if they wish to go on the air at all. This acquiescing to the broadcast industry is corrupting the Christian gospel message to its core, not just in religious television, but in many other aspects of Christian liturgy, theology and practice. It is also threatening the existence of the local Christian community which is the only real basis for Christian spiritual growth. Like Malcolm Muggeridge in his book, *Christ and the Media*, she suggests that the churches avoid television entirely.

Peter Horsfield, however, maintains hope that Christian use of television can have advantages for the church in extending its mission: 1) it gives greater public expression to the Christian faith as a viable life option; 2) it provides viewers with a range of resources, models and information that would otherwise not be available to them; 3) it provides a stimulus for faith and opens up questions of meaning and value, thereby setting the stage for further personal contacts; and 4) it provides an opportunity for communicating Christian concern to sectors of the public not ordinarily reached by this message.

But Horsfield thinks that these advantages can be realised in their fullest potential only if a number of critically important changes are made in Christian television broadcasting as it exists in America and other countries at present:

1. The Christian broadcasters must recognise the limits of the medium and the institutional structure of the broadcasting industry and find ways of facing these limitations.
2. Christian broadcasting must restore its service function to the church and integrate itself with the pastoral planning of the local church.
3. There should be greater interfaith discussion (perhaps through some form of ecumenical watch-dog agency) to ensure that the message of Christian television remains “congruous with established Christian thought”.
4. Christian television should exist as part of a broader ministry within the television field including media criticism; media education; media advocacy; promotion of equity and justice; and more systematic reflection and research.

Is it likely that any of these suggested changes will be implemented? Horsfield himself concludes that “there are powerful and vested interests (both within and outside Christian circles) which militate against such changes”. Many of the more mainline, institutionalised churches are taking the initiative to restore balance and variety in religious television so that one tradition does not dominate religious broadcasting. But the outcome is likely to depend more on the broader cultural and structural tendencies in America and other national societies than merely the action of the churches alone.