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Citizens and Consumers: Religious Broadcasting Between Public Service and Deregulation

In 1949 French television regularly broadcast 1 hour 30 minutes of religious programming out of 16 hours output each week; by 1986 only 3 hours on Sunday mornings, out of 680 hours weekly of television produced by six channels, were religious in content and inspiration. The percentage of the weekly programme output had fallen from a respectable 10% to a mere 0.5%.

The trend indicated by these figures is a common one. Across the world religious programmes have been pushed to the margins of the broadcasting system. In the USA there is little mainline religious programming on the national networks and the electronic church, for all its self-advertisement, has only a small minority, perhaps 7 million viewers, of the US television audience. In Australia and New Zealand the churches are fighting to preserve the place of religion in the public broadcasting system. In most of the Third World churches are finding it ever more costly to ensure that even a limited amount of religious material is broadcast on a regular basis. Even in Britain, where the devout Lord Reith, first Director-General of the BBC, ensured that religion was an indispensable element in broadcasting, religious programming is less certain of its place in the schedules.

Already the siren voices are heard calling for more authentic religious programming on overtly Christian channels; already commercial broadcasters are warning that religion will be one of the first casualties of a more competitive deregulated broadcast market.

What then is the future for religious programming in the new era of broadcasting? How much is the fate of religious broadcasting bound up with or dependent upon that of public broadcasting in general? Must religious broadcasting in general go the way of the electronic church? These are just a few of the themes considered in this issue of TRENDS.

Religious Broadcasting In A Public Broadcasting Context

Kenneth M. Wolfe. *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956: The Politics of Broadcast Religion*. London: SCM Press, 1984.
Richard P. B. Wallis. *Looking on Glass: Communicating Religious Ideas and Experience Through Television*. Unpublished Dissertation. 1987.

Kenneth Wolfe's study is the first part of a detailed investigation into the relationship between the churches and broadcasting in Britain. This first volume is particularly useful in identifying the crucial shift in church involvement with broadcasting from that based around the idea of confirming the faith of a fundamentally Christian nation to that of maintaining a Christian presence in an increasingly secular and pluralistic society.

The driving force behind the start of British religious broadcasting was the BBC's first Director-General, John Reith. From the beginning of the BBC's existence he saw religious broadcasting as having a central place in its output as a public service. He assumed, as did the churches, that the nation was instinctively Christian in outlook even if fewer and fewer people were attending church.

The first broadcast religious address on the BBC was given by

the Anglican Rector of Whitechapel, the Rev J. A. Mayo on Christmas Eve 1922, and soon after Reith invited the main denominations to participate in formulating a BBC religious policy. In May 1923 a 'Sunday Committee' was set up, comprising representatives of the Church of England, Nonconformists and Catholics to advise the BBC and provide it with Sunday speakers. Three years later, in July 1926, the Sunday Committee became the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC).

BBC Religion for a Christian Nation

Reith's enthusiasm for religious broadcasting was not immediately shared by the churchmen whom he first contacted. Reith, a Presbyterian Scot, was deeply committed to a practical, evangelical, Sabbatarian Christianity. For him the aim of religious broadcasting

was to provide the nation with a 'thoroughgoing, manly and optimistic' Christian message. Among church leaders, however, there was considerable hostility and suspicion to the idea that worship should be broadcast, largely on the grounds that such broadcasts would be heard by those who had no religious allegiance. It would, it was thought, trivialise and cheapen the liturgical experience.

Such weighty theological objections found little sympathy with Reith, who found allies in men such as the Rev H. R. L. Sheppard at the Church of St Martin's-in-the-Fields, who stood, in his own words, for a 'diffused rather than a sectional Christianity'. In January 1924 the first special broadcast service was transmitted from St Martin's and soon St Martin's became the 'BBC church'. By 1929 the BBC was broadcasting regular Sunday services, weekly Evensong from Westminster Abbey and a daily service. No broadcast, save on ceremonial occasions, was permitted between 6-7.45 pm on Sunday evenings so as not to keep people from church. The BBC published its own service book, *New Every Morning*, in 1936 and had sold over 100,000 copies by the end of 1937. These early broadcast services and talks were intended to reach those unable, or unwilling, to attend church, the 'non-attending' church and the 'lapsed', who might be persuaded to return to the fold. A BBC research report in July 1939 revealed that the evening services were the most popular programmes, and that more people listened to church-based than studio-based services. The major body of listeners consisted of the lapsed or the unchurched who wanted more entertaining programmes.

In April 1939 James Welch, an educational specialist, became Director of Religious Broadcasting. Welch's predecessor, Iremonger, had believed that Christianity had a place in broadcasting. Welch, more robustly, thought that the BBC should undertake a national mission on behalf of the churches. Welch wanted the BBC to reach three categories of listener: (1) the committed Christian, through ecumenical and educational broadcasts; (2) the 'half-churched', and (3) the 'closed ears' of those in the Armed Forces, a major category since the outbreak of war. To reach the two latter categories religious broadcasting would have to become more entertaining and popular.

Popular Religious Drama

The most famous and controversial attempt to make a religious programme that was at once educational and entertaining was Dorothy L. Sayer's sequence of plays on the life of Jesus, *The Man Born to Be King* (1942). It was first conceived as a children's programme series but rapidly became much more, in effect an unprecedented attempt to convey the everyday reality of Jesus's life in dramatic terms. When broadcast it proved popular enough to attract an audience of two million listeners, but, because it challenged many people's beliefs about the permissible ways in which Jesus could be presented as a character in a drama, *The Man Born to Be King* was highly controversial. The Government, ever anxious to sustain public morale in wartime, the BBC and the churches were all initially alarmed by press coverage which called it an assault on the sacred. These fears were generally overcome, however, as the plays were read and broadcast. As usual in such cases the controversy and the publicity it provoked boosted the initial audience, but as the series continued the audience declined.

The Growth of Ecumenical Co-operation

The war also gave a boost to ecumenical co-operation as the churches came together to rally behind the government in defence of the values of Christian civilization. Christian pacifists prominent in religious broadcasting before the war were no longer heard. The most significant ecumenical initiative under the new dispensation was the introduction of religious news and current affairs. Between November 1942 and June 1943 *Christian News* provided Christian

news and commentary; after the war the experiment was continued as the programme *What Are the Churches Doing?*

Ecumenism, however, had its limits. The cornerstone of BBC religious broadcasting, the notion of Britain as a (Protestant) Christian nation, had the effect of keeping out both Christian groups considered sectarian and non-Christians. (The Jewish faith was recognized as having a legitimate claim but was outside CRAC's competence.) For a long time this concept of Britain also kept the Catholics at a discreet distance. Catholic-Protestant relations were tinged with uneasiness. Though represented on CRAC, the Catholics were not happy with the amount of airtime they were allocated and felt that their distinctive ecclesial identity was being submerged. The Catholics wanted to sharpen denominational distinctions at the same time as the other main churches tended to blur them. They were also highly dissatisfied with the lack of doctrinal content in the output of sermons designed to 'diffuse' a Christian spirit. Moreover in 1938, even Reith had been powerless in the face of Protestant opposition to the appointment of a Roman Catholic, the BBC's Deputy Director-General, Graves, as his successor at the BBC.

It was an event of some significance, therefore, when the Franciscan friar Fr Agnellus Andrew was appointed the Catholic advisor to the BBC Religious Broadcasting Department in 1945; by 1955, his professionalism and personality had done much to reduce anti-Catholic prejudice. In that year he finally became a full-time member of the Religious Broadcasting Department.

Monopoly Under Question

After the war the BBC and the churches found themselves having to adjust to a world in which many of the old certainties seemed to have been swept away. The BBC's broadcasting monopoly and the place of religious broadcasting within that monopoly began to look like relics of an era of social and moral consensus that no longer existed. The problems of the new era were sharply defined by the Beveridge inquiry into broadcasting which began in 1949. Though convinced that broadcasting should be a public service, Beveridge was uneasy about the BBC monopoly. Within religious broadcasting too, the orthodox Protestant Christian position as represented by CRAC was subject to renewed assaults from those who felt themselves denied their rightful access to the airwaves. Many groups simply felt that they should have a chance to express their point of view, and in certain cases, engage in argument with the religious or non-religious views of others. These groups included various Christian sects, including the Christian Scientists, the Spiritualists and the Unitarians; the lobby of Freethinkers, Humanists and Rationalists who objected to religious propaganda; and Christian fringe bodies, notably The Lord's Day Observance Society, The Protestant Truth Society and the Temperance League.

Religious Controversy

Neither the BBC nor the main churches, with the exception of the Catholics, were anxious to engage in controversy. The majority view on CRAC was that controversy would simply contribute to the undermining of what were assumed to be the simple certainties of the majority of ordinary Christians. In the early years it was BBC policy not to broadcast controversial talks of either a political or religious nature, and, though by 1926 Reith wanted more latitude to air differences, he did not want a freedom that would allow churches to attack one another.

By the early 1950s, however, the mood within the BBC had shifted. The Corporation, under its new Director-General, William Haley, no longer saw itself as committed to making the nation more Christian, but as committed to the preservation of core values associated with Christian belief. As for religious broadcasting, its

new director, Francis House, thought that it should: 'reflect and proclaim the faith of the churches'. Religious broadcasting was 'a continuous teaching mission...its intention is evangelistic and its methods must be mostly educational'. Along these lines between 1951 and 1955 the BBC adopted the idea of a 'fundamental debate' in religious broadcasting, though not so fundamental as to allow airtime to Marxists. As the broadcaster Harman Grisewood wrote, the BBC could not confuse 'tolerance' with 'impartiality', and should not give airtime to views, such as those of Marxists, which would be seen to undermine society.

The Coming of Television

Yet another disruptive force in the post-war period was television. In 1951 Colin Beale came from the British Churches Film Council to work part-time in BBC television. This was a considerable challenge to religious producers used to radio, though House saw that there was potential for more programmes than worship services on television. The position of the churches was complicated yet further when the BBC monopoly was broken and commercial television was introduced in 1954. CRAC soon found itself with responsibility for religious broadcasting on the commercial channels too, but nothing in its past had prepared it to cope with advising on religious programmes in an advertiser supported system geared to the provision of popular entertainment. In the end, however, the religious policies of commercial television, and later still of commercial radio, were broadly comparable to those of the BBC.

In his study of religious television Richard Wallis notes that the amount of airtime devoted to religion was at first severely limited. The amount was increased substantially, however, when the BBC and the commercial companies agreed to transmit religious programmes within the so-called 'closed period', a 70 minute break between 6.15 and 7.25pm on Sunday evenings. This increased the total amount of religious programming each week from about 30 minutes to about 4 hours.

By the late 1970s Wallis is able to identify three main strands of religious programming on British television. These strands were (1) worship and other 'committed' programmes for religious believers, e.g. *Morning Worship*; (2) popular programmes with a Christian base but appealing to the 'folk religion' of the audience by offering a careful selection of popular Bible readings and hymns etc., for example, the now defunct *Stars on Sunday* or the currently broadcast *Highway*; and (3) documentary or discussion programmes about religious or moral issues, e.g. *Heart of the Matter* or *Seven Days*.

The first programmes to appear in the new documentary strand was a BBC series entitled *Anno Domini*. This was then followed by *Everyman* a series which marked a number of significant breaks with tradition. First, it was not scheduled in the closed period but for 10.30pm on Sunday evening. Secondly, it was, in Wallis's words, 'indistinguishable from the remainder of the output'. The new documentary series signalled that as far as the broadcasters were concerned religion was just a subject like any other and it was no business of the broadcasters to protect Christian or other religious beliefs from critical scrutiny.

From Christian to Religious Broadcasting

This shift was but the culmination of the process of coming to terms with a pluralistic society which had begun in the immediate post-war years. It was a process which was also mirrored in the outlook and philosophy of CRAC. In 1948 CRAC was able to assert that the aims of religious broadcasting could encompass explaining and demonstrating the relevance of the Christian faith, leading 'non-churchgoers' to see that Christian commitment involved active church membership, and providing opportunities for 'that challenge to personal faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord which is the heart of 'conversion'.

Fourteen years later, in 1962, CRAC had redefined the objectives of religious broadcasting in less evangelistic, but still overtly Christian terms, as: (1) to reflect the worship, thought and action of the mainstream churches; (2) to stress what was most relevant in Christian faith for the modern world; (3) to reach those outside or loosely attached to the churches.

In 1977, the year in which *Everyman* was first broadcast, objectives had been modified again to take account of the reality of Britain as a multi-racial, multi-faith society. CRAC now wanted religious broadcasting to: (1) reflect the worship, thought and action of the principal religious traditions represented in Britain, recognizing that those are mainly, though not exclusively, Christian; (2) seek to present the beliefs, ideas, issues and experiences evidently related to a religious interpretation or dimension of life; and (3) meet the religious interests, concerns and needs of those on the fringe of, or outside the organized life of, the churches. Five years later the first Moslem representative was appointed to CRAC.

Jesus: The Controversy

The changing character of religious broadcasting was observed by the churches with a mixture of approbation and apprehension. Though many documentaries on religious issues were appreciated there was a growing feeling that some broadcasters were inclined to treat religious matters in a superficial manner. In addition, many church people of a more conservative nature deplored what they saw as broadcasting's general lapses in taste and morality. Many of these underlying tensions between broadcasters and the churches came to the fore in the early 1980s in the row over the television series *Jesus: The Evidence*.

In 1979 John Whale, then at *The Sunday Times*, reviewed Dr Elaine Pagé's book *The Gnostic Gospels* a review which stimulated Julian Norridge at London Weekend Television (LWT) to raise the idea with Channel Four that there should be an investigation into the historical reliability of the Gospels. Channel Four then asked LWT's Current Affairs and Features Department to provide a series entitled *Jesus: An Examination of the Evidence*. Two researchers, both without any theological background, who started preparing the series became convinced that there was a deep, and well concealed, cleavage in the churches between the beliefs of the laity and those of the clergy. As it developed the script began to reflect that point of view.

Filming began in April 1983 and a copy of the shooting script found its way to a number of leading Evangelicals and through them to a wider church public. Soon the Church of England and the Catholic Church were considering the merits or otherwise of the programme's content. Evangelical groups joined forces to launch a campaign to have the series dropped. By March 1984 the row had become national news. The protests, however, failed to stop the series, finally entitled *Jesus: The Evidence*, being shown on Channel Four. It was regarded by all the churches as a particularly misleading and tendentious account of the historicity of the Gospels and certainly soured relations between the churches and Channel Four.

The series also prompted a direct response. Charles Cordle, an energetic Evangelical entrepreneur who had founded Trinity Trust to make Christian television programmes, made a new series entitled *Jesus: Then and Now*. This series of videos was then offered to Channel Four. Unfortunately for Cordle, Channel Four regarded the series as poorly made and as propagandist and rejected it. There then ensued another campaign, this time designed to force Channel Four into accepting the series. That campaign now seems to have been abandoned in the face of Channel Four's unwillingness to have its editorial freedom constrained by a pressure group.

The controversy over *Jesus: The Evidence* and the recent battle over *Jesus: Then and Now* reveals how far the churches and the broadcasters have moved from the halcyon days of Reith. Though

these disputes are with commercial television the attitudes of the broadcasters are not untypical of those in the BBC as well. In both Corporation and commercial stations broadcasters pride themselves on their impartiality and objectivity. In a pluralistic multi-racial society religious broadcasting is becoming ever more broadcasting about religion, rather than broadcasting of religion. Broadcasters are jealous of their editorial independence and unwilling to be seen as subservient to church interests. They wish to keep their distance.

The advent of a pluralistic society and the shift in attitudes among broadcasters has drawn from the churches one of three responses. The mainstream churches on the whole have adopted a policy of

accommodation. They have accepted that religious broadcasting should not be overtly evangelistic and stress rather its educational function. Other groups, exemplified by Cordle's Trinity Trust look towards a strategy of transformation. They want to revive the Christian ethos and seek to make committed Christian based programming. The third strategy, adopted by various Evangelical groups, is that of separation. For them the future lies with a deregulated broadcasting system in which special interest channels can proliferate. They look to the possibility of producing a Christian alternative along the lines of the US model. They want Christian cable, Christian radio and Christian satellites.

France: The History of Religious Television

Pierre Moitel and Claude Plettner. *Une Aventure de la Télévision: 'Le Jour du Seigneur'*. Paris: Le Centurion, 1987.

The major difference between religious broadcasting in Britain and France is that the French churches have always had to make their own programmes. Because of this, religious broadcasting has never been integrated into the public broadcasting system as it has in Britain. The French broadcaster has never, for example, thought of public broadcasting as having a mission to promote Christianity in the way in which Reith thought of it. French religious broadcasting has always had to operate within a state and a public broadcasting system that is profoundly secular in outlook.

At present, religious output on French network television is confined to Sunday mornings. Each major religious tradition is assigned a segment of air time. The Catholic segment, known as *Le Jour du Seigneur*, is a three part programme lasting for 90 minutes. It consists of 30 minutes of religious magazine and news followed by Mass live from a parish, convent, monastery or shrine and a 7 minute reflection. In the 1950s the programme was oriented towards forming Christians, but over the past decade or so the orientation has been towards promoting a Christian view of what it means to be fully human, an engagement with the world in which Christ is revealed indirectly.

The first French protestant broadcast, *Présence Protestante*, took place on Sunday 2 October 1955 under the direction of Marcel Gosselin. Gosselin continued to produce the programme, now a weekly 30 minute broadcast, until he was succeeded by Jean Domon in 1980. Once a month there is the transmission of a different Protestant liturgy. Since 1961 a Catholic/Protestant agreement has meant that on the feasts of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost *Présence Protestante* has an hour of airtime at its disposal.

In 1963 ORTF proposed to the Orthodox that they should have regular broadcasts and the first programme was transmitted in 1965. Orthodox and Eastern Christians take turns to prepare a 30 minute broadcast every two weeks.

The Jews produced their first broadcast in 1962 and since 1985 have had a 15 minute broadcast on the Bible each week. The first Islamic broadcast was produced in January 1983, and since then 15 minutes each Sunday are devoted to the exposition of the Koran. Thus on French television each Sunday morning there are 3 hours in which each of the major religious traditions is able to give some indication of its thought and worship.

The Beginnings of Religious Broadcasting

Religious broadcasting in France began in 1927 when the first talks were broadcast from Notre-Dame by the private radio station, Radio-Paris, and the Dominicans gave their first radio sermons. The popular

success of radio sermons was such that in 1934 they inspired talks and religious programmes on both private stations, Radio Parisien and Radio Luxembourg, and regional stations in Bordeaux, Lyon, Strasbourg. The first broadcast Mass was the midnight Mass transmitted on Radio Toulouse, at Christmas 1936.

After the war, radio and television broadcasting was placed under the control of the state and steps were taken to develop the new medium of television. At this point the Catholic church in France found itself lucky to have a man of vision, the Dominican Fr Pichard, who saw that television would be the medium of the future. It was due to him that the first televised Mass was broadcast on December 24th 1948 from Notre Dame in Paris.

By October 1949 a regular Catholic broadcast had begun which lasted for 90 minutes. This programme, later to become *Le Jour du Seigneur*, was made at the invitation of the broadcasting authority. Until 1964 *Le Jour du Seigneur* was limited to the retransmission of worship and studio bound interviews illustrated with film sequences donated by others. In that year, however, the team began to produce its own film reports. Between 1965 and 1986 the film team made some 155 films.

Financing Religious Television

Moitel and Plettner report how in 1950 Fr Pichard created the Comité Française de Radio-Télévision (CFRT) to provide a juridical frame for the broadcast and in order to finance it. From the beginning an agreement for co-production was entered into between RTF and Fr Pichard, an agreement which was renewed at each reform of the French television system. This agreement sets out the rights and obligations of each of the contracting parties.

A part of the financing of the broadcasts falls upon the CFRT which asks for funds through the generosity of viewers and the friends of *Le Jour du Seigneur*, and so for 38 years the Catholics of France have participated in the financing of their broadcasts. In 1972 an agreement between the broadcasting authority, ORTF, and the Catholics arranged for 7.95% of the production costs to be borne by the Church. After the restructuring of ORTF in 1973 this proportion was increased to 30% and ORTF claimed the right to modify, cut or cancel material. Later agreements were made with TF1 in 1975 and with Antenne 2 in 1986 after TF1 was privatized.

Among all the religious programmes broadcast on French television only the Catholic has a co-production contract for the whole of its broadcast. *Le Jour du Seigneur* receives technical assistance, the production and retransmission of broadcasts, the costs of recording. It pays for the conception and preparation of Masses and the magazine,

the production of films, the costs of locating sites for Masses and films, the supplies of documentary films and photographs, the salaries of collaborators and administration, etc.

Over the years the cost has risen tremendously. In 1975 the annual budget was 1 million francs, in 1986 it was 9 million francs or approximately £1 million. This money is raised by 75,000 supporters. Each broadcast costs approximately 450,000 francs or about £45,000, of which approximately two thirds is covered by the broadcasting station.

In 1976, another Dominican, Fr Abeberry, succeeded Fr Pichard as head of the *Le Jour du Seigneur* team and, since July 1985, Fr Abeberry has been replaced by Gabriel Nissim.

Problems of Censorship

Since 1949 the broadcasters at *Le Jour du Seigneur* have been subject to pressure from three power groups: the broadcasting authorities, the Catholic traditionalist right, and the Bishops.

In the 1960s and 1970s *Le Jour du Seigneur* had to suffer several cases of material being censored by the broadcasting authority for political reasons. In 1969 because of the general governmental panic over the student and worker unrest; in 1970 because of a film on the French nuclear deterrent; in 1977 because the programme raised allegations of torture in French Africa. In all these cases the political complaint was that the programme was exceeding its religious mandate and engaging with matters outside its competence, a view stoutly opposed by the *Le Jour du Seigneur* team who argued that Christian religious broadcasting had to concern itself with social and political issues.

The Catholic Right Displeased

Attacks on *Le Jour du Seigneur* from Catholic traditionalists and integralists occurred during the 1960s and 1970s as the Church implemented the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. The programme was criticized in a number of publications for its too progressive stand. In one incident in 1969 traditionalists interrupted a televised liturgy to protest against the use of African based music!

Tensions Between Programme Makers and Bishops

The official church attitude to *Le Jour du Seigneur* has gone through a number of phases. In the beginning *Le Jour du Seigneur* did very much as it pleased without close oversight from the episcopal authorities. In 1963, however, an episcopal commission was formed which gave the first official support to *Le Jour du Seigneur* and which exercised a benevolent oversight.

Later on, the programme found itself the object of a certain amount of suspicion. In 1973, for example, certain bishops questioned the doctrinal orthodoxy of a number of televised sermons and it was proposed that the texts of such sermons be submitted to a vetting committee in advance. *Le Jour du Seigneur* responded by pointing out that it was not the official televised magazine of the church. In 1975 the bishops vetoed a film on the biologist Henri Laborit on the grounds that its content might disturb the faith of the essentially Catholic public.

In the same year TF1 was charged with providing religious programmes every Sunday morning, the programmes to be produced by people mandated and responsible to the competent religious hierarchies. This placed *Le Jour du Seigneur* for the first time under the direct responsibility of the bishops. When Fr Abeberry took over from Fr Pichard he asked for guarantees of independence and autonomy. As a result in 1976 there were official agreements drawn up between the bishops and the CFRT.

Among the bishops, however, there remained a concern with some of the policies pursued by the programme makers. In parallel with the politicians, the bishops too were coming to take a closer interest in

television as their belief in its power and influence grew. Complaints were made that the Christians profiled in the programme's film slots were not representative of the Church and not always the most exemplary. In 1976, just 5 days before it was due to be transmitted, the bishops forbade a broadcast of a film on a priest who had remained a worker-priest even after the movement had been suppressed by Rome in 1954.

This period of distrust lasted for some time but had largely passed by the middle 1980s, and in 1985 the 1976 accords were re-examined. Stronger links were forged between the directors of *Le Jour du Seigneur* and the Episcopal Commission in the hope of avoiding the conflicts of the past.

The Audience for Religious Television

According to Moitel and Plettner an audience survey in 1984 revealed that 31% of the French adult population claimed to watch television on Sunday mornings, of which about 50% (14.9%) switched on to religious programmes. Thus about 25% of French adults, about 10 million people, claimed to watch religious television regularly or occasionally. This varied from those who watched each Sunday, about 1,400,000, to those who watched occasionally, about 4,500,000. These figures varied according to the content and length of the programme.

The audience for *Le Jour du Seigneur* was found to be predominantly elderly, with 56% aged 50 or over and 30% over 65. It was found that 68% of practicing Catholics watched, (of whom 48% watched once a week or occasionally, and 20% watched only on Holy Days). Some 32% of non-practicing Catholics also watched.

Privatization and Deregulation

It is not known if these viewing figures have been affected by the shake-up in French television and the proliferation of new channels. The French television viewer has now become the object of a bitter ratings war. In late 1986 the French government privatized the state owned television channel TF1 which has now largely abandoned the making of quality programmes and has gone all out to win a mass audience. The result is that it now has 47.5% of the audience compared to Antenne 2's 28.8%. The other state channel FR3 has 7.7%, while the two other private channels TV5 and M6 have 8.1% and 1.7% respectively.

The privatization of TF1 and the ratings war have had significant consequences for religious broadcasting because religious programmes had been transmitted each Sunday morning on TF1 since 1975. As a newly privatized commercial channel, however, TF1 did not want to be responsible for such public service broadcasting and the religious programmes were transferred to the second public channel, Antenne 2, at the beginning of 1987. Since then TF1's only interest in religious programming has been its negotiations with the Jimmy Swaggart organization to broadcast his brand of televangelism in a late night slot during the week. (According to a report in *Le Monde*, Swaggart agreed to pay 18 million francs, or about \$2.8 million, for the privilege.) Negotiations were hurriedly broken off, however, when Swaggart found himself embroiled in a sex scandal.

The team who produce *Le Jour du Seigneur* have recently begun to take steps to widen the scope of their work in the new deregulated environment. It has offered its help to Christians interested in preparing for the advent of local television. In addition it is preparing programmes for the French satellite TV5. Another initiative was taken by the Catholic publishing group Bayard-Presses which in 1987 co-produced with Antenne 2 a documentary on the French Catholic church which was broadcast in prime-time.

The Implications of Deregulation for Religious Broadcasting

The third of the strategies identified by Richard Wallis, that of the creation of an alternative Christian broadcasting system, has a powerful attraction for those Christians who believe that broadcasters treat religious issues in a trivial manner and fail to produce inspiring programmes. These critics argue that what is needed is religious broadcasting of a more popular and distinctively evangelistic character. The assumption is that such programming would have a greater audience appeal than present offerings. From this critical perspective the general tendency towards more deregulated broadcasting systems looks more like an opportunity than a threat.

Public broadcasting systems try to strike a balance between treating the audience as consumers and as citizens. They have the task of producing programmes which avoid the twin dangers of simply allowing the advertisers to set the agenda or of reducing public service broadcasting to the provision of minority educational or other improving programmes. For some people, including those in government, this effort to strike a balance between consumer sovereignty and public service no longer meets audience expectations. They claim broadcasting is suffering from too much regulation and is too unresponsive to public taste. Similar arguments are put forward about religious broadcasting.

This is the crucial issue which needs to be addressed in the debate on the effects of deregulation on religious broadcasting. Defenders of public service are on the defensive. Countries like Britain are betwixt and between a public service past and a deregulated future, though the transition to the new order seems to be ever accelerating. Before public broadcasting is swept away by an enthusiasm for the new order, it is worth considering the experience of countries which have had some form of deregulation.

It is, of course, impossible in a brief review to give any kind of adequate description of the deregulatory trend in more than a handful of countries. It is also true that every nation's broadcasting system is unique and difficult to compare with another's. Yet, even a cursory survey of the European and North American scene reveals certain common results of deregulation.

Deregulation and Religious Broadcasting in the USA

Mainstream religious denominations in the USA have built up their religious broadcasting on the basis of free (sustaining) time from the commercial broadcast networks. The deregulation of US broadcasting over the past decade, however, means that sustaining time is no longer generally available. Where it is available, it is on such poor time slots that little religious broadcasting is found in or near prime-time. There is religious broadcasting available on those affiliate stations in smaller markets where churches are able to offer programmes to fill otherwise empty slots, or where the station feels some duty to the local community to provide a measure of religious programming.

Having built up their religious programming on the basis of sustaining time, few of the mainstream religious programmers have really worked out alternative distribution mechanisms to replace their previous practice. The alternative to sustaining time is the purchase of time. This is being done, for example, by a number of the larger Catholic dioceses which have the resources to buy time on local television and radio stations. However in those periods, such as Sunday mornings, which have traditionally been low viewer

periods the electronic church time purchases have driven up costs. As a result the purchase of time tends to be self-defeating.

Among the major networks, NBC and ABC produce about 10 hours of religious programming each year and CBS offers a weekly half hour series plus 3 or 4 hours a year of liturgical programmes. These are programmes offered to the network affiliates but there is no obligation on the part of the affiliates to carry them. For example, the weekly half hour programme *For Our Times* produced by CBS is carried on only about 45 of the 220 CBS stations. Little is known about how much locally originated religious programming is produced or carried by independent and affiliate broadcasting stations.

NBC and ABC recently did away with their religious programming divisions, though NBC now gives an annual grant of \$1 million to the major faith groups to make programmes. These programmes are produced by the members of the Interfaith Broadcasting Commission which brings together the Catholic Church, the mainline Protestant churches, the Southern Baptists and the Jewish Theological Seminary. If the productions measure up to NBC's programme standards they are released on the network and offered to the affiliates. Each of the four major church groupings has been responsible for producing an hour-long special to be aired in 1988.

VISN: Vision Interfaith Satellite Network

Deregulation of the cable industry has also brought problems as religious programmers outside the electronic church have found increasingly difficult to gain access. A recent initiative designed to deal with this problem is the proposal for a national interfaith cable channel known as VISN the Vision Interfaith Satellite Network. Local interfaith cable channels currently exist in half a dozen major cities including Pittsburgh, Atlanta, New Orleans, Louisville, San Francisco and Youngstown. The proposal originally came in May 1987 from TCI, the largest of the cable industry's Multiple System Operators. After receiving a positive response from the major churches an agreement was reached with TCI and other major cable operators to commit between \$2 to \$3 million in the first 2 years as bridge financing until the new network is able to be self-financing through advertising revenue. The programming principles of the new channel include no proselytizing, no fund raising, and no attacks on other faith groups. It will offer daily about 4 to 5 hours of denominational programmes as well as self help, news, current affairs, cultural and entertainment programmes.

Already fears have been expressed that the cable industry's reason for supporting VISN is to drive religious programming off most cable systems and into a religious ghetto. The churches have, therefore, negotiated with the cable operators to ensure that currently offered religious programmes on systems whose subscribers continue to express an interest in receiving such material, will not be displaced. Only time will tell how faithfully this agreement will be observed.

Canada: Vision Television

Though deregulation in Canadian broadcasting has been nowheres as widespread and extensive as in the USA the public service ethos is on the defensive there as well. For religious broadcasters this is but another stage in the decline in religious programming which

has been taking place over the past 20 years. Between 1965 and 1980, for example, the annual percentage of religious programmes aired in public service time, i.e. the US sustaining time, dropped from 80% to 5%. Over the same period the yearly number of Canadian-produced religious programme hours in time which had to be paid for went from 0 to 318. The churches seldom have access to the airwaves on a national basis. National networks take limited responsibility for the production and presentation of religious material. On the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) about 2+ hours a week are given over to religious programmes. There are also religious programmes at Christmas, etc.

The response of the faith groups in Canada has been to propose the establishment of a satellite to cable interfaith network. Originally known as Canadian Interfaith Network or CIN, it is now known as Vision Television. In November 1987 the Canadian Radio TV and Telecommunications Commission granted Vision Television a 5 year renewable licence. From September 1988 Vision Television is offering 3 hours of programming between 6 and 9 pm Monday to Friday. Programmes presented by the faith communities of Canada, individually or in co-operation with one another, will air in a segment known as *Mosaic*. In addition, from the sale of air time to the religious communities, the network itself will provide programming of a religious and values nature. This programming will match the number of hours prepared, purchased for *Mosaic* programmes. It is hoped that the mixture of programming will both be broadly evangelistic and provide a values oriented programming mix for a general audience.

Christian Radio in France and Italy

In France deregulation over the past few years has had substantial effects upon religious broadcasting. This has been particularly evident in the field of local radio, though television broadcasting has also been affected. The period between 1977 and 1981 saw a massive upheaval in the French broadcasting landscape as the state sought to control an upsurge in unlicensed radio stations operating in the FM band. Eventually local independent radio stations were licensed in 1982. At present the French regulatory authority, the CNCL, is responsible for assigning the frequencies and monitoring the performance of some 1800 radio stations.

This opening up of the airwaves has been seen as an opportunity for the churches to produce their own programmes on their own stations. Today nearly 30 Christian radio stations are operating in the FM band between 88.2 and 103.9. These stations, the vast majority Catholic but including Protestant stations and with Orthodox participation, are grouped into a French Federation of Christian Radio Stations. The churches also prepare religious broadcasts for the state controlled network and local radio.

Deregulation came to Italy earlier than France, and came in the most chaotic of forms. In 1975 private local broadcasting was totally deregulated following a ruling of the Constitutional Court in 1974. Since then Italy has effectively had an unregulated system with no limits on advertising, no programme codes and no restrictions on such contentious matters as sex and violence. Though France has a multitude of radio stations, Italy has even more, at present somewhere between 3,500 and 4,000 private stations as well as the local and regional stations of the public broadcasting company, RAI. In addition, Italy has 3 public television networks and 23 private television channels. There are at least 500 Catholic local radio stations as well as a host of parish stations.

One of the most important Catholic radio stations is Radio A, which has served the diocese of Milan since 1980, and around which a Catholic network covering Northern Italy is beginning to form.

One of the services offered by Radio A is the relay of programmes from Radio Vatican. Radio A's programming consists of news, information and educational programmes during the day, and

music at night. It employs 11 people, three of whom are technicians, and can count on further help from about 80 volunteers.

Christian Broadcasting or Broadcasting to Christians?

This rapid survey of some of the major effects of deregulation on religious broadcasting in different countries provokes a number of reflections concerning the future of religious broadcasting. The first issue to be addressed concerns the issue of who watches or listens to religious broadcasting. It seems clear that the audience for religious broadcasts consists of those who are religiously committed, supplemented by those who regard themselves as religious but non-churchgoing. In other words, religious broadcasts tend to address a religious public. For many Christian broadcasters this has been both a challenge and a frustration. A challenge as Christian broadcasters have sought new ways to educate and entertain the religious audience, and a frustration because it has been so difficult to reach out to the general audience.

In Britain the requirements of public service broadcasting and an avoidance of specifically denominational programming have given religious broadcasting some opportunities to escape from the religious ghetto. The presence of religious programmes on commercial stations as well as on the BBC has extended the range and reach of religious broadcasting. On radio in particular the presence of religious programmes and segments within the general programme flow on both BBC and independent local radio enable religious broadcasters to speak to a very wide range of listeners. It is this presence within general programming that is now under threat.

In Australia, for example, a recent proposal suggested that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's activities should be divided into core programmes which would be publicly funded and non-core programmes, including religion, sports and light entertainment which would have to receive commercial sponsorship. After protests however, religion has been reinstated, for the time being, in the 'core' activities. In North America religious broadcasting has relatively little chance of finding a place in or near prime-time. Even if VISN and Vision Television are successful the overall situation will remain the same. Relatively few non-religious viewers will seek out avowedly religious channels, and if they do it will be for the family entertainment programming that they may feel is lacking on the commercial networks. In the latter case one might say that the churches are making the kind of public service programming that the commercial stations are downgrading.

As for the future of Christian radio stations, or even Christian television stations, in Europe, the same problems apply. If they are set up to provide a measure of public service programming, that is a measure of the failure of the overall broadcasting system; and insofar as they are more specifically Christian they will be heard largely, if not exclusively, by the already committed. As tools of evangelism their impact is probably minimal.

Christian broadcasting is, however, both wider than broadcasting to Christians or even than religious broadcasting. Public service broadcasting as an ideal approximates to Christian broadcasting in that it is broadcasting which respects the integrity and dignity of the viewer or listener. The public service system, however imperfectly, recognizes that religion has a central place in human life, a deregulated commercial system recognizes only that religion is a minority interest, like sport, education, and even news and public affairs, which can be catered for by specialist channels. That is why it is worth defending public service broadcasting. Having Christian radio stations or television channels would be a poor substitute.

Finance and Control

There are also other lessons to be learned. The British churches are almost alone in neither having to pay for their air-time nor produce

regular religious broadcasts themselves. This has two major consequences. First of all it means religious broadcasting in Britain costs the churches almost nothing. Contrast this with France where *Le Jour du Seigneur* has to raise just under £1 million each year to pay about 30% of the cost of making its weekly programme. Think too of the costs that are incurred when, as in North America and elsewhere, the churches run their own radio or television stations.

Secondly, the British system means that religious broadcasters have a degree of autonomy and creative freedom not always given to those working in institutions subject to ecclesiastical authority. In France *Le Jour du Seigneur*, even though nominally autonomous, has in the past found certain programmes censored by the church authorities. Church leaders who put money into Christian radio stations generally require some degree of control over the output of those stations. Whether one thinks religious broadcasters should be brought under church control or not depends upon one's view of the function of religious broadcasting, but the disadvantage is that, combined with financial stringency, such control may, and often does, inhibit and restrict creativity and innovation. If religious broadcasting is to reach out to wider audiences the programme makers need more creative autonomy, not less.

Regulation In A Deregulated Environment

When radio first appeared in North America the airwaves were soon crowded with competing stations. Part of the rationale behind broadcasting regulation was simply to ensure that broadcasters did not intrude upon each others' frequencies. Today that early chaos has returned in France and Italy. In both countries the number of stations competing for space on limited frequencies in the FM band mean that listeners are often hard pressed to tune to the station they want. In France the regulatory authority is frequently and openly ignored, and in Italy there are few, if any, rules. In such a chaotic situation how is a small Christian station, or even a large one, to make itself heard?

Apart from frequency regulation there are also the problems of regulation of ownership, of programme content and of advertising. In France, for example, TF1 has simply ignored the regulatory authority's limits on advertising. In the radio arena regulation has proved ineffective in restricting concentration of ownership; already about 1200 local community radio stations have come under the control of 8 national networks owning between 40 and 140 stations each. Only in the larger cities do a few regionally based groups remain independent. In addition the authority has great difficulty in ensuring that stations live up to their pledges on programming. These problems illustrate the fact that deregulation does not necessarily reduce the regulatory workload.

Religious broadcasters need to consider the implications of more chaotic regulatory systems. This is especially true for those broadcasters who have been used to working within a highly regulated public broadcasting system. There is no doubt that the future prospects for mainstream religious broadcasters are bleak. Yet religious broadcasters still have much to fight for. In the first place, the churches need to decide how far they are committed to religious broadcasting. Good religious programming in any environment will only come about if the churches are prepared to invest people and resources on a sufficient scale. They also need to think very carefully about the most appropriate strategy for religious broadcasting in their particular culture. There is no universal model of religious broadcasting, just as there is no universal model of broadcasting in general. Secondly, they should fight to keep a place in the general programming output. Religion should not be reduced to the level of a minority interest. Thirdly, they can and should defend the idea of public broadcasting and lend their support to those dedicated to preserving, or (as in the Philippines) building, a public service ideal. Religious broadcasters should be in the vanguard of those working to ensure that broadcasting treats people as citizens and not simply as consumers.