
‘He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear’: Christian Pedagogy and Religious Broadcasting During the Inter-War Period

Michael Bailey

Leeds Metropolitan University

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Abstract

What I mean to demonstrate in this essay is the way in which early public service broadcasting developed as an extension of Christian pastoral guidance. Understood thus, early broadcasting can be seen to function as a socio-religious technology whose rationale was to give direction to practical conduct and attempt to hold individuals to it. The significance of this is that Christian utterance was a broadcasting activity to which the BBC, and its first Director-General particularly, John Reith, ascribed special importance. The BBC was determined to provide what it thought was for the moral good of the greater majority. In spite of overwhelming criticism from the listening public and secular public opinion, the BBC was unswerving in its commitment to the centrality of Christianity in the national culture. By the end of the 1930s the ‘Reithian Sunday’ was among the most enduring and controversial of the BBCs inter-war practices.

Introduction

In the entrance of Broadcasting House is a statue by the well-known sculptor, Eric Gill, depicting *The Sower* casting his seed abroad. Though the act of sowing is nowadays commonly associated with primitive farming methods, the iconography of the sower was in fact used to illustrate a well-known parable from the New Testament (Matthew 13; Mark 4; Luke 8). For just as Jesus told his disciples that the farmer goes out to sow his seed in order to yield a crop, so too do the agencies of religion sow the word of God in order that, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear’. Ideally casting abroad the word of God would have the effect of seed sown on good soil, and produce a crop ‘thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown’. However, just as the farmer is likely to cast seed on ground that will not yield any crop, so too will the word of God fall on deaf ears or ears that, ‘As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them’. In other words, the problem with communication as arbitrary dissemination is that the sender, to quote Peters (2000, 35), ‘has no control over the harvest’.

Bailey, *‘He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear’...*

the farmer can act from a distance by making his expertise available in the form of instruction, once scattered, it is the recipient’s responsibility, ultimately, to nurture and cultivate the cast seed through to fruition.

Above the sculpture of *The Sower* is a high-minded Latin inscription, which translates as follows:

This Temple of the Arts and Muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first Governors of Broadcasting in the year 1931, Sir John Reith being the Director General. It is their prayer that good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest, that all things hostile to peace or purity may be abolished from this house and that the people, inclining their ear to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the path of wisdom and uprightness. (Quoted in Briggs 1981, 146)

What is clear from the above passage and the parable of the sower is the extent to which the early BBC undertook its public service ethos – to inform, educate, and entertain – with a religious, missionary zeal. There was a direct link between religion and morality on the one hand, and culture and self-improvement on the other. The significance of this synthesis between secular and religious rationalities, and its rarity in much present day culture, has recently been noted by Scannell (2004). However, whereas Scannell argues that ‘the blessing of broadcast communication and its indiscriminate scatter’ are essentially ‘unconditional’ in so far as the British model of public service broadcasting ‘gives without expectation of a return’, I mean to demonstrate that, in the context of broadcast religion, early broadcasting expected a great deal from its listening public, viz: discipline, obedience, reverence, and Christian manliness. However, just as the parable of the sower is an allegory about the contingent and diverse nature of audience reception, similarly, broadcasting’s listening public was a rich assortment of soil types. It is with this in mind that I now wish to consider the emergence and development of religious broadcasting; and its deployment as an agent of Christian pedagogy.

Radio Evangelism

Initially, religious broadcasting was administered by J. C. Stobbart, the BBC’s first Director of Education. It was not until the appointment of F. A. Iremonger, then Editor of the *Guardian*, a Church of England weekly newsletter, as Director of Religion in July 1933 that religious broadcasting became an administrative department in its own right (WAC R51/482). That said, one can discern the special character of religious broadcasting and the primacy accorded it by the BBC since the first religious address was given on 24 December 1922, by the Rector of Whitechapel, the Rev. J. A. Mayo, an occasion upon which he was to reflect ten years later in a special, anniversary edition of the *Radio Times*:

... At 5.30pm on that day I came up from Whitechapel to talk to the children, and after my evening service I hurried back to the Strand to address the grown-ups. Heavens! How nervous I was! ... I had numerous letters by Monday morning's post speaking in terms of warm (really warm!) approval; and I felt enormously relieved. Radio Religion, thus begun, has grown in volume beyond all imagining. There can be no question of its value ... a vast body of people who never heard a word connected with religion from one end of the year to the other, now listen Sunday after Sunday to sermons by wireless, which for eloquence, earnestness and Gospel truth have never been surpassed ... I only ask for this one thing of my executors - that they put on my tombstone: He preached the first broadcast sermon! (Quoted in Briggs 1981, 146)

One of the clearest articulations of BBC policy vis-à-vis religious broadcasting is expressed in the BBC Handbook for 1928 (131), in which we are told that 'it was natural that from the beginning religion should find its place in British Broadcasting', not least because,

when those who were responsible for Broadcasting set before themselves the object of raising the national standard of values and of a constructive idealism, it was obvious that the religious service should be one of the regular programme features ...

The guiding principles for BBC religion were as follows: to secure the co-operation of the Christian Churches; ensure that broadcast services did not enter into competition with the ordinary Church services; prohibit any controversial broadcasts that might offend Christian sensibilities; and to present a 'thorough-going, optimistic and manly religion' that avoids narrow interpretation of denominational dogma but instead concerns itself 'with the application of the teaching of Christ to everyday life'. It was hoped that religious broadcasting would 'prevent any decay of Christianity in a nominally Christian country' by 'keeping alive but giving new life and meaning to the traditionally Christian character of the British people'.

Elsewhere religious broadcasting was conceived to have four more specific objectives: (i) to maintain standards of morality in private and public life; (ii) to explain what the Christian faith is, to eliminate misunderstanding of it, and to demonstrate its relevance to everyday life; (iii) to convert non-churchgoers and the semi-religious to an orthodox Christian faith; (iv) to bring unity to the various orthodox Christian denominations so that they might speak with one voice (WAC R51/482). In short, religious broadcasting constituted a civilising mission, both educational and evangelistic. More than this, the agenda and objectives of BBC religion, the taken for granted of 'natural' and 'obvious', the more specific formulation of 'the traditionally Christian character of the British people', were

essentially a working through in a new broadcasting context of pre-existing religious discourses, for example, there in the *Army and Religion* report (1919) and the English Religious Census of 1851.¹ What they all had in common was to assume religion to be integral to the national identity (which the BBC sought to recreate) and state institutions (which in a complex way the BBC was). The terms of reference were much the same too: the moral functions of religion; the rising tide of secularisation; the need to 'reach out' to the majority who did not go to Church; the kind of official/unofficial religion to be broadcast; the relationship to ecumenicalism; and, perhaps above all, the view taken of the 'special' Christian character of Sunday.

The detail of the meeting in which Reith effectively secured the co-operation of the Anglican Church after convincing the Archbishop Randall Davidson of the potentialities for broadcast religion is well-known (see Wolfe 1984, 6; Briggs 1961, 241). In addition to securing the co-operation of the churches, Reith wanted access to the best preachers and churches. The first meeting of the 'Sunday Committee' (which subsequently became the Central Religious Advisory Committee) took place on 18 May 1923, under the chairmanship of Cyril Garbett, then Bishop of Southwark. Though the membership of the CRAC was representative of the mainstream Christian denominations, the Anglicans had a pivotal influence within the committee, with the Catholics and the Nonconformists having to accept a less central role (see Wolfe 1984, 32-41). That the CRAC was the first of the BBC's Advisory Committees is significant; and it soon established itself as the most influential. Indeed, much BBC policy was virtually dictated by the CRAC, particularly in regard to Sunday broadcasts (Ibid, 70). For the BBC Sunday was by far the biggest listening day of the week: if the casting of seed abroad was ever to bear fruit, Sunday was the day on which the soil was most fertile.

The BBC Sunday Programme began with a morning religious service between the hours of 9.30 to 10.45. There was silence then until 12.30, after which there was various serious music and talks until the evening service at eight in the evening. This was followed by yet more earnest music until the Epilogue formally brought the day's observance to a conclusion at eleven o'clock (Scannell and Cardiff 1991, 232). Apart from its insistence that no secular programmes of any kind were to be broadcast on the Sabbath, the CRAC's most controversial edict was to permit only mainstream Christian denominations to broadcast. Unorthodox religious sects (e.g. Christian Scientists, the Unitarians, and the Oxford Group Movement) and irreligious free-thinkers were excluded. Nor would they be allowed to creep in by the back door. A committee meeting on 13 March 1931, recommended that manuscripts on philosophical subjects 'be more carefully scrutinised with a view to obviating statements which might be interpreted as disruptive of Christian morality' (WAC R6/21/1). Reith, ever anxious about his religious duty, sought the advice of William Temple, then Archbishop of York, about instructing non-clergy

speakers what they could say on religious topics. Even clergy were requested to submit their manuscripts five days before their sermon was due to be broadcast, alienating Roman Catholics who objected to lay censorship. Later, only studio broadcasts were requested in advance with editorial decisions taken only by CRAC members (WAC R34/809/1).

In spite of widespread criticism, Reith maintained the increasingly unpopular Sabbath policy as well as the policy of refusing minority religious or secular groups from broadcasting an oppositional viewpoint, no matter what day of the week. The lifting of the ban on 'controversial broadcasting' in 1928 did not extend to religion, with the decision to 'continue to exclude the discussion of certain subjects likely to offend religious or moral susceptibilities' (WAC C1/26/1). As the *BBC Handbook* for 1929 noted (210), 'the removal of the ban on controversy in regard to religion creates a new possibility in theory rather than in practice'. In effectively maintaining a ban on controversial broadcasting in all matters that pertained to religion, the BBC curtailed any considerable criticism of Christianity by secularist and unorthodox Christian groups. The corporation's policy of protection effectively amounted to censorship, preventing other minority Christian faiths and irreligious groups from contesting the 'truth' of mainstream Christianity. The orthodox Christian churches benefited enormously inasmuch as they exerted a disproportionate influence over broadcasting policy generally. Not surprisingly, the BBC faced accusations of creating a Christian monopoly over religious broadcasting.

By contrast, Sabbatarian pressure groups praised the BBC for helping to preserve the Christian Sabbath². The most vociferous of these groups was the Lord's Day Observance Society. In early correspondence, the LDOS formally thanked the BBC for 'respecting the quiet and religious character of the British Sunday in the compilation of its Sunday Programmes' (WAC R41/100). Like Reith, the LDOS firmly believed that the BBC's Sabbath policy needed no defence as it was 'in accord with the mind of multitudes of our countrymen who have no desire for a more secular or vaudeville Programme on Sundays, or indeed any approximation on that day to the atmosphere of the continental station broadcasts'.

Occasionally, however, the Corporation was criticised by Sabbatarians, particularly in the late thirties when it began to express an interest in extending the hours of the Sunday Programme to fill the hitherto silent hours between 10.45 am and 12.30 pm by broadcasting appropriate secular material 'in keeping with the BBC Sunday policy'³. The BBC's motive was to attract back listeners who tuned in to the commercial, continental stations (WAC R30/2/166/1 & R34/809/1). The puritanical instinct for Sunday Observance was most pronounced in Scotland. Such was the opposition to the extension of the Sunday Programme that BBC management responsible for broadcasting in Scotland were obliged to meet a

Bailey, 'He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear'...

deputation from the Lord's Day Observance Association of Scotland on 12 April 1938 (see WAC R44/557; Dinwiddie 1968, 25-6; Wolfe 1984, 72-5). The deputation was introduced by the Rev. E. J. Hagan, Moderator of the Presbytery of Edinburgh, who stated that he was 'profoundly disturbed by the gradual introduction of secular programmes on Sundays, and felt that some protest was necessary ... to prevent further encroachment of secular programmes on the Lord's day' (WAC R44/557). Rev. W. A. Guthrie added that it was in his opinion 'a moral wrong to broadcast such programmes on Sunday'. The Rev. James Hair felt it was necessary to 'face up to the ethics of life in these days, and that such an organisation as the BBC could help very greatly in this respect'. In spite of these protestations, BBC opinion increasingly viewed strict Sabbatarianism as outmoded, in view of recent innovations in amusement and entertainment. The Scottish Regional Director, Melville Dinwiddie, drafted an internal memorandum after meeting the ministers, urging a move away from Sabbatarianism towards secular entertainment, if only so that it might engage 'those who would otherwise be idle and at a loose end on a Sunday morning' (WAC R 30/2/166/1). The BBC was slowly moving away from seeing Sunday as a day entirely for religious observance but it was only with the introduction of the Forces Programme early in 1940 that secular entertainment was finally introduced. Until then the spectre of Reith still held sway.

Reithian Christianity

No history of the early BBC would be complete without mention of John Reith, the first General-Manager and Director-General of the BBC. Born a Scotsman, and a lifelong devout Christian, Reith's part in shaping the policy of the BBC, or what might be more broadly referred to as BBC culture, not least its public service ethos, was distinct. He more than anybody championed the BBC's civilising mission.

The sense in which one can reasonably talk about the spectre of Reith vis-à-vis the BBC's embodiment of his ethos is provided by Wynford Vaughan Thomas, a BBC employee during the inter-war period:

The spirit of Reith brooded over Broadcasting House in those days. It was a strange experience to walk for the first time into that hall, with its inscriptions. It was like entering a temple: no doubt about it. You moved about the corridors with awe and reverence, and you felt as if you had been admitted into a High Church, and you were taking Holy Orders. (Quoted in Robinson 1982, 69-70)

As with the inscription above the sculpture of *The Sower* it is clearly evident that there was a direct link between the BBC's secular civilising mission on the one

hand, and religion, that is Christian morality and piety, on the other. Reith's influence here was unequivocal, particularly his insistence upon a strict Sabbath policy, one that, in spite of the blatant and overwhelming unpopularity of religious broadcasting, was to endure for much of the inter-war period. Reith was anxious that broadcasting ought to serve the Christian faith and the observance of the Sabbath as a sacrosanct institution. He was all too aware of the increasing diminution of the Sabbath tradition and genuinely thought that 'the surrender of the principles of Sunday observance is fraught with danger'; and that 'the secularising of the day is one of the most significant and unfortunate trends of modern life ...' (Reith 1924, 195). Sundays were a day for 're-creation of the mind and refreshment of the spirit' and therefore represented 'one of the invaluable assets of our existence – quiet islands on the tossing sea of life' (Ibid, 196). Giving oral evidence before the Crawford Committee, Reith stated that

broadcasting should not assist the secularisation of [the Sabbath] ... the Sunday programmes should be framed with the day itself in mind ... There should be a religious service every Sunday evening from every station in the country and whatever may take place thereafter, music or otherwise, be appropriate. (WAC R4/28/1)

For Reith religion was more than just a system of faith in some form of superhuman controlling power, since religion should induce 'an adjustment of conduct in daily life to accord with the known or assumed characteristics of the Supreme Being' (1924, 191).⁴ Religion was as much to do with regulating one's behaviour and effecting 'an essential code of ethics common' as it was with offering solace and the hope of salvation. Indeed, what was relatively new about the BBC's pastoral guidance was that it was largely for secular purposes. Though some of the BBC's internal terms of reference were explicitly religious, its civilising mission was more properly concerned with moral training as a practical remedy, an everyday ethical practice, rather than a theology for the salvation of souls. Hence Reith's intolerance for populism and what he saw as its encouragement of impropriety in cultural and moral matters.⁵

Whilst Reith's attitude towards Sunday was typical of contemporary attitudes of middle-class churchgoers who saw religion as a means of inculcating both morality and respectability, his religiosity was undoubtedly more radical. For example, though Reith (1924, 200) sincerely hoped that religious broadcasting would rejuvenate church attendance and other official religious practices – indeed he thought that if the churches recognised their new opportunity, there would 'not be room enough to hold their people' – he did not think it was 'necessarily a criterion of any religious or spiritual value'. Reith believed in an essentially 'Christian Britain', which broadcasting only need tap into. His concern for practical remedies meant he 'did not find theological doctrine or dogma of much practical

Bailey, *He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear*...

significance in the world today' (cited in Wolfe 1984, 19). Far more important was that the various Christian denominations speak with one voice and sustain a Christian version of 'the nation'. Hence Reith's (1924, 194) stated preference for non-denominationalism and his insistence upon a 'thoroughgoing, optimistic and manly religion'.

Reith's advocacy for non-denominationalism was amplified in much BBC religious broadcasting policy. A BBC brochure, *Hints to Sunday Speakers* (1928), proscribed 'sectarian propaganda or provocative argument' (WAC R6/14/3). The 1928 *BBC Handbook* (131) reiterated that religious broadcasting 'does not concern itself with a narrow interpretation of dogma, but with the application of the teaching of Christ to everyday life'. Similarly, the 1932 *BBC Handbook* (216) stressed that 'broadcast services are not the occasion for sectarian propaganda' and the need 'to dwell rather on that which unites than on that which divides'. That BBC policy was concurrent with the wider movement within Christianity towards ecumenicalism is significant, and is something I shall discuss in more detail in a short while.

BBC Religion

The degree to which broadcast religion became regarded as an authoritative ecclesiastical practice was confirmed in the often used reference to 'BBC Religion'. Indeed, concern in the church that religious broadcasting was too populist, and thus undermining the sovereignty of the church, led the Convocation of Canterbury, the church's inaugural policy making executive, to call for 'clearer guidance as to the ways in which it was possible for the church to deepen and extend the good influences that broadcasting has brought to bear' (cited in Wolfe, 1984, 20). It appointed a committee of inquiry, chaired by L. J. White-Thomson, Bishop of Ely. The committee presented its report, entitled, *The Religious Value of Broadcast Services and their Bearing on Public Worship*, to convocation on 21 January 1931. In spite of the suspicion and doubt expressed by some clergy that broadcast religion would have a derogatory effect on church attendance and public worship – indeed the committee emphasised the fact that religious broadcasting 'should not be regarded as a substitute for corporate public worship' – the first unanimous resolution to be carried in both the upper and lower houses of convocation was a 'grateful appreciation of the service rendered to the cause of religion by the British Broadcasting Company' (1931, 10). They were of the opinion that

the effect of broadcasting has been exceedingly valuable. It has recalled to the acknowledgement of God many thousands who had, from various causes, been out of touch with sacred things. The appeal of God has found its way into homes and into hearts untouched by organised religion ... It has brought religion once again into the market place. Discussions spring up...between men descending in the cage, in factories, under the lee side of

a hedge, in bars, and places where other songs and subjects are usually heard and discussed. (1931, 4)

Elsewhere the Committee quoted in the Report, and made their own, the words in which the Corporation, in its memorandum on the history and development of the religious side of broadcasting (WAC R51/482), defined the scope of its activities:

They would claim that its obvious possibilities (bringing religion to the hearthside as a source of comfort to the sick, the isolated, the timid among religious people, and in making the voice of religion, the beauty of worship and the attractions of Scripture known to the vast numbers of irreligious and semi-religious outsiders) have been explored and exploited to the utmost with results little short of marvellous; but at the same time there will be no denial of the fact that people whose only religious contact is through listening miss some of the most essential influences of religion, and their constant hope is that, as in the field of education, so in the field of religion, broadcasting may act as a stimulus and a means of recruitment for the Churches. (1931, 3)

Just as the 1851 census had complimented Nonconformism for its missionary zeal, so too was broadcasting congratulated on its capacity to reach those who had been lost to religion. The report concluded by exhorting the clergy to make wider use of broadcasting's educational facilities and to lead people to select 'the best thing to listen-in to' so as to 'gradually wean them from the cheap and the mean' (1931, 7). The report was undoubtedly a landmark in the history of religious broadcasting: the policy of the Corporation had been vindicated, and was now firmly established.

Popular Theology

How to preserve the popularity of religious broadcasting and engage ever increasing numbers of listeners became the primary focus of Corporation policy during much of the thirties. A series of connected religious talks, *God and the World through Christian Eyes*, was broadcast in place of the ordinary services in the National Programme on the first and third Sundays of the month throughout 1933, each half-an-hour lecture being preceded by a fifteen-minute service (WAC R34/809/1; Wolfe 1984, 49-53 & 84-5). The series was a response to the Ely Report's recommendation that the Corporation develop broadcasts of a more theological character in an attempt to better inform the general public about Christian doctrine. The Archbishop of Canterbury in his introduction to the talks hoped that the series would facilitate intelligent discussion by presenting the central truths which Christians hold in common (WAC R6/21/1). Many clergy felt that broadcasting could succeed where preaching could not, in bringing an intelligible understanding of Christianity to the broad mass of the people (Wolfe 1984, 85). The BBC saw the talks as a means of promoting adult education in

Bailey, *He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear*...

religious knowledge (BBC 1933, 60). It was also hoped that the series would encourage listeners to think more about their personal religion, and in so doing situate religion more firmly within a domestic context as well as the more traditional pew and pulpit mode of worship (Dinwiddie 1968, 25). As the lectures were planned as a contribution to adult education, clergy were encouraged to form and lead discussion-groups among their congregations. The BBC was confident that, 'Any clergyman who sits in at a number of such discussions conducted by groups from among different sections of his congregation will surely grow in the knowledge of his people's mind, and find his power of useful leadership correspondingly increased'. In other words, the onus was 'on the clergy and other leaders of religious thought to see that good use was made of the instrument put into their hands' (BBC 1933, 60).

Despite the odd example of successful discussion groups, the series was essentially a failure. Widely criticised for being too 'technical' and 'high-brow', regular listeners had turned off in droves, preferring to listen to the more orthodox religious broadcasts or not at all (WAC R34/809/1; *BBC Handbook*, 1934, 94). For the church and the BBC it was a stark reminder that the listening public did not like the didactical style of the formal lecture for religious broadcasting; many still preferred to feel that they were participating in religious worship and ritual, as they would when attending church. The problem was thus how to combine the discursive form of the lecture with that of the sermon: that is the technical with the popular. Subsequent series of religious talks, for example *The Way to God* and *This Christian Faith*, were conceived with this objective in mind. In his foreword to the pamphlet for *The Way to God* series, William Temple, stated that this series would 'start from the common facts of experience, continue with questions everyone was likely to ask, give the answer the Christian Church exists to proclaim, and end by applying that answer to life and its claim on our attention and action' (cited in Dinwiddie 1968, 80). Though some complained that the talks were still incomprehensible, the series and the discourse it employed was a marked contrast to its predecessor.

This move towards popular theology was further developed alongside a series of national and international ecumenical conferences held in the mid-thirties. It was felt by many Christian clergy that the age-long conflict between the Church and secular power had again become acute. A series of reports of the Conference at Oxford entitled, *Church, Community and State* (1937) had as their theme the problem of 'how religion is to survive in a single community which is neither Church nor State ... but which covers the whole of life and claims to be the source and goal of every human activity' (Ibid, 9). Among other things, the report reviewed the possible sites of Christian observance, lamenting its decline in the home but noting the potential of new education agencies, such as broadcasting and the cinema, to 'provide unprecedented opportunities for reaching and influencing masses of the

population' (Ibid, 141 and 154). Though many of its recommendations were in fact concerned with the Church's role in providing leisure activities, it implicitly endorsed the view that broadcasting represented a real opportunity to recover Christianity's popularity. This public symbiosis between the church and the BBC was however paradoxical for it depended upon addressing an audience it could not see, and whose responses it could not control.

The significance of the Oxford conference was that the clergy yet again acknowledged that broadcasting represented a real opportunity to redress the Churches' ever increasing unpopularity with the popular masses. There was recognition of the need to exploit the intimacy of radio as a medium, addressing not a congregation in a church but individuals in their own homes, thus connecting Christian theology with 'popular' religion.⁶ The project was distinctly missionary, and in keeping with the wider innovations in techniques of early twentieth-century Christian pedagogy.

Private Worship

Reith and the like believed in a new sort of Christianity, one which would take religion to the people by penetrating what was for many people their *sanctum sanctorum* – the home. Religious broadcasts, studio services in particular, thus became an instrument of private mediation when at home and, as Wolfe notes (1984, 46), 'could properly bring religious piety to the hearer rather than draw him away to some church actuality'. In short, the BBC was promoting public religion as private entertainment.

There were some favourable conditions for this project. One, noted by Filson Young, was that popular culture recognised Sunday as a special day, set aside from the ordinary working week. 'The habit ... of putting on better clothes than usual and having something special in the way of food on one day of the week is a very sound thing; and broadcasting with us has always put on its very best clothes on a Sunday'. Radio fitted in well. 'Sunday is still essentially a day devoted to the enjoyment of their homes by those who have them, and wireless is a very important part of the furniture of these homes' (cited in Briggs 1981, 148-9). Young recognised that whilst the public may not partake of official religion they did observe the special nature of Sunday as a day for familial recreation centred around the home and hearth. If radio could situate itself at the centre of this familial institution, the creation of a 'wireless congregation' was a distinct possibility.

However, unlike church or Sunday school, discipline could not be enforced at home where listeners were relatively free to do as they please: to move around rather than remain seated, to listen passively rather than attentively and in silence,

and so on. The concern that private worship would encourage inappropriate forms of religiosity was expressed in the *Edinburgh Evening News* (5 May 1928) which asserted that, ‘a man sitting in an easy chair with headphones on, or even listening to a loud speaker, cannot in any sense be said to be taking part in worship. He is not of the service he hears; his attitude of mind, sitting in his armchair, is altogether different from what it would be if he were sitting in a pew’. Homes in which a spatial and temporal sanctuary were set aside for the purposes of religious broadcasting were the exception; more often than not, there was much to distract from the true spirit of worship. In other words, the home did not embody a spatial disciplinary apparatus in the same way that a church did. It is probably for this reason that both the BBC and the Church were pro-active in organising listening fellowship groups or Church Tutorial Classes which, like many of the WEA tutorial classes, would take place in buildings whose architecture embodied a disciplinary apparatus, such as libraries or school classrooms for example.

All this made it vital that the content of broadcasts should be appropriate for the domestic context of listening whilst not deterring listeners or provoking other inappropriate responses. The problem was addressed in an internal memorandum on how to improve broadcast religious services, circulated to all members of the CRAC by Iremonger in February 1937 (WAC R6/21/1). The chief problem was ensuring how listeners might share in broadcast services without loss of attention. One of the first suggestions was that abstract nouns – such as co-operation, fellowship, and service – ought to be avoided on the grounds that ‘the listener receives the impression that he [sic] is hearing an entirely impersonal statement’. Hints to Sunday speakers issued by the CRAC in 1928 asked them to remember that ‘the tone of voice found to have most appeal is that of the intimate and sympathetic talk rather than that of a public address’ (WAC R51/482). Speakers were asked to ‘think of his [sic] audience not as a crowd or a congregation, but a vast number of individuals to whom he is speaking in the intimacy of their homes’ (WAC R6/14/3). Even prayers were kept short and simple as opposed to the more traditional discursive or preaching prayers commonly practiced in the church (see Dinwiddie 1968, 52-60). Prayer books were especially published for broadcast services and their contents organised around everyday practices. *The Book of Common Prayer* was revised in 1929 under the new title of *Service for Broadcasting*. Among its fifteen forms of service were: ‘The Fatherly Care’, ‘The Responsibilities of Life’, ‘The Duties of Life’, ‘Home and Friendship’, ‘Education, Art and Letters’, and ‘Health, Recreation and Healing’ (WAC R51/482). From September 1926 the *Sunday Programme* concluded with an Epilogue, another broadcasting innovation which was essentially a very brief mediation on some religious theme, much like a thought for the day. An internal memorandum on Epilogues stated that it ‘was always the object of the BBC to preserve an air of mystery with regard to the Epilogue, and to retain an “improvised, unexpected quality” that would set it apart from the rest of the evening’s programme’ (WAC R51/482). It was something to

mull over in one's head before going to bed. And maybe a kernel of its 'moral truth' would have taken hold by the morning.

Some elements of Christianity could be exploited for their inherent enjoyment. One of the most popular expressions of religiosity during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was hymn singing, not least because hymns were closely interwoven with familial and communal life (see Williams 1999, 150-4). The broadcasting of hymns on the radio could be both Christian and popular, especially with the proliferation of 'new hymns' which tended to be even more populist in form and content, bearing a close resemblance to popular secular songs. There are even reports of hymn-signing by radio congregations in public-houses, as testified by a correspondent of the *Radio Times* who wrote in May 1924:

Dear Sirs – While at Erith [Kent], the other day, I heard one of the wonders of wireless. While passing a public house, I was more than surprised to hear all therein joining in singing a hymn which was then being broadcast from London. Surely, the preacher never dreamt of such an audience. (Cited in Briggs 1981, 148)

Unfortunately, not all sacred music broadcasts were appreciated by the listening public. The complete series of Bach's cantatas broadcast in 1928 for a whole year were notoriously unpopular.⁷ While it stayed close to popular tradition and exploited the intimate potential of the new medium of radio, religious broadcasting could gain an audience but when it became too theological or highbrow, the audience was often lost, prompting them to tune in to other stations.

Popular Alternatives: Luxembourg and Normandie

By the 1930s broadcast religion had assumed a definite shape: output had increased considerably: Sunday evening Services, Bible Readings, Religious Talks, Missionary Talks, the Epilogue, Weekly Evensong and a Daily Service were all now prominent features in the weekly broadcast programme. Outside broadcasts had taken place from many different churches as well as from several cathedrals, including York, Worcester, Durham, Belfast, Armagh, Lincoln and Liverpool (WAC R34/809/1). Nevertheless, it was becoming increasingly clear that the BBC's Sunday Programme was unpopular. The listening public preferred listening to Radios Luxembourg and Normandie, which began broadcasting an alternative secular Sunday programme during the inter-war period (see Briggs 1965, 362-4). For every good seed sown by the BBC, the 'enemy' continental stations were deliberately sowing weeds, causing the word of god to be choked by life's pleasures. Indeed, the BBC was increasingly aware, as stated in an internal memorandum outlining the historical development of religious broadcasting, of 'the lamentable gap that often occurs between hopes and fulfilment'; and of 'the

Bailey, 'He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear'...

limitations of religious broadcasting' (WAC R51/482). Sunday Speakers were thus urged to remember that 'listeners are able to stop listening at will', and that, 'thousands of them will switch off their sets before the end of a long, elaborate and unfamiliar anthem, psalm or hymn' (WAC R6/14/3).

And so they did. According to Rowntree's (1941, 407-8) survey of listeners of working-class households in York 'it is often customary to switch on to Luxembourg first thing in the morning and leave it on all day, with perhaps a break in the evening for the religious service'. A survey by the Institute of Incorporated Practitioners in Advertising in 1935 showed that a half of British listeners regularly tuned in to Radio Luxembourg on Sundays. A further survey carried out in 1938 estimated that one million households listened to Luxembourg (Briggs 1965, 363-4). The first major BBC departmental report on the audience for religious broadcasts, carried out by Robert Silvey in 1939, provided a more detailed portrait of those most likely to stay with the BBC for religious broadcasts (Wolfe 1984, 127-9). They were most likely to live in the South West and more likely to be middle class than working class. It would seem that the labouring masses represented seed cast 'along the path' and 'the rock' in the sense that the word of god was unable to take hold. Those who have ears to hear will not always hear!

Furthermore, since most listeners to religious broadcasting did not regularly attend church, broadcast religion was less a supplement than an alternative to church attendance. Compared to church services, religious broadcasts seemed less demanding and more entertaining (Wolfe 1984, 129). But this remained a minority appeal and the demand for entertainment pure and simple on the radio, including Sunday, could not be held back. The Ullswater Committee (1935, 31), the last of the inter-war broadcasting committees, noted the severity and 'lack of attractiveness in the programmes broadcast on Sundays'; and recommended that 'one of the alternative programmes should be of a lighter and more popular character'. For all their efforts to steer broadcast religion away from populism, sabbatarians had failed to curb the demand for popular religion and entertainment. It would seem that the spirit of Reith was about to be exorcised.

Conclusions

This last comment seems to neatly summarise the tensions between Sabbatarianism on the one hand and the strong pressures towards the provision of entertainment within which radio was caught. Paradoxically, radio as a form of popular entertainment was itself implicated in the secularisation of culture and leisure. This contradiction remained at the heart of BBC policy, not least in the tension between instruction and entertainment. This was less evident in the early than the later years of the inter-war period. The early BBC developed a clear sense of mission in relation to religious broadcasting. And it did so in the context of

discourses and practices inherited from the history of English religion. The late BBC, however, was becoming increasingly aware of the immensity of the task as envisaged by Reith, viz. restoring the centrality of the Christian faith in an essentially post-Christian society. It is at this point that we see the contradictory nature of the BBC's wider civilising mission, of which religion was only one facet. Much better that religious broadcasting provided a positive method of observing the Sabbath, rather than the earlier negative policy which attempted to negate the desire for secular amusement and relaxation.

Notwithstanding the moderation of BBC Religion, wireless became an indispensable instrument for disseminating Christian utterance. Once initial suspicion had given way to a policy of co-operation, public service broadcasting and ecclesiastical politics were inextricably intertwined. By the 1930s, the BBC was widely regarded as an adjunct of the Christian establishment. Not surprisingly, religious broadcasting mirrored changes and developments in the wider Christian community; this was particularly so vis-à-vis the progressive ecumenical movement that emerged in the inter-war period. Whether religious broadcasting succeeded in making Britain a more religious country is debatable. That broadcast religion was a technology of pastoral pedagogy whose rationality was to instil a stronger sense of religiosity and morality in an increasingly secular, non-attending church public is unquestionable. Radio became the agent of aggressive Christianity *par excellence*, inasmuch as it was able to penetrate the inner sanctum of the home. One is reminded of the proverb: 'If the mountain will not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain'.

Though still one-way communication, broadcasting's ability to communicate to a mass audience undoubtedly surpassed that of the Church, which was no longer the primary source of information or means of public communication. Indeed, secular social institutions – such as the BBC – would, in time, replace the Church both as the everyday embodiment of spiritual discipline, moral authority and pastoral guidance, and in terms of offering its incumbents social prestige and respectability. That religion should become one of the core broadcasting activities only accentuated this process inasmuch as the church was seen to be actively consenting to the relegation of religion to the level of an essentially secular-based medium, that is, one far removed from the pulpit and pew. This is not to say that the church no longer figured in public life in the early twentieth century. Rather, Christian utterance was de-ritualised, reinvented, and absorbed into the voice of the BBC, thus transforming it into a more accessible, everyday social phenomenon. And whilst previous media had served as intermediaries for the word of God, broadcasting was particularly suited to extending, renewing, and re-embedding Christian pedagogical traditions in temporal and spatial contexts on a scale that was previously unimaginable.⁸

Bailey, 'He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear'...

For those willing to listen, the broadcasting ether afforded an extended, imagined holy communion in which they could participate from the comfort of their own homes. For others it was just one of several competing voices to which they could listen to should they chose to do so. The BBC was not the only medium capable of speaking. Also, the spatial and temporal 'distanciated' nature of broadcasting also meant the BBC's attempts to sow the word of God constantly ran up against the problem of regulating the way in which the listening public tuned-in. The ether may have been monopolised by the voice of the BBC but the reality of the everyday context in which the public listened was one in which there were other voices, noises and cultural practices, giving rise to endless other listening subjectivities. In short, those with ears to hear were more diffuse and diverse than ever before, making it increasingly difficult for the BBC to produce the desired crop.

Notes

¹ Probably the most famous comment on nineteenth-century religion and secularisation – and its subsequent development in the early twentieth century – was the English Religious Census of 1851 undertaken by Horace Mann (1853), the then Registrar-General of Religion. As well as showing the amount of 'accommodation' for worship provided by the various religious bodies, the report also summarised the extent to which the means for religious worship were used, not least its absence among 'the labouring myriads', those 'most in need' of religion. Mann was especially critical of the Church of England's indifference towards pastorship vis-à-vis the 'Methodist patriarchs' for their 'unceasing labours' in converting non-believers. The ineffectiveness of the Anglican parochial system was further exasperated owing to the spatial isolation of many of its parishioners from the church, the parsonage, and the manor house. It was becoming apparent that the traditional Anglican parochial system was one that belonged to a rural, pre-industrial England (see Eliot, 1953: 214-6; Gilbert, 1976: 100-10; Inglis, 1963: 24-7). Conventional parish ministers were in no position to reach such people since they essentially waited for the people to come to them. By contrast, the non-conformists went to meet the people. That said, how to develop new methods of pastorship, or what Mann called 'aggressive Christianity', was a concern for all the Christian denominations, so that by the early twentieth century we see a shift towards more practical forms of religiosity, ones which increasingly relied upon discreet forms of surveillance. The full extent of the Churches estrangement from the everyday fabric of English society became even more transparent after the First World War. One of the many Ministry of Reconstruction reports was one on religion, *The Army and Religion* (1919). The report committee was convened by The Rt. Rev. E. S. Talbot, Bishop of Winchester. The aim and scope of the enquiry was to ascertain what male soldiers thought about religion, morality, and

society; how the war has affected their moral and religious outlook and charter; and, finally, the relation of the men to the churches. What the report made clear was that an overwhelming majority of working class males were no longer reached by the Church. The report was also quite candid in its articulation of the perceived threat posed by disaffected soldiers to the social order on their return. More than this, the report was concerned that male soldiers were potentially disaffected from all established institutions, with that danger that 'our statesmen may find themselves later on facing tidal forces of feeling which will sweep them away into oblivion' (ibid.: xxvi). The report goes on to suggest that whilst many soldiers expressed an elementary religiosity, their beliefs were not in any way grounded in official religion or Christian morality. Rather their religion was premised upon popular interpretations of Christian faith and practices – what prevailed amongst the soldiers was not so much Christianity as, to quote the report, a 'natural religion'. This was regarded as insufficient since it prescribed no clear rules for moral conduct or objective exercise of the intellect. Whilst the report recognised that such practices cannot 'be overthrown by repressive agencies alone', it strongly recommended that 'vital impulses' be somehow channelled into more 'wholesome' and 'honourable' practices. And it was suggested that the Christian Church pioneer the way for the state by discovering and providing these channels, that is to say, practical remedies. The report thus stressed that in order for social reconstruction to be realised there must be a concomitant spiritual and moral regeneration. In other words, religion must lead in setting the standards for the whole nation. The significance of the above is that we see quite clearly the function of religion as a technology of social governance: religion guarantees morality; morality guarantees order within the state; the state guarantees the welfare of its citizens, and so on. More than this, these problems would become the guiding tenets of the BBC's approach to religious broadcasting. There was a reworking in more modern terms of the same concerns as the 1851 census and the 1919 Report, viz. how to reclaim a Christian identity for the nation. Then the remedies were evangelism and rational recreation; now the emphasis is more on reformist politics, ecumenicalism and penetration of the home. This shifting definition of the role of religion in the life of the nation was to have a direct bearing upon BBC religion.

² The tradition of a seven day week with a weekly day of rest and worship has been observed by most religions for hundreds of years (see Eskenazi et al, 1991; Lincoln, 1982; Rordorf, 1968). English Sabbatarianism emerged as a widely observed social custom during the sixteenth century Reformation, since when there have been various legal and moral prescriptions for Sunday observance (see Wigley, 1980: 204-08). The high point of English Sabbatarianism was the mid-Victorian period. The austerity of the English Sabbath during this period was infamous, prompting one foreign observer to remark: 'I do not know for what unspeakable sin the Lord has sentenced England to the weekly punishment of her

Sunday' (cited in Pickering, 1972: 35). Of the various Sunday observance societies, by far the most significant was the Lord's Day Observance Society (LDOS), founded by Daniel Wilson in 1831. Among the society's stated principles was a 'firm belief in the Divine Authority and perpetual obligation of the Christian Sabbath or Lord's Day' (WAC R41/100). One of the earliest LDOS publications was a treatise entitled *An Appeal to the Rich* (1831), warning the ruling class that if the poor be allowed to break God's law there was a possibility that they might reject all human authority upon which the social status quo depended. Other Sunday observance societies included: the National Lord's Day Rest Association, the Working Men's Lord's Day Rest Association, The League Against Sunday Travelling, and the Imperial Sunday Alliance. All enjoined strict observation of the Sabbath. Even Sunday newspapers were deemed a profanation of the English Sunday insofar as they encouraged the dissemination of secular ideas and practices. Sabbatarians were particularly anxious to regulate working class uses of leisure on Sundays. So much so that many religious figures began to advocate that, to quote Inglis (1963: 79), 'the churches take pleasure and consecrate it'. Just as social reformers had turned to recreation in an effort to regulate the conduct of the popular masses, so too did religious leaders begin to infuse religion with secular, rational recreation in the hope that it might revive the popularity of the church and religion. Just as the political rationality of many so-called educative leisure activities were opaque, so too was the religious pill tempered with a coating of sugar.

³ Yet another protest came from the Imperial Alliance for the Defence of Sundays, who engaged in a lengthy correspondence with the BBC objecting to the proposal to introduce musical comedy in its Sunday Programme (WAC R41/74). The IADS was thus of the opinion that, 'the introduction into Sunday programmes of comedy would be a further distraction and negation of the high and noble purposes for which Sunday was ordained and for which it has been used for many centuries'.

⁴ This belief in a higher incontrovertible authority to which one owes the whole self and the whole of one's behaviour was propounded by the Rev. C. C. Martindale in a service broadcast on 20 October 1929, of which a précis was published in *The Listener* (30 October 1929). Like Reith, Martindale thought Christianity instils a sense of obligation or duty 'to act thus and thus', to behave in accordance with a conscience that constantly invokes a sense of 'I ought'. In short, religion is a moral imperative.

⁵ Reith's intolerance for any kind of impropriety was especially pronounced with regard BBC employees: so-called 'guilty parties' were quickly dispensed with: even Peter Eckersley, the BBC's Chief Engineer, was made to leave the Corporation shortly after he divorced his wife.

⁶ In recent years there have emerged a number of so-called revisionist religious histories that refute the secularisation thesis expounded in the above (see Cox,

1982; Green, 1990 & 1996; McLeod, 1984, 1987 & 1996; Morris, 1992; Williams, 1999). Whereas the above histories were preoccupied with the question of religious decline and institutional expressions of religiosity, more recent histories have focused upon popular expressions of religiosity. What these histories illustrate is that Christianity amongst the working-class was distinct from the official ideal of the true believer (see Williams, 1999: 105-25). In other words, the popular masses did not regard church-based culture as the only arbiter of truth or morality. Rather, the ideas and practices of popular religion were firmly rooted in the ethical and religious milieu of the local community and tended to be enacted within a context of nostalgia, loyalty, and tradition. Such practices included simple humanitarian goodness towards one's family, neighbours and friends, a respect for the Sabbath, sending one's children to Sunday school, and teaching them to say prayers. Sunday school was especially popular, at least with parents. Sending their children to church – a practice commonly referred to as 'religion by deputy' – presented themselves as being respectable members of the community, if not actively religious themselves. A more sceptical view was that the working classes were using the churches simply for entertainment purposes, charity hand-outs, or somewhere to unload the children for a couple of hours, without making any formal commitment beyond attending once in a while or sending their children to Sunday school. In all these forms, working-class aloofness from church-based culture should not necessarily be understood as indifference but rather as a renegotiation of what it meant to be a 'good Christian'. Direct church involvement was not the only criterion for observing or ensuring the moral well-being of the populace. Many working-class families continued to uphold Christian morality and traditions based on their own reinterpretations and cultural heritage thus effecting what Williams (1999: 166) describes as a 'coalescence of folk and official religious discourses'. The reason for my mentioning this is because the BBC religious broadcasting would succeed best where it exploited the popular basis of religion rather than reproducing the dominant forms from which too many were already alienated.

⁷ Dinwiddie (1968: 63) tells an amusing story of a taxi-driver who refused to drive a musician to Broadcasting House on discovering he was engaged in 'them Bach cantatas'.

⁸ This 're-mooring of tradition' was crucial to cultivating a sense of ordered national identity based on assimilated, shared cultural experiences (see Thompson, 1997: 179-206).

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