

RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING – FRIEND OR FOE?

Near the beginning of his fascinating 'Foreword' to Melville Dinwiddie's *Religion by Radio*, the late Lord Reith, master-architect of British Broadcasting, makes this controversial statement:

Religion by radio – probably relatively the most ineffectual and anyhow the most inefficient . . . of all the sectional activities of broadcasting.

Later in the same 'Foreword', his exposition of this apparently denigratory thesis expresses even more upsetting sentiments:

The comment above about the ineffectualness and inefficiency of broadcast religious activities is not to any extent chargeable to the transmitting end – conception, planning, mounting, execution; nor to the receiving end as such. It did and does apply to follow-up – or rather lack of follow-up. The Churches, all denominations and confessions, presumably exist to bring men to a knowledge of, and faith in, Christ; 'Come and See' their supreme commission. In business terms, they have something to sell. Here millions of pounds worth of advertising has been done for them free. Nor did they realise what was required by way of follow-up to those whose interest had been revived. If they had, there might have been a national revival on a scale hitherto unimagined.

There is just enough truth behind Reith's judgement to make his statements sting. For example when the late Very Rev. Dr. John White preached in Glasgow Cathedral in the late 'forties, on the occasion of the BBC's Semi-Jubilee in Scotland, he reminded us that he had gone ahead with the first-ever Glasgow radio Outside Broadcast of a Church Service from The Barony in face of the opposition of the Presbytery of Glasgow who, somehow or other, saw both sacrilege and blasphemy in this innovation. Yet within the next decade the names of Dick Sheppard, George Macleod and Pat McCormick were household names throughout the United Kingdom. It was Dick Sheppard himself who drew attention to the fact that many of his listeners were obviously people outside the normal life of the Churches.

The war years brought even greater gains. Ronald Selby Wright's ministry as Radio Padre was not only to millions of servicemen and women, but also to vaster numbers on the Home Front, including those fathers who saw their sons enduring the same dangers and agonies which they believed they had fought to remove for ever from the world. One is delighted, that, following a little tardily upon

the heels of State, Mother Church has at last recognized this unique and penetrating ministry.

The other great war-time advance was the Dorothy Sayers' play-cycle, *The Man born to be King*. But this time, and again in advance of the event, the accusations of sacrilege and blasphemy were even louder, for the unseen but heard portrayal of Christ was involved. Brilliant writing and brilliant acting silenced most of the critics, and the Person of Jesus took on a new dimension of Humanity for all but a very few of those who listened. A regular spate of Bible plays, written in the contemporary idiom, followed on radio; also on stage, in church hall, and indeed they continue in this tradition down to our own day.

Radio flowered here in Scotland during those post-war years and much experimentation was carried through which came to a logical climax in the 'Radio Missions' of 1950 and 1952. A Radio Mission brought into the homes of the country six weeks of highly skilled and concentrated Religious Broadcasting. It invited the parish churches of the land to make these broadcasts known by parish mission visitation to all homes, whether church-going or not, and at the conclusion of the broadcasts to carry out a second parish visitation to reap any harvest that was coming to growth. This was a genuine attempt to enlist the Churches in that follow-up which seemed to be so important to Lord Reith. Only about two dozen churches carried through their local part of the mission seriously. Some reaped extraordinary harvests, such as High Hilton, Aberdeen, under the late Henry Meikle, which found itself with a Communicants' Class eighty-strong, and the remarkable class of Tom Allan's in North Kelvinside, which, as much as any, gave birth to the subsequent Tell Scotland Movement of Evangelism. But the great majority of parishes dismissed it as a stunt, despite the distinguished radio missionaries, or simply turned on the wireless and sat back and waited for miracles to happen. Only those who worked hard saw results.

Sadly it was not Evangelism by radio which really roused the Kirk in those days. It was the proposal to broadcast the Service of Holy Communion. The midnight Mass of the Nativity had been broadcast in many lands before, during and after World War II. Indeed our Roman Catholic colleagues kept telling us that the Mass was for them the *only* service. They were very anxious to have it broadcast regularly, and in this they were supported by the Anglo-Catholics of Canterbury. In Scottish broadcasting we were not so sure about the merits of this operation. Would it not detract from the developing, evangelical influence of radio — and there was the problem of the Silence which is at the heart of our Celebration. Mercifully we had then — as indeed all down the years — a strong and able Scottish Religious Advisory Committee. It was chaired by Principal

John Baillie with Drs. Alexander MacDonald, Nevile Davidson, Edward Jarvis and G. D. Henderson, all men who were to grace the Moderatorial Chair. The Committee's advice, which the BBC in Scotland readily accepted, was that the Scottish Sacrament was a worthy Liturgy, fit to take its place in any company; that the Open Table was of considerable Ecumenical significance and that we should go ahead, having made our intentions and motives clear. Then chaos broke out! Owing to a premature release of the English side of the project from London, a garbled version of what was proposed appeared in the Scottish press. In no time, and on the basis of these press reports, without any reference to us in the BBC, Presbytery and after Presbytery passed motions of censure, thus, as so often in the past, believing the worst of the BBC and pre-judging the issue. Twenty-six Presbyteries in all, beginning with Ayr and covering the whole country, were violently opposed. Only one, that of Annandale, said it believed the Sacramental Service should be broadcast and encouraged us to go ahead. Again our SRAC stood staunchly by us. It besought the Kirk not to condemn until there had been an actual broadcast, and finally the General Assembly was persuaded to let us go ahead, while giving its Public Worship and Aids to Devotion Committee a watching brief in the matter. Before that happened, however, Melville Dinwiddie, my Controller, sent me off on a tour of the protesting Presbyteries, as he said, 'To try to talk some sense into them so that we don't sell out the Kirk to the RCs and the Anglicans!' I soon began to enjoy those encounters; the odds were so heavily against us that there was nothing to lose.

In due course the Service was broadcast from Dunbarney Parish Church, the minister, the Rev. Dr. T. B. Stewart Thomson, being both preacher and celebrant. The problem of the Silence was circumvented by a suggestion of John Baillie's, that 'Comfortable Words' such as Our Lord's affirmations about Himself, the Beatitudes, Sermon on the Mount, etc., should be read, decently interspersed with silence, after the manner of the Highland usage of his youth. The result was a profoundly moving experience and an even more deeply moving response from listeners, especially the aged and house-bound. Well over one hundred letters were received and only one was critical. This writer accused us of Romanism by including the Apostles' Creed! Oddly enough when discussing this point with Dr. Thomson, he said he would keep to the Book of Common Order in every part except that of the Creed as it was not yet the custom in Dunbarney and he did not wish to impose any innovation in a service already the occasion of so much controversy!

After the event, the arguments died down, and infrequent broadcasts of Holy Communion became part of our normal output. Many and varied had been the liturgical and theological issues raised, some

quite fundamental, others almost childish. But none of them had prepared us for the further storm which blew up five years later when the proposal was made that Holy Communion should be seen on the new medium of television! Once more the Presbyterian objections, the accusations of sacrilege and blasphemy, charge and counter-charge until the whole sorry business once more found its way to the General Assembly — with much the same results. We returned to Dunbarney of Radio fame, on the Sunday nearest St. Andrew's Day, 1953, for yet another worthy and moving occasion. As before, the arguments faded away before the reality of the happening.

But it was not only the Sacrament on television that disturbed people. It was worship of any kind. This time laymen as well as ministers had to be persuaded that we meant no harm to their services. I remember vividly meetings in the Session Rooms of St. Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, Glasgow Cathedral and Wellington, Glasgow, not to mention St. Columba's, Pont Street, which were tough going indeed. But not their ministers, all of whom were entirely in favour of television as indeed were more and more of the best thinkers and pastors in the Church. Even the Assembly debate had not been without its lighter moments. One of our critics went so far as to say in his accusation of sensationalism: 'If the BBC had been present when Moses climbed Mt. Sinai, they would have sent a recording-car after him!' Whereupon a back-bencher shouted 'A good idea too! Then we would really know what happened up there!'

One of the great fears expressed had to do with what I might describe as 'irreverent reception'. What, so the argument went, if someone in Wick or Aberdeen or Kilmarnock, were to prepare bread and wine in their own home and there receive the elements without the benefit of being present in the flesh in the communicating congregation? This thought was abhorrent to many members of the Aids to Devotion Committee, but it did not disturb me unduly that some elderly, lonely, house-bound soul might seek to renew his or her communion with the Lord Jesus in this way. Surely to limit the *Epiklesis* to one physical location was to limit the power and action of the Holy Spirit Himself. In the event, one such needy person, old and frail did just that and her letter was moving indeed to read. A year or so afterwards I discovered that a genuine 'wireless communion' situation existed in the far North-West of Canada. There, in the far-away areas, the shortage of ordained ministers at that time was so great that once or twice a year the Communion Service of the United Church was broadcast and people all over the North-West were encouraged to prepare the elements and to communicate with the worshippers in the broadcasting church and the

listening hosts and to feel themselves in every way united with them. That situation, of course, would never obtain here in Scotland with our more compact and manageable population distribution, but, on reflection, the Canadian attitude seemed to me to be both more realistic and more appreciative of the power of the Holy Spirit who knows no boundaries of Space and Time in the Almighty's Universe. Incidentally there is also a 'limiting school' both within and without the BBC in this respect, in its attitude to recorded services, acts of worship, on both radio and television. This school says that all such broadcasts must be 'Live', or happening now, otherwise the sense of immediacy is lacking. This theory is really saying that all *recorded* experiences of the Spirit are invalid, or impaired, thus destroying, presumably, the reality of the enjoyment of the world's great symphony orchestras rendering Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and the master-interpreters through music. No one can ever deny for me the reality I experienced on Good Friday morning, 1971, when I listened on Australian radio to Kenneth MacKellar's singing of 'O sacred head' from his disc of Sacred Songs recorded in Paisley Abbey a few years ago. Millions of viewers, at a very simple level, can testify to the reality of Songs of Praise programmes, the vast majority of which have had to be pre-recorded for many years. My reaction to all these limiting strictures is to say 'your God – and certainly your Holy Spirit – is too small'.

The coming of television was a shattering experience not only to Churchmen but also to those who were working in broadcasting. A few producers took to it like the proverbial ducks to water; but others found the new medium overwhelmingly complicated and resolved accordingly either to stay in radio or to get out of the business altogether. We were told to multiply everything by ten to grasp the complexity of the medium – a TV production involved ten times more staff than radio – for 3 read 30; it cost ten times as much; there were ten times as many things to be remembered and done by the producer. Religious Television was slow to get off the ground in Scotland as indeed elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We were the Cinderella of the new service.

Of course for the great occasion such as the 'Honours of Scotland' Service in which Her Majesty the Queen came to St. Giles' Cathedral after her Coronation, there was an abundance of both equipment and cash. But during the first five or six years of television, we were often struggling desperately with inadequate resources and minimal budgets. Yet necessity was indeed the mother of invention and many fine productions were made, relying upon the searching out of *people* who could communicate, rather than pictures alone, a theory which was widely held in television circles in those days. 'Television', said the BBC pundits, 'is all about moving pictures – and

pictures that move.’ Most of them sneered at the ‘talking head’ which was for ‘steam radio’ and not for the visual medium. Yet it was during those very years that Hugh Douglas’s *Coping with Life* was evolved, a pastoral series which built up a large BBC Network following – indeed the first religious series to do so from any part of the United Kingdom. So one qualified the ‘talking head’ thesis – it depended upon the *kind* of head and what it was talking about! To radio with its unseen but often friendly voices, television added the new dimension of the friendly *personality*, entering directly into the home and there talking about all the problems that were lived out within its four walls. Yet not simply talking about problems; but also showing the relevance of the Christian life for the daily living that encompassed bringing up a family, attitudes to work, marital difficulties, suffering and death itself. Not much of living nor of Christian apologetic was left out of *Coping with Life*. Hugh Douglas’s post-bag also showed that many viewers were ‘non-church’ or *lapsi*. Some of them required regular and careful correspondence. There was one of the *lapsi*, for example, with whom correspondence was carried on regularly for two years before he was received into full membership of the Anglican Church in an English village. At its peak, this was an extremely popular series, although, let it be said, much more so with viewers than with ministers. What is it about us ministers in the Church of Scotland, which makes so many of us believe that we are as good as any man in the pulpit – or in front of cameras, if only we could get our chance, or if only people would understand what we are saying; or ‘if only’? In those early days, we used to run regular ‘audition-conferences’ to which we would invite a score of likely ministers. After talking and demonstration, we would put them all in front of the camera in one way or another. But no single session ever produced more than one outstanding performer, and some none at all.

In 1958, Melville Dinwiddie, staunch churchman, former minister of St. Machar’s Cathedral, Aberdeen, deviser of *Lift Up Your Hearts*, warm supporter of two Radio Missions, retired, to be succeeded as BBC Controller, Scotland, by Andrew Stewart, returning after ten years’ distinguished service in the testing jobs of Controller, Northern Ireland, and the stretching experience of Controller, Home Service, based upon London as the noisy, brawling, new television infant began its tottering steps in all directions. Andrew Stewart was determined to build the BBC’s Television Service in Scotland into something as comprehensive as the old Radio Scottish Home Service had been in its peak year around 1950/52. It must have solid, traditional foundations and one of these was the Kirk. Not long after his arrival, he sent for me. How many religious programmes of all kinds had been seen in Scotland during the previous twelve months?

Approximately two hundred. How many of these had originated in Scotland? Thirty-seven. 'That means that Scottish viewers saw one hundred and sixty-three religious programmes from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, inevitably expressing the religious ethos of those countries, outnumbering our out-put by five to one? Why?' 'Not enough money, staff or equipment.' 'What has the General Assembly said about that?' I doubted if the General Assembly had even given the matter a serious thought at that time for the Kirk was still at the stage when for too many ministers were boasting that they were 'too busy to worry about television'. Next question: 'Who knows most about the legal side of Church and State relations in Scotland?' 'Sir Thomas Taylor of Aberdeen University,' I replied.

A fortnight later Andrew Stewart sent for me again. 'I have seen Sir Thomas', he said, 'and he has confirmed my suspicions that the BBC is culpable in the area of Religious Broadcasting in Scotland. The Church of Scotland's constitutional position as outlined in the Treaty of Union as renewed in each Accession Oath and declared to each successive General Assembly in the Message from the Throne, demands that the Kirk must at least have parity north of the Border with the other National Church south of the Border. I will see to it that you receive the staff, finance and technical resources to reach that parity as quickly as possible.' There was only one problem arising out of the Controller's excellent intentions. While the BBC's Broadcasting Council for Scotland had control over the output and content of the *radio* Scottish Home Service, it was only in an *advisory* position as far as television was concerned. In practice, this meant that I had to obtain the permission of the London-based 'Head of Religious Broadcasting', an Anglican Canon, in order to put out even an Epilogue for 'Scotland only' viewers. This was a frustrating situation and London was loth to give up even the smallest control over the Network – a situation I am happy to say, which no longer obtains with the present London HRB. But in this, as in other vital fields, London believed it really knew what was best for the Scots with a paternalism which was patronizing and at times arrogant. Those were difficult years, and life seemed to be one tough, long battle, despite Andrew Stewart's immense support. Then came the Pilkington Committee of Enquiry which, at long last, gave the Broadcasting Council for Scotland the same powers for Television as for Radio. Now we could mount any programme we wanted from the lowly Epilogue to Meeting Points, to Barclay Lectures and a Royal General Assembly which we indeed did in the Quater-Centenary year of 1960. Always, of course, provided we had the money! For the basic flaw in the Scottish situation then – as now! – was that London controlled (and controls) the purse-strings. But that, as they say, is another story about which I trust the Kirk will

have something to say when the next Committee of Enquiry into the Future of Broadcasting is set up in the not too distant future. There are several retired BBC-Scotland types like myself around the country who feel deeply about this one.

After Pilkington, came the great years of television experiment and development up to around 1965, by which time the religious output, with one exception, had become stabilized and Andrew Stewart's material promises had been fulfilled. There were regular Morning Services from churches throughout the land, supported, in the more popular evening space, by the informal worship of *Songs of Praise*, hymn-singing by united choirs of young and old, based upon the formula of 'the best old and the best new'. Here, as on radio as early as 1940, was a mass-appeal programme beloved by the common man, to the astonishment of some churchmen and not a few musicians who would have wished him to prefer Bach and Britten even if both were no strangers to the programme. This phenomenon persists to this day, and in terms of popular communications, is well worth studying. For however simple the singing, *Songs of Praise* in television terms should be a highly polished and sophisticated programme, making great demands upon the Churches as well as BBC producers and their teams. During those developing years, the documentary film came into its own, with some twenty or more Scottish products, many of which were seen throughout the United Kingdom and indeed beyond, in Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Germany, Holland and other European countries. One which went round the world was the beautifully scripted and shot *Dove across the Waters* which told the story of the Columban monks of Iona. There was a whole series of parish documentaries such as *Highland Parish*, *In the new Gorbals*, *Mining Parish*, *In a City Centre*, *At a Nation's Heart*, *The Cephas Club*, all of which reflected differing types of parishes and the attempts to make the Gospel relevant to all who dwell in them. Film profiles also made their appearance at this time, studying the life and works of such subjects as George MacLeod in *From Pattern to Pentecost*; the revered old Angus MacVicar of Southend in *The Old Padre*; layman-extraordinary, J. D. Michael in *View from a Hill-Farm*; while the Hugh Douglas story was completed in *Portrait of a Moderator*. *Sunday Set*, a magazine programme for family viewing, became the first religious magazine programme devised and produced by any part of the BBC and introduced to viewers the pleasant and able personality of Campbell McLean, again appealing widely to lay folk but with often hostile reactions from the ordained! At its peak its viewing figures were even coming near to those of *Songs of Praise*.

If ordinary viewers in Scotland are asked about their favourite religious programmes, they will all name *Songs of Praise* and 'Professor Barclay'. One of the most important developments in the early

'sixties was that of the Television Lecture by, first, Professor Barclay, and then by others such as Stanley Mair and Leonard Small. Dr. Barclay resisted television for years before he agreed to do programmes, but when he finally agreed, there was no doubt at all, from reactions, that we had a popular and brilliant communicator of the highest order. Popular again with the common man, but often pooh-poohed to begin with by ministers and University people of the Divinity Faculties. After his very first series which had both church and non-church people asking for more, we invited a conference of *able* parish ministers to tell us if we should do another Barclay series. Out of the twenty men present, only one encouraged us. Let me set against that my favourite Barclay story. He once went into a pub in Dumbarton, when on his way to a Lecture in Helensburgh, to buy cigarettes – this in his smoking days! The pub was crowded with Scottish working-men, mostly from the shipyards of the Clyde. He was at once recognized and involved in a spontaneous discussion on Religion. When he tore himself away to keep his engagement, they lined up and insisted, each man, in shaking hands with him. Willie Barclay adds with a grin, 'And they paid for my cigarettes, forbye.' Latterly, as viewers could see, both young people and Roman Catholic nuns and priests were attending his lectures, while his *Jesus To-Day* Baird Lectures have gone round the world in both print and film. How marvellous that shipyard workers and many others who would not normally darken a church door have sat at the feet of one of the great modern communicators of the Gospel story!

Tuesday night was the time when we planned programmes in terms of the more thoughtful viewer. *Why I Believe*, *Witness-Box*, and latterly *Scottish-View-Point* were all concerned with the continuing engagement of thinking people in depth, freed from the need for simple communication which obtains at seven o'clock on a Sunday evening with a mass-audience. There have been differing attempts and techniques on Tuesday nights, each in its own way saying something to someone and nothing at all to someone else! My basic complaint about these programmes has always been the lateness of the hour. I have heard all the BBC's reasons for this and remain singularly unimpressed. Scottish Current Affairs, Cultural and other programmes as well as Religion, regularly find themselves appearing well after eleven o'clock – and sometimes after midnight. I have never been able to understand both the BBC-Scotland planners and the Broadcasting Council for Scotland's attitudes over these insults to such autonomy as they have. But here I am with yet another story, better told elsewhere than in a journal of this nature!

Of course all BBC staff have a love-hate relationship with the Corporation, as my comments have shown. But the positive side of what the BBC does for the Church in Scotland is immense. It employs,

trains and pays a full-time Religious Broadcasting Department of seven men and eight women; it expends on their radio and television work hundreds of thousands of pounds every year* – although quite a few Departments receive more money than that. All in all I have had a marvellously exciting and creative life of it, forwarding the Gospel in these modern media – a most fortunate person indeed, I count myself!

My commission from the Editor was to say something forthright about the Church and Religious Broadcasting, arising from my experiences after over twenty-six years trying to serve both in the BBC. I believe that if there had been *no* religious broadcasting in radio and television during the past quarter of a century, Scotland would be a much more pagan place than it is. I believe that through the great hymns of the Christian Faith as these reflect the total truth of that Faith through the Christian Year, both non-church and church viewers have received *simple* instruction on the Faith. I believe that countless viewers of all shades of belief and unbelief have gratefully sat at the feet of William Barclay and others, and profited accordingly. I believe that those who have had eyes to see and ears to hear have learnt much of the modern Christian Church in action. Sadly, I also believe with John Reith that the Church has tended to take all this fantastic and powerful support for its Mission in the homes of those who are outside her normal influence, almost entirely for granted. But if the Radio Parish Missions of the early 'fifties were harnessed to Television today, what a harvest there might yet be!

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* The cost of Television, when the writer left the BBC in 1971 was around £6000 an hour.