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Changing the Channel to Salvation: Television's Influence on Religion

by Darcie Novotny

Worse theology may surface only with the help of better technology.

Thomas Oden

The revolution in mass communication has been a strong shaper of American culture (Hadden 38). Our ability to provide instantaneous global communication has resulted in an enormous flooding of information, images, fads, and fashions via television, radio, films, and computers. Because over 50 percent of all Americans watch some form of religious television (Oden 34), it is important to understand how both religion and public perception of televangelists have been changed by the onslaught of mass media. The following song accurately depicts the popular perception of modern televangelists held by many Americans:

Would Jesus Wear A Rolex?

Woke up this morning
Turned on my t.v. set
There in living color
Was something I can't forget

This man was preaching at me
Yea--laying on the charm
Asking me for 20
With 10,000 on his arm

He wore designer clothing
And a big smile on his face
Selling me salvation
While they sang "Amazing Grace"

Asking me for money
When he had all the signs of wealth

Almost wrote a check out
Then I asked myself

Chorus

Would He wear a pinky ring
Would He drive a fancy car
Would His wife wear furs and diamonds
Would His dressing room have a star
If He came back tomorrow
There's something I'd like to know
Would Jesus wear a Rolex on His television show?

Would Jesus be political
If He came back to Earth
Have His second home in Palm Springs
Or try to hide his worth

Take money from those poor folks
When He comes back again
And admit He's talked to all those preachers
That say they've been a'talking to Him?

A Brief History of Religious Programming

As America became increasingly urban by the end of the nineteenth century, many people feared their religious identity would be lost in the secular aspects of society (Frankl 29). To ease these fears, many people turned to religious revivalism (Frankl 29). Revivalists focused on those persons who held basic Christian beliefs but were not closely attached to specific denominations (Crownfield). The three main Christian revivalists of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century were Charles Grandison Finney, Dwight Moody, and Billy Sunday (Hadden 44). Organizing huge public services separate from congregational activities, these men were effective in gaining new converts, raising funds, and mobilizing followers. By developing revivalism as a movement detached from mainstream religious activities, they created a methodology for modern televangelists to build upon when the technology of television emerged.

The broadcasting of religious programs began with the radio. In 1921, the Calvary Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh broadcast the first religious program and many other religious organizations soon followed (Frankl 68). With the emergence of television in the 1950s,

religious broadcasters realized the potential of this medium to reach a large audience, and religious telecasts were included in television's initial programming (Horsfield 3). At first Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Jews dominated public service air time (Horsfield 3), while fundamentalists and evangelists used commercial programs (Frankl 69), the latter trying to convert non-Christians to Christianity by spreading the "good news" of the New Testament (Crownfield).

Three major changes in the television industry in the 1960s greatly affected religious programming and ultimately aided in the development of modern televangelism (Frankl 69). The first change was an economic one. Tobacco and liquor commercials initially provided rich advertising revenue to support television stations. When such commercials were banned from the air waves, many television stations were forced to work harder to sell broadcast time.

The second and third changes were ones of policy. During the 1960s the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) relaxed and finally eliminated previous regulations concerning the selling of airtime to religious programs. Many evangelists used this increased opportunity to reach an extensive audience. The second policy change also involved FCC regulations. To be licensed, television stations were required to include a certain number of public interest programs in their broadcasts. In 1960, the FCC allowed commercial as well as public service programs to meet this requirement (Frankl 70). It therefore became advantageous for stations to use commercial religious programming, not only to generate income, but as public interest programming.

As a result of social upheaval in the 1960s, an observable decline in mainstream church attendance accompanied an increase in evangelical and fundamentalist church attendance (Horsfield 16). Within that decade, Americans experienced social unrest caused by the Civil Rights Movement; the Vietnam War; and the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. The unrest was intensified by the realistic depiction of these events on television. Many Americans found answers to their resulting questions concerning religion and society in the evangelical churches (Horsfield 16). Unlike the philosophical leaders of mainstream religions, the evangelists provided simple answers to the public. Because evangelists were seen as part of a new social movement, their popularity increased (Horsfield 17).

By 1977, commercial religious programming dominated the television religious market with 92 per cent of religious airtime being used by evangelical and fundamentalist groups (Horsfield 9). Consequently,

Americans who watched religious telecasts were being exposed principally to a minority faith.

The Nature of Television as a Medium

An important role of television at the present time is as a socializing agent along with family, school, and church (Horsfield xi). Television is capable of bringing images and values into the home. In America's fast-paced society, television is one of the few activities enjoyed by the family unit as a whole and is the center of many modern families (Schultze 28).

The television industry is also a business driven by marketing demands. To be successful, television must attract a large consumer audience in order to sell the products of the sponsoring advertiser. This economic influence mandates several principles of all television programming to which televangelists have willingly adapted. America's preoccupation with wealth is reflected in the programs. Fundraising is a crucial concern for the televangelists who faithfully monitor Nielsen ratings, viewer response, and contributions (Schultze 31). Direct appeals make up at least 10 per cent of the airtime, and because the shows do not have to be interrupted for traditional commercials, these financial requests are very effective (Hadden 132).

Some Concerns

Televangelists are essentially selling God and the secrets to achieving everlasting life. Because this medium is capable of saying "You're forgiven" millions of times in a millisecond (Oden 37), not only can viewers be "saved" by offering large contributions, they can do it at their convenience and with little time commitment. Viewers have been found to be more receptive to donating money to various religious projects rather than to covering broadcasting costs, so many televangelists urge the audience to support the building of a new church or hospital and then use the excess contributions to help pay for airtime (Hadden 131).

Because the content of mass media tends not to increase our knowledge, but to center our attention on manageable issues (Hadden 42), the evangelist himself (or herself, although most televangelists are men) is often made the focus of attention. To make him appealing to the audience, the evangelist is portrayed as a "Hollywood star" (Frankl 28).

Furthermore, because television requires telecasts to be entertain-

ing (Schultze 29) the preachers cannot rely on just a sermon; they must also include demonstrations of healing, revivalism, and secular entertainment (Schultze 31). Such secular entertainment includes appearances by "popular" American heroes of sports, politics, and movies.

The incorporation of fundraising and secular influences into religious programs has caused many people to fear that television has altered the Christian message (Hadden 131). This is especially important considering that televangelism is the only contact some Americans have with Christian values and ideas (Schultze 28). Adapting to meet the needs of a culture concerned with self-gratification and pleasure (Schultze 31), televangelists no longer emphasize sacrifice as part of modern Christianity (Hadden 131). They stress the reciprocity of God: the more money given to Him (via the evangelical ministries), the more God will return to the individual (Hadden 131).

The following synopses are from Stewart M. Hoover's *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* and clearly depict some of the televangelistic methods specifically employed for the medium of television including secular entertainment, fundraising, testimonials, and the emphasis on viewer convenience:

Oral Roberts and You

His early program focused on the healing of the sick and needy. Returning to television in 1969, his show has since resembled a "variety program . . . with a religious twist." (58)

Jerry Falwell's Old Time Gospel Hour

Although basically a broadcast of his Sunday service, popular political, sports, and entertainment personalities frequently make appearances. Using his influential position, Falwell is considered controversial because of his televised criticism of social and political events. (58-59)

Robert Schuller's Hour of Power

Schuller's church service is broadcast from the impressive Crystal Cathedral in Los Angeles. Made mostly of

glass, the structure caters to America's fast-paced life-style by allowing worshippers to remain in their cars during the service. Musical accompaniment and celebrity interviews are emphasized. Schuller rarely comments on politics. (59-60)

Jimmy Swaggart

Swaggart's program was comprised basically of two components: information sessions and musical crusades. His information sessions dealt with the interaction of biblical prophecy and modern problems. However, Swaggart's across-the-country musical crusades focused on the promotion of his gospel rhythm-and-blues tapes and albums. (60)

Pat Robertson's 700 Club

This program was the first to utilize cable television systems. It has changed from a Bible-study program to a "Christian talk show" (60-61).

Concluding Remarks

A result of recent scandals in the televangelical industry has been a decrease in the size of the audience of religious programs. A Louis Harris poll shows some religious program viewers think evangelists are more harmful than good (Oden 34). Nevertheless, millions of viewers are still loyal to the televangelical ministries as evidenced by the enormous sums of money the evangelists are still able to raise. Televangelists also have the power to influence many political and social ideologies. According to David Crownfield, a professor of religion and philosophy, the visibility of the televangelists has been important in the "role of public-reinforcement." Many evangelical viewers find reassurance that televangelists hold similar religious beliefs.

The economic and market demands of the television industry have altered Americans' perception of televangelists and have influenced alarmingly the modern conception of religion in the United States. There is more, however, for public concern. Television has not only changed religion to appeal to its audience, but it may also give televangelists the power to consolidate a group of viewers capable of influencing spheres outside of the religious realm.

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