

The unknown history of televangelism

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A brief summary of the history of televangelism in the United States, how it began, grew, and finally dominated the media is given in the following article. It explores some implications of this history, and indicates why the subject deserves a good deal more careful analysis than it has received thus far. Along the way it describes some events that are virtually unknown about how the televangelists gained power over the Federal Communication Commission _ a power that has provided a unique opportunity for fundamentalist religion to effect cultural change during the past forty years.

A great deal is being written these days about the increasing role of religion in American life, and in particular, its political life. A recent book by best selling author Kevin Phillips, entitled *American Theocracy* (Penguin Books, Viking Group, 2006) details the central role religion now plays in America.

Many writers _ sociologists, historians, cultural analysts _ have described this phenomenon and tried to explain its origins and power. They point to the sect-driven dynamic of American religion, the populist innovations in worship developed by laypersons, the large number of denominations, the pervasive influence of the Bible and its literal interpretation. But with few exceptions, almost none of them has dealt with one of the most important factors in the equation _ the use of the mass media by televangelists.

A brief history of religious broadcasting

In 1934 the U.S. Congress passed the Communications Act which authorized the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) to grant broadcast licenses. The Congress asserted that the electromagnetic spectrum is a national resource that cannot be owned by any one person or corporation, but that it can only be licensed for a specific period of time. The license, in effect, is a monopoly to use a scarce commodity. In exchange for this monopoly, the station is obligated to broadcast 'in the public interest'. From the beginning, religious broadcasting was considered one of the ways of fulfilling a station's 'public interest' obligation.

But which religious speakers should broadcasters put on the air? Literally hundreds of ministers and evangelists asked for time. At first the radio networks sold time to religious speakers, but some of the more outspoken clergy were much too narrow and controversial for their liking. Perhaps the worst example was Father Charles Coughlin who broadcast on radio in the early 1930s, regularly preaching hatred of Jews and blacks.

Very soon the radio networks decided not to sell time but to give time to the largest representative bodies which would speak on behalf of all religions. These groups were the national Council of Catholic Bishops, the Federal Council of Churches (Protestant), and a coalition of three national Jewish organizations.

This system worked reasonably well throughout the late 1930s and 1940s. When television came in about 1950, each of these 'faith groups' was given time each Sunday for their TV programs _ programs which were broadly representative of the religious and cultural diversity of the country as a whole. The FCC gave 'public interest credit' to the networks and their stations for providing free time. In fact, the networks themselves actually paid for the program production.

However, the evangelical and fundamentalist groups were more or less excluded from this agreement, although the Southern Baptists, Mormons and others were given a modest amount of air time, and some televangelists were able to buy time, mostly on radio and non-network TV stations.

In 1960 all this changed. Under growing pressure from conservative groups, the FCC ruled that local stations could sell airtime for religious programs and still get 'public interest' credit. Suddenly evangelical groups lined up to buy commercial time on radio and TV, and local stations that had previously agreed with the network policy not to sell airtime for religious broadcasting, began to cash in on the new demand and to sell time to the highest bidder.

The new FCC policy was devastating to programs that had been carried free for the major (main line) groups. Just before the FCC ruling took effect, only 53% of all religious broadcasting was paid-time. But by 1977, paid-time religious broadcasting had risen to 92%. Thus, since the mid-1970s, religious broadcasting has been firmly in the hands of the televangelists.

Deregulation

However, the changes in religious broadcasting were only the beginning of a more fundamental change in broadcasting itself. When Ronald Reagan became President in 1980, he brought about an almost complete deregulation of radio and TV. He did this by weakening the FCC to the point where it had very little real control. He cut the number of FCC Commissioners from seven to five. He drastically reduced its budget. And he installed a Chairman who publicly proclaimed that 'television is no different from a toaster'. That is, in his view, the TV set was just another appliance. The cultural impact of broadcasting was irrelevant. The marketplace, not public policy, determined who controls TV and radio.

The result was the rapid buying up of stations by large networks, which made possible the centralization of power in the hands of only a few multinational corporations who now own every part of the broadcasting system _ radio, TV, cable, and satellite. Programming, including sports, news, investigative reporting, even the weather,- rapidly became commercialized. Profits ruled over the public interest.

Businesses profited greatly from this change _ and so did the Electronic Church. Televangelists used money sent by listeners and viewers (much of it pledged for mission work overseas) to buy up hundreds of radio and TV station licenses, and to create satellite-fed networks. Some of the largest televangelist organizations became multi-million dollar giants. Aggressive and legal fund-raising on the air made possible the creation of huge distribution systems for the televangelists _ all with the bonus of being tax free as religious organizations.

Political power of the electronic church

In addition, since 1960 the religious broadcasters have steadily increased their political power in America. Consider the famous 'Madelyn Murray O'Hare Affair'. In the 1960s and 70s, Madelyn Murray O'Hare was a famous American atheist. Among other things, she attacked the electronic church through marches and protests. But in 1975 an anonymous letter began to circulate, charging that Mrs. O'Hare was trying to get the FCC to remove all Christian programs from radio and television.

To quote from the letter: '(Her) petition, Number 2493, would ultimately pave the way to stop the reading of the gospel (of) our Lord and Savior, on the airwaves of America. They got 287,000 signatures to back their stand! Please stand up for your religious freedom and let your voice be heard.'

The only problem with this letter, which was passed on to thousands of conservative Christians in church meetings, newsletters, and through private mailings, is that none of it was true. Mrs. O'Hare had not filed a petition with the FCC. There were no 287,000 signatures. The whole thing was false. It was soon revealed to be untrue in the press and on the air. The FCC issued a public statement saying the petition never existed and that it had no intention of forbidding Bible reading

on the air.

Yet this did not deter the religious faithful. They began to send letters and postcards to the FCC by the thousands, and finally by the millions _ for months and months _ and then for years and years. The Commission received so much protest mail (more than 30 million!) that they had to stop opening them, and merely piled stacks of mail bags in their closets.

And from this experience the FCC got the message, loud and clear: don't challenge the Electronic Church. Ever since that time, the Commission has refused to exert any significant regulation over so-called religious stations. Today there are some 1,600 'Christian' radio stations on the air, and 250 'Christian' TV stations. They blanket the nation. Their licenses require them to broadcast 'in the public convenience, interest and necessity', and the courts have ruled that this means a broadcaster must provide diverse programming that meets the needs of its entire listening-viewing audience.

But these 1,600 radio stations do not do that. Instead, they broadcast, hour after hour, the brand of religion that suits them, and nothing more. The FCC should have long ago denied them their licenses to broadcast, but they will not. They cannot, because the religious right has become so strong in the Congress and the Administration that it would be political suicide for any politician to challenge these stations.

If you turn on one of these stations, you will hear an amazing gospel. The outline of the message is rather simple _ and bizarre. For most of them it goes something like this: The Old Testament is literally true, and it promises the Jews that they are the People of God. Once Israel has occupied all of the 'biblical lands', legions of the anti-Christ will attack it, triggering a battle in the valley of Armageddon, at which time the Messiah will return for the 'rapture'.

During the 'rapture', true believers will be lifted out of their clothes and transported to heaven, where, seated on the right hand of God, they will watch their political and religious opponents suffer plagues of boils, sores, locusts, and frogs during the seven years of 'tribulation' that will follow. Then there is increasing struggle and the final battle on the plains of Armageddon. Christ is victorious, and those who are saved look forward to a glorious reign of a thousand years _ a new Heaven and a new Earth. (Incidentally, this is one of the main reasons for America's support of Israel, since Israel's control of the 'biblical lands' is a first step toward the 'rapture' and the end of the world which is so much desired by these Christians!)

If you find it difficult to accept that many ordinary people would really believe this sort of thing, consider that in a 2004 Gallup Poll, 55% of Americans said they believe the Bible is literally true, including the story of Noah's Ark and God's creation of the earth in six days. Even more disturbing, 71% of evangelical Christians said they believe the world will end in an Armegaddon battle between Jesus Christ and the Antichrist. Thus, millions of people in America hold this amazing (and very disturbing) view

But of course, millions do not. The result is that America is a nation deeply divided between people who are concerned about real-life issues _ war and peace, social justice, the health and welfare of people _ on one hand, and other people who are concerned, instead, about 'values', by which they mean adherence to ancient taboos, dependence on a magical God, enforcing acceptance of ancient creeds, requiring everyone to believe as they do, and finding safety in raw (though often hidden) social and economic power.

Implications

What are the implications of such a message, broadcast everywhere in America, everyday of the year, on radio and television? First, consider the theological implications. In the last half-century a whole new understanding of the Bible has emerged from Biblical scholars. The result in Europe has been a mass exodus from the traditional churches which cling to the orthodox views, while in

America there has arisen a much stronger fundamentalism. Why has there been such different religious development on the two sides of the Atlantic? A major difference is that in America there were scores of television evangelists and hundreds of radio preachers on the air, day and night, preaching a bogus religion whose story is a wild tale of the end of the world, and whose values closely resemble the values and worldview of secular America _ the values of winning, of wealth, of power, and of being Number One. On the other side of the Atlantic, European audiences were never subjected to this kind of message.

Second, consider the political implications. Today there is a significant group within the fundamentalist community who want to bring about a complete change in the American form of government. Pat Robertson is a key leader in the group called Dominionists, or sometimes Reconstructionists. Robertson and his followers consistently and openly argue that America must become a theocracy under the control of Christian fundamentalists. He is on record saying that democracy is a terrible form of government, unless it is run by his kind of Christians.

Dr. Gary North, a major figure among the Dominionists, clarifies their goal and tactics: 'We must use the doctrine of religious liberty ... until we train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they will get busy constructing a Bible-based social, political and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God.' To give you an idea of what the new Bible-based order would be like, Dr. North advocates public execution of women who undergo abortions, and a similar fate for those who advise them to do so.

This situation could easily be dismissed as the ravings of a few neurotic sociopaths, except for the chilling fact that our President and many of his advisors talk in much the same way. While Mr. Bush does not agree wholly with the Dominionists, he is supported by many of them, and they have much in common. In Mr. Bush's world, there exist only two groups _ the enemies of freedom and the lovers of freedom _ the evil and the good. Thus to waver, to change policy, would be to tempt God's disfavor. Indeed, the very act of holding to his resolve _ what his critics identify as his stubbornness and arrogance _ becomes a way of reassuring himself of his special place in God's plan.

Summary

What we have in the American Electronic Church today is a phenomenon that has gained immense power, almost entirely through the use of radio and television. The televangelists have used this power to join forces with the political right in order to bring about a nation more in conformity with what its adherents believe to be the will of God, or at least the demands of Christianity. This power came about because the FCC, which is charged with making certain the airwaves are used to meet the needs of the entire community and that all issues of importance to citizens are thoroughly aired, has failed in its task.

The FCC has allowed licenses to go to religious groups who have no intention of ever broadcasting in ways that speaks to the diversity within their community, but only to use their monopoly as a tool to further their own narrow ideology. And if they are able to continue to gain power, some day they may even attempt to deny religious liberty to all the 'enemies of God'. This is what the current 'culture clash' in America is all about.

Of course, this situation was not created in a political and social vacuum. Many other forces were at work, including the powerful commercial broadcasters who wanted to be free from regulation at least as much as the religious broadcasters. But without the development of large and powerful conservative religious broadcasting, with its strong political component, much of what has occurred in the past six years in the United States simply would not have happened.

Mr. Bush would not have been elected President. The nation would not have been plunged into a

war that is understood by many to be a religious war and not acknowledged to be about oil. And millions of Americans would not have been misinformed and misled into accepting a war based upon both false information and a superficial misunderstanding of the Bible and its teachings.

Television is not a toaster. It is the world's most important source of news and information, and its most powerful propaganda agent. Unless it is regulated by governments so as to insure that all people have access to all sides of issues, democracy as we know it becomes impossible.

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