

## RELIGION AND TELEVISION

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**D**URING the past year, the B.B.C. has broadcast about fifty religious television programmes. Of these, twelve were major 'outside broadcasts' from churches, and the rest were from the studio. Catholics contributed six programmes: Pontifical High Mass from Leeds Cathedral; the Easter Vigil from Clifton Cathedral; Evening Service with Benediction from St James', Spanish Place; the Westminster Passion Play *Behold the Man*; and Talks from the studio by Bishop Fulton Sheen and Mr Frank Sheed. Before last year we had contributed Solemn Mass from St Denis, Paris, and some half-a-dozen other programmes, including an Evening Service from St Chad's, Birmingham, Stations of the Cross, the Christmas Crib and an illustrated Talk. All these broadcasts have been largely experimental. Comments and the reaction of viewers have been most carefully observed, and we are by no means yet clear in our minds as to the best way in which Television can serve the Catholic Apostolate.

B.B.C. policy in religious television is identical with that in sound broadcasting which has been publicly stated more than once. Perhaps the clearest statement was made by the then Director General, Sir William Haley, in a speech to the British Council of Churches in November 1948. Dealing with the question whether the B.B.C. was neutral where Christian values were concerned, he said: 'Of course it is not. There are many demands of impartiality laid upon the Corporation, but this is not one of them. We are citizens of a Christian country, and the B.B.C.—an institution set up by the State—bases its policy upon a positive attitude towards the Christian values. It seeks to safeguard those values and to foster acceptance of them. The whole preponderant weight of its programme is directed to this end. . . . Some of you may feel that the practice I have outlined is not the best way to make people join the Christian faith. But it does not seem to me to be an inherent duty of broadcasting to make people join the Christian faith. By that I mean it is not the duty of the B.B.C. in everything it does. It is the duty of religious broadcasting, of course. And we must do everything we reasonably can to foster

and strengthen religious broadcasting. But there are many other fields of broadcasting in which the duty does not arise. The overriding duty of the B.B.C. in everything it does is, as I see it, to provide listeners with the best in all the various aspects of life with which it is concerned. And never to fail to put the Christian point of view wherever it is relevant.'

At a conference with Catholic leaders in May 1950, the Head of Religious Broadcasting was asked to relate this statement to our Catholic work and in particular to clarify the phrase 'the Christian faith'. He made the following statement:

(1) The policy of the Religious Broadcasting Department was to broadcast the Christian Faith "as it is actually found in the Bible and in the living traditions of the different Christian denominations". This was quite different from a policy of broadcasting only the "lowest common denominator" or "what was acceptable to the common man".

(2) In principle, Roman Catholic broadcasters were expected to transmit the full depositum of Catholic teaching, and there was no ban on the inclusion of certain aspects of Catholic doctrine because they might provoke antagonism.

(3) On the other hand, the ban on controversial attacks on positions held by other denominations applied to Roman Catholics and all other religious bodies. At the tactical level, at which consideration had to be given to such factors as anti-Catholic prejudice, the impossibility of providing alternative religious programmes for all listeners under the present allocation of wavelengths, and the right use of "persuasion" in the communication of the Faith, it should be recognized that certain subjects required specially careful handling, and it is expedient for many reasons to avoid unintentional and unnecessary "irritation".

Within this policy, during the past few years we have been able to broadcast the Mass and other liturgical acts, and we have preached on subjects as difficult to non-Catholics as the Assumption, the Church, the Papacy, and Purgatory. There is no censorship of our scripts and the organization and production of Catholic broadcasts are in Catholic hands.

When religious broadcasting began in the B.B.C., it was conceived principally as a ministry of comfort and consolation

to sick, aged and 'deprived' Christians. Now it is planned principally as a deliberate apostolate to the millions in the country, who, while not entirely dead to religion, are not in regular contact with any church. There are still many programmes intended for practising Christians, although only a few of these are suitable for Catholics. Each day there is a Daily Service; each week there is Evensong or Vespers and 'Silver Lining'; and about once a month there is Mass or an Anglican or Free Church Communion Service. Further, there are a great many programmes designed for specialist groups within the Christian body in the country, broadcast usually on the Third Programme. Last year there were over a hundred such programmes of special Catholic interest, including talks on the significance of the recent excavation in St Peter's in Rome; a series of performances of most of Palestrina's music; six illustrated lectures on the 'Origin and History of the Christian Chant', and many other highly expert and specialized programmes. But the great weekly religious programmes which have built up huge regular audiences are a deliberate attempt to lead the vast half-Christian masses in the country to understand the necessity and relevance of religion. It is an apostolate one step back from the Enquiry Class and Evidence work, for it can presume no initial interest and no favourable predisposition. Every possible form has been used in these programmes, from the Mass, quite untouched, through a parish meeting of the Blessed Sacrament Guild, down to Community Hymn-Singing. And now each programme is planned in the light of considerable experience and prolonged study to do one particular job towards one particular audience. And the work is planned in such a way as to try to ensure over a period a totality in respect of subject-matter, form and audience. Each individual broadcast should be complete in itself, but for an adequate judgment it should be seen as a part of a continuously unfolding plan in which the great Paris Mass, Vespers from Westminster or Buckfast, Mgr Knox thinking aloud on Christmas Day, Canon McNarney talking to his millions at People's Service in the Light Programme, and the children of a Rescue Home singing hymns and carols, all have their part to play.

Last year we broadcast about two hundred and fifty Catholic programmes in all, of which rather more than half were actually produced by the Religious Broadcasting Department, and were

described as 'Services' or 'Religious Talks'. The rest were broadcasts mainly of the Third Programme type, of Catholic origin or inspiration, and of particular interest to Catholic listeners.

It is difficult to measure the effects of all this work and it is easy to be glib about it. It is quite certain that a number of converts have been made directly by religious broadcasting. I have today a letter from a man who was moved by the Leeds Mass to begin instructions, and I know of five people who have begun instructions as a result of our broadcasts in the month of February. And one constantly hears from broadcasters and from parish priests of people who have become Catholics and whose first contact with the Church was through a Catholic broadcast. But there is another effect, perhaps even more important. The cumulative effect of Catholic broadcasts week after week must be to destroy the sense of the unfamiliar about Catholicism, to accustom the people of the country to our Catholic doctrine and our Catholic way of thinking, to introduce them to our Liturgy, to bring our speakers to their notice, and gradually to make Catholicism one of the familiar elements in their life. We are indeed contributing to the christianizing of the country, but we are also enabling the people of the country to correct the false impressions that prevail about us and our doctrines and our ways. This is a slow process, but in its ultimate effects it may be even more important than the individual conversions that we are enabled to make. And it is perhaps a task that can only be done by Radio and Television.

Television opens out an entirely new field to us, for we can now bring outsiders into the Church to let them see our ceremonies and our liturgy. Looking ahead before we began Catholic television programmes, many of our people were inclined to say that with this new possibility, Catholics would have an enormous advantage over all others. That may indeed be so ultimately, but we have not found that non-Catholics are easily able to accept and to understand Catholic services. A case in point.

The great Mass from St Denis was acclaimed as one of the most brilliant pieces of television that the B.B.C. had produced. We may make this claim in all modesty because the arrangements were in the hands of our French Catholic Television colleagues, particularly Father Pichard, O.P. and his brilliant assistant M. Chartier. And yet careful research revealed the surprising fact that

this wonderful broadcast was very much less appreciated in the country than many other ordinary television services, of considerably less beauty and perhaps merit. And we have had the same experience recently with the Leeds High Mass. The B.B.C. did not hesitate for a moment about televising this Mass, in spite of very considerable pressure. The protests gained us enormous publicity, and yet the number of people viewing the Mass was not above the average for television religious services at that time, and the level of appreciation was considerably below the average. We are being compelled to understand what perhaps we should have anticipated, that to confront with our liturgy people who for four hundred years have been formed in another tradition, is not instantly to compel either admiration or understanding. There will be a phase, perhaps a long phase, during which we shall have to win the outsider to a sympathetic understanding of what lies within our beautiful ceremonies. Elsewhere in this issue attention is called to the very interesting division of opinion about the televising of the Mass that we observed at the recent Paris Conference of Catholic television experts.

In the meantime, it lies with us to create forms suitable to the medium in which we can communicate to this vast, new, interested audience, the treasures of the Faith. And this perhaps presents a challenge to our liturgists, to our artists, and our creative thinkers. Two different approaches are possible. In the first, by means of the television cameras, we invite the viewer to become one member of a worshipping community, present in one of our churches. It is my view that in these circumstances, we ought not to interfere in the least with the normal progress of the church service, except that we aim at the highest possible perfection. In the other, we deliberately create a form through which we try to reach the viewer sitting as one of a small company in his own home. This too, may sometimes be labelled a 'Service', but the primary purpose will be to communicate something of our faith and practice, using all the resources of the television medium.

So far, we have been greatly restricted in our ambitions, both by the shortage of mobile television equipment, and by the extreme difficulty of getting adequate television signals from the more remote centres. It is obvious that geography makes it more difficult to televise a Service from, for example, Buckfast or

Ampleforth, than from London or Birmingham or Manchester. These difficulties are being speedily resolved and the expansion of technical facilities, and the development of religious programmes in general, have enabled us to plan for the next few months almost as many Catholic transmissions as for the whole of last year.

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