



EXCERPT



Ministers of a New Medium

Broadcasting Theology in the Radio Ministries of Fulton J. Sheen and Walter A. Maier

June 21, 2022 | \$40, 368 pages, hardcover | 978-1-5140-0322-0

Kirk D. Farney explores the work of Fulton J. Sheen and Walter A. Maier as groundbreaking leaders combining theology and technology to spread the gospel in the golden age of radio. With careful attention to both the theological content and the cultural influence of these masters of a new medium, this study sheds new light on the history of media and Christianity in the United States.

A Fascinating History of Radio Evangelism

Religious programming was a significant component of radio broadcasting from the beginning of commercial radio itself. Purveyors of “old-time” religion were quick to grasp “new-fashioned” microphones to spread their message. During the 1920s, numerous religious organizations obtained broadcast licenses and began operating their own stations. Additionally, program directors at both local commercial stations and emerging networks allotted time for religious content to be aired. As more and more households acquired radio sets and tuned in, Christian broadcasters contributed to, as well as benefited from, the growing momentum of this cultural force.

Fulton Sheen and Walter Maier both took to the airwaves in the 1920s, via a variety of local broadcast opportunities. They both transferred their homiletic voices to network hookups in 1930. Soon they built up and retained national (and international) listening audiences in the millions. They maintained their respective leadership positions as radio preachers until the beginning of the 1950s. Notwithstanding these and other parallels, both clerics would also face their own unique challenges, as they carried on radio ministries.

Network radio had come into existence in 1926, when RCA launched NBC, thereby creating a truly national audience. As a public service, NBC soon developed a policy of donating “sustaining” time to broadcasts of the three leading faith groups in the United States—Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. NBC insisted that radio messages be “nonsectarian and nondenominational,” “interpret[ing] religion at its highest and best so that as an educational factor it will bring the individual listener to realize his responsibility to the organized church and to society”—a kind of civil religion to edify the populace. Because NBC’s policy stated that the “national religious messages . . . be broadcast by the recognized outstanding leaders of the several faiths as determined by the best counsel and advice available,” it looked to what its executives considered representative organizations to choose who met such standards and should go on the air.

NBC allowed the Greater New York Council of Churches to decide which preachers would be featured representing Protestantism. (In 1934, this task would move to the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America—later the National Council of Churches.) Given the liberal leanings of the leaders of these mainline Protestant bodies, access to NBC’s microphones was limited to prominent “progressives,” such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, S. Parkes Cadman, and Ralph W. Sockman. As for the Catholic sustaining time slots, NBC handed responsibility to the National Council of Catholic Men (NCCM)—a federation of US lay societies whose purpose was to foster a positive image of Catholicism to non-Catholics. NBC worked with a number of groups regarding sustaining-time Jewish programming, but primarily relied on the oversight of the United Jewish Laymen’s Committee.

While NBC had established network religious broadcasting, and had included such programming from its first year of existence, CBS was founded in 1927 and soon offered religion via its own broadcasts. Unlike NBC, CBS was willing to sell broadcasting time to religious programs in its initial years; however, it would soon follow NBC’s path and ban paid religious broadcasts. In the early 1930s, CBS did shift to a policy of offering access to a revolving restricted group of “leading representatives of thirteen communions,” on a sustaining time basis, under the condition that their messages possessed “a constructive character.” Yet a third network appeared in 1934, when a group of broadcasters formed the cooperative Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS). MBS, the self-promoted “Network for All America,” modified its policies regarding religious programming over time, but would consistently accommodate paid religious broadcasts.



Karin DeHaven, academic publicist
800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or kdehaven@ivpress.com



ivpress.com/media



EXCERPT



Ministers of a New Medium

Broadcasting Theology in the Radio Ministries of Fulton J. Sheen and Walter A. Maier

June 21, 2022 | \$40, 368 pages, hardcover | 978-1-5140-0322-0

Kirk D. Farney explores the work of Fulton J. Sheen and Walter A. Maier as groundbreaking leaders combining theology and technology to spread the gospel in the golden age of radio. With careful attention to both the theological content and the cultural influence of these masters of a new medium, this study sheds new light on the history of media and Christianity in the United States.

NBC approached American Catholic Church officials in 1928, with an offer of airtime and studio space in New York for a regular Catholic radio broadcast. Apparently, NBC expressed a preference for dealing with a “lay-run” Catholic organization. Additionally, such an organization was to be “thoroughly representative of the Catholics of the country and . . . authorized by the church.” Thus, the NCCM was the natural organization to fill the role of establishing and producing the *Catholic Hour*.

Given its mission, the NCCM was eager to respond, especially in the midst of the pronounced anti-Catholic bigotry of the late 1920s. Such had been exhibited only too well in the virulent anti-Catholicism directed toward Democratic candidate Al Smith, the Catholic governor of New York, during the 1928 presidential campaign. In their November 1928 convention, disconcerted NCCM delegates voted to step up their efforts to “fill in the valleys of ignorance and level off the mountains of prejudice about the Catholic Church and its relation to the American scene.” Surely if anti-Catholic Americans only understood their genuflecting cocitizens better, their negative opinions would dissipate. And so to put a positive face on its faithful, the NCCM entered into a contract with NBC, and the CH went on the air in early 1930. The CH would continue under the auspices of the NCCM throughout and beyond Fulton Sheen’s tenure on the program.

Though NBC was offering airtime to the CH gratis, the NCCM still needed to cover the production cost of the program, plus “money . . . for an administrative, stenographic, and clerical staff, for music, for travelling expenses and at least a gesture toward an honorarium for the speakers, for postage, telephone, and telegraph.” During the first year, these expenses came to roughly eight hundred dollars per week. The NCCM raised the necessary funds via “voluntary subscriptions,” an effort jump-started by the Knights of Columbus, which pledged “the magnificent sum” of five thousand dollars for the first year of broadcasts, prior to the CH going on the air. In confirming his organization’s commitment, Supreme Knight Martin H. Carmody wrote, “I feel no hesitancy in giving assurance of the whole-hearted support of the K. of C. body to the splendid work contemplated.” Remaining first-year funding was provided by “about seventy-five men who . . . donated sums ranging from \$100 to \$1,000,” and “approximately two hundred and fifty individuals” who gave “smaller sums which together aggregate about \$3,000.” Combined subscriptions came to thirty-two thousand dollars during the CH’s first year, which covered actual expenses. Annual production and related costs increased only modestly over the next ten years, falling within the thirty-five- to forty-thousand-dollar range in 1940.

Raising necessary funds for the CH was no small task, especially in the midst of the Great Depression. Yet because NBC provided the CH sustaining time, the financial resources required to keep the program on the air were a fraction of those required to maintain airwave access for programs such as TLH, which had to pay commercial rates for airtime. What is more, because the NCCM was able to solicit the relatively modest funding needs of CH production, CH’s speakers, including its most popular speaker, Fulton Sheen, were shielded from primary fundraising tasks. The more demanding realities of TLH’s financial situation would require Walter Maier to shoulder much of the responsibility for ongoing fundraising.

As they prepared to take the CH to the airwaves, NCCM leaders sought “priests noted for their scholarship and eloquence” to launch the program. The inaugural network broadcast occurred on March 2, 1930, as Patrick Cardinal Hayes, archbishop of New York, dedicated the CH to the “glory of God ‘for the American people.’” NBC propelled the archbishop’s voice over an initial chain of twenty-two stations. What is often overlooked is that NBC had offered the first program to seventy-three stations, but only 30 percent chose to carry it—either because of latent anti-Catholicism, or out of concern that listenership for such a program would be too low to warrant giving up the airtime. Setting the tone for future messages, Hayes declared, “The purpose of the Catholic Hour is not to triumph or to boast; not to attack or blame; but to serve . . . with good will, with kindness and with Christ-like sympathy for all.”

—Taken from chapter 4, “Catching the (Air)Waves”



Karin DeHaven, academic publicist
800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or kdehaven@ivpress.com



ivpress.com/media