

A Companion to the Australian Media
edited by **Bridget Griffen-Foley**
Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014

Religious broadcasting

Bridget Griffen-Foley, Alison M. Healey and Peter Horsfield

Some of Australia's earliest **commercial radio** licences were awarded to religious bodies (particularly in Sydney), including 2GB (Theosophical) in 1926 and 2SM (Catholic) and 2CH (NSW Council of Churches), both in 1931. Although some Christians were sceptical about radio, others argued that many people were not always able to physically go to church. Several ministers, such as Rev. Reginald Gordon Nichols of Melbourne and Rev. A.D. McCutcheon of Adelaide, broadcast on both commercial and **ABC** radio.

From its inception in 1932, the ABC accepted that its Charter requirement to provide 'adequate and comprehensive broadcasting' to the Australian people demanded a regular schedule of religious broadcasts. ABC religious broadcasting was oriented to the broad sweep of Australians who were not church-goers, but were nonetheless concerned with the spiritual dimensions of life. Guided by census statistics, the programs of the first 10 years or so were almost entirely Christian in content: religious services, Bible readings and non-denominational talks.

During World War II, there was an increase in religious broadcasting – with patriotic overtones – on commercial radio, while the **Department of Information** induced the ABC to schedule a daily minute of prayer. But wartime religious (particularly Lutheran) broadcasts were closely monitored. The most spectacular instance of government intervention in religious broadcasting occurred in 1941, when 5KA Adelaide and three stations controlled by the Jehovah's Witnesses were closed.

Two core values in the ABC Charter were independence and promoting national unity. By 1941, the ABC realised that it could not exercise adequate editorial control over its religious programs so long as it depended on clergy in the major Christian churches for their content and presentation. It therefore appointed Rev. Kenneth T. Henderson, an Anglican modernist theologian and experienced journalist, to oversee all religious broadcasts. In 1947 he launched the long-running *Plain Christianity: A Word to the Wayfarer*, and two years later became the first federal supervisor of a separate Religion Department; by 1953, the ABC had established an Advisory Committee of representatives of the mainstream churches to promote ecumenical collaboration.

A 1943 inquiry by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Broadcasting established that around half of commercial stations never broadcast religious broadcasts, and about 20 per cent did so only occasionally. Most, however, broadcast hymns –, often heard in a block on Sundays, early on weekday mornings, and at Easter and Christmas. The *Broadcasting Act 1948* provided that the new **Australian Broadcasting Control Board** would be responsible for ensuring that 'divine worship or other matter of a religious nature' was broadcast for adequate periods and at appropriate times. Commercial stations struggled to deal with a plethora of denominations, and the poor broadcasting technique and/or lack of reliability of some clergy. Some listeners were also perturbed by sectarianism: Australia's most famous religious broadcaster, Dr Leslie Rumble (2SM), could be heard up against a trenchant Anglican, Rev. T.C. Hammond (2CH), on Sunday nights.

More coordinated commercial radio programming emerged with the formation of the Christian Broadcasting Association (Protestant) in 1953, followed by the National Catholic Radio and Television Centre. One of the most successful radio ministries in post-war Australia was *The Voice of Prophecy*, established by the Seventh-day Adventists. Australians heard about the revival in American Pentecostal and charismatic movements partly when they were sponsors on Australian commercial radio.

Henderson retired in 1956, and was succeeded as head of department by Rev. Dr John Munro, Rev. James Peter, Patrick Kirkwood and Rev. Dr David Millikan until the Religion Department was abolished in 1991. Since then, religious program-makers at the ABC have been incorporated into broader production structures in radio and television, while still retaining their identity as a specialist Religion and Ethics Unit.

The 1954 Royal Commission on Television recommended the mandatory broadcasting of religious content on television on a community service basis. Following practices that had been established in radio, the Program Standards positioned station licensees as carriers of the programs, with a church or religious body responsible for their production and provision. This became the standard pattern of religion on **commercial television** for the next three decades.

Following their practice in radio, larger denominations such as the Catholic and Anglican Churches established their own television agencies on a diocesan or state basis, and smaller Protestant denominations mainly combined forces in state-based Christian Television Associations (CTA). Collaboration between church agencies took place on a national level through the Australian Churches Media Association. It suited stations to have churches produce the material they broadcast. Although other community groups sought to broaden the requirement to include minority religions or non-religious topics of social concern, the 'demographically proportional' clause of the Standards meant that access to the free-time provision was limited almost totally to the major Christian churches.

The resources provided by church bodies for the creation and production of program content were inadequate for such a medium. This limited what could be done, and narrowed the bulk of religious programs to primarily in-studio talking-head monologues, discussions, interviews and seasonal specials.

One of the exceptions to the time allocated proportionally to churches by television stations was B.A. Santamaria, the driving force behind the National Civic Council, a conservative Catholic body. Removed as the presenter of the Catholic Church's regular program on Channel 7 after the death of Archbishop Daniel Mannix in 1963, Santamaria was offered a weekly spot on TCN9 and GTV9 by Sir Frank Packer in 1963. For the next 20 years, his *Point of View* was an influential weekly commentary on political and policy issues.

In the 1960s, stations began to challenge the Sunday morning provision by replacing religious programs with their own commercial programs. While some church agencies resisted this, others saw it as an opportunity to get out of 'the religious ghetto'. In Victoria, Doug Tasker, director of that state's CTA, renegotiated with stations to replace his Sunday morning programs with 30- and 60-second religious 'spots' scattered through the schedule. This was an international innovation that received local and international awards (and was later adopted by community service programs).

From the late 1960s, some commercial radio broadcasters moved more into counselling and **talkback** as they attempted to reach out to young people. Father Jim McLaren, of 2UW and then 2SM, established Cross Walk Products to supply religious programs to AM and FM stations. Rev. Alan Walker (Methodist) initiated *Life Line* on 2UE to tie in with a Christian and crisis ministry he had founded, while Rev. Neil Adcock (5DN) developed an off-air counselling service with the help of Baptist Community Services.

The 1976 self-regulation inquiry of the **Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT)** reaffirmed the status quo, but largely left implementation to negotiations between television stations and the churches. This opened the way in the late 1970s for stations to begin replacing local programming with US evangelical/fundamentalist programs, which paid for their air-time with funds solicited from local audiences. By the early 1980s, these accounted for more than 70 per cent of the religious material broadcast by Australian metropolitan stations.

With surveys since the 1970s pointing to a significant decline in religious belief among Australians, many religious broadcasters moved to **community radio** or struggled to maintain a commercial presence. In 1986, the ABT converted a Program Standard requiring one hour of religion per week to a 'direction'. Religious stations became unsure of their identities: 2SM was sold to Wesgo Holdings Ltd in 1992 and 2CH to **John Singleton** in 1994. By the end of the century, **astrology** and advice programs were challenging religious broadcasters' dominance of the commercial airwaves on Sunday nights.

The *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* included, as a condition of licence, broadcasting of 'matter of a religious nature during such periods as the ACMA [**Australian Communications and Media Authority**] determines and, if the ACMA so directs, will do so without charge', but it has never made such a direction. By this time, the major churches were facing declining membership and resource crises, and by the end of the 1990s most of the major religious production agencies had closed or were minimally active.

As Australian society has progressively become more diverse, ABC broadcasts have extended their range to explore diverse religions and expressions of spirituality and values. *Encounter* (1965–) and Carolyn Jones' *The Search for Meaning* (1987–94) on radio and *Compass* on television (1988–), presented since 1998 by Geraldine Doogue, have been publicly acclaimed and received media awards. In 2012, the ABC established an online portal, attracting a global audience to its programs and enabling listener responses and discussion.

Fusion Media, which owned and managed community radio stations in Tasmania and regional Victoria, had all but collapsed by the early 2000s. Established in 1999, United Christian Broadcasters' Vision Radio Network broadcasts from studios in Brisbane via satellite and **narrowcasting**, and has its own **news** service. Rhema FM stations are across Australia, with locally programmed Christian content. The longest-running religious program on Australian television, *Mass for You at Home*, is still broadcast on Channel 11 at 5.30 a.m. on Sundays.

REFs: B. Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations* (2009); A. Healey, 'Spirit and Substance: ABC Religious Broadcasting 1941–91' (PhD thesis, 1993); K.S. Inglis, *This is the ABC* (1983); D.H. Tasker, 'The Place of Religion in Commercial Television in Australia from 1956 to 1978' (PhD thesis, 1980).