



Construction of the WMBI radio station in Addison, Illinois, 1920s.

INCLINE YOUR EAR

For Those Just Tuning In: Christianity by Podcast

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“WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT”

—*Num. 23:23, the first message transmitted electronically, sent by Samuel F. B. Morse from Washington to Baltimore in 1844*

The most consequential medium for English-language discourse about Orthodox Christianity today is internet-based audio. Church-themed podcasts, YouTube channels, and even online call-in shows have mushroomed over the past few years. Many hours' worth of free spoken content is now produced every week, enough to suit virtually every cultural temperament within the Church. Perhaps most notably, the Orthodox media giant Ancient Faith Ministries manages two round-the-clock internet radio stations along with scores of podcasts, mostly oriented toward converts from Protestantism. But Ancient Faith is by no means alone. Sister Vassa Larin, a

liturgical scholar and an Orthodox nun, celebrates the “zillions” of fans who access her regular online audio and video shows. And Saint Vladimir’s Seminary recently digitized hundreds of audio recordings of lectures, citing “the need—the yearning—to hear the voices of our fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters from the past.”¹ This statement acknowledges an important reality: many Orthodox Christians now spend far more time listening to internet media *about* church than they do *in* church, and many inquirers’ first impressions of Orthodoxy are formed through online audio programming. *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

¹ “The Project,” <https://digi.svots.edu/index.php/the-project>.

This astonishing development has not taken place in a vacuum. Sixty percent of Americans now listen to some form of online audio on a weekly basis, up from seventeen percent ten years ago.² A new class of “YouTube stars” are eclipsing traditional celebrities in cultural influence. Barack and Michelle Obama recently announced their intention to produce podcasts, thus confirming the arrival of this format in the mainstream.³

As the influence of digital audio technologies is felt in American Orthodoxy, it is time for the Church to grapple with the implications of these brave new media, to weigh the significant opportunities as well as the particular dangers associated with them. To begin with, it is helpful to consider them in a longer history of Christian communication. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas puzzled over why Jesus did not personally write down his teachings. Aquinas concluded that the Savior must have recognized the distinct pedagogical character of spoken instruction, and intentionally followed the pattern of Greece’s ur-teachers Pythagoras and Socrates, who also conspicuously refrained from authoring books of their own.⁴

The twentieth-century Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan, an enthusiastic convert to Catholicism, cited this passage of Aquinas in articulating his own theory of communication. McLuhan posited that the structural operation of any medium is of greater social consequence than the particular content it is used to convey—hence his pithy manifesto “the medium is the message.”⁵ Whenever a new means of communication is adopted, it reshapes how its users perceive the world, whether they realize it or not. According to

McLuhan, the media we use to communicate are not just discrete technologies. They mesh together to form a total “environment” in which we are entirely immersed. Usually, we are as unconscious of their effects on us as a fish is of water.⁶

The most important divide for McLuhan was between visual media, such as written and printed text, and auditory ones, a category in which he included all electronic forms of communication, beginning with telegraphy. He believed radio, which appealed directly to listeners’ emotions and thereby promoted a sense of interconnectedness, had reawakened a “tribal” sensibility associated with oral communication that had long been suppressed in the visually-oriented West.⁷

McLuhan’s scholarship, which remarkably anticipated the Internet in many respects, casts the new audio media in an interesting light. Podcasts and their ilk are in many respects the logical descendants of radio. For one thing, they tend to be easy to consume. Like radio programs, they may be heard “in a state of distraction,” to borrow Walter Benjamin’s phrase, when the listener’s intellectual faculties are not fully engaged—while driving or doing housework, for example.⁸ Often, their persuasiveness comes from the speaker’s tone and rhetorical power as much as from a logically structured argument.

This medium also shares in many of radio’s paradoxes. Successful online broadcasts usually sound spontaneous and informal, but in fact are often tightly scripted. Those who master the format can become influential “media personalities” with huge followings. Podcasts encourage us to feel that we are part of a large community of listeners, but also seem to address us personally, whispering right into our

² *The Infinite Dial 2019* (Edison Research and Triton Digital, 2019), <https://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Infinite-Dial-2019-PDF-1.pdf>.

³ “Spotify lands exclusive podcast deal with Barack and Michelle Obama,” *CNBC News*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.cnbcm.com/2019/06/06/spotify-lands-exclusive-podcast-deal-with-barack-and-michelle-obama.html>.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III.42.4 trans. <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/summa/TP/TP042.html#TPQ42A4THEP1>.

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 23–35.

⁶ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 175.

⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 260–8.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 239.

ears if we're wearing headphones. Reflecting on the distinctive properties of this format, the editors of the culture journal *n+1* describe it as the first audio medium designed for solitary listening but meant to evoke a sense of collectivity. "Podcasts make us feel less lonely," they write. "They simulate intimacy just enough to make us feel like we're in a room with other people."⁹

McLuhan believed one of Christianity's most distinctive cultural strengths was its historical knack for making use of both visual-textual and auditory communication. He found it highly significant that the institutional Church first took shape within Greco-Roman civilization, which had developed a phonetic alphabet. "This wasn't a simple historical accident, but an act of Providence," he told an interviewer.¹⁰ Even though only a tiny segment of Greco-Roman society could read and write, McLuhan held that the influence of phonetic literacy predisposed early Christian thinkers to systematize knowledge during a crucial period for the elaboration of theology. In the fifteenth century, McLuhan thought, this tendency to codify dogma in complex intellectual systems went into overdrive—at least in the West—largely as a consequence of the printing press.

Everything was changing in the twentieth century with the rise of electronic communication. "The Church is watching its cultural infrastructure crumble beneath its feet," McLuhan declared with ambivalence.¹¹ He discerned a troubling tendency on the part of radio to foster sectarianism and cults of personality, massively amplifying verbal charisma and appeals to group identity, even as it interconnected the world. In the age of sonic media, McLuhan wrote ominously, "we live in a single constricted space

resonant with tribal drums."¹² Yet he also found reason to hope because, underneath the many encrusted layers of theological texts, Christianity still had at its core an experiential, interactive character, which had been preserved in a diminished form in the Church's homiletic tradition. In McLuhan's account, radio and other electronic technologies had the potential to reinvigorate the kind of oral teaching reflected in the earthly ministry of Jesus. To realize this potential, Christians would need to study the new sound-based media carefully and critically, discern the specific social effects associated with them, and learn to channel their power wisely.

Some critics have attacked McLuhan's framework for being overly deterministic—for attributing too much agency to technology and not enough to humans. But one especially enthusiastic reader of McLuhan's "insightful, delightful and provocative ideas" on media and Christianity was the late Father Thomas Hopko. In a 2005 paper on the prospects for Orthodox-Catholic unity, the former dean of Saint Vladimir's Seminary cited McLuhan's argument that Christianity's historical propagation owed a great deal to its suppleness in adapting to various forms of communication.¹³ With a mix of admiration and regret, Hopko wrote that broadcast media had elevated the Roman Pope to a greater public role than ever before, as the de facto leader of global Christianity. Indeed, the Vatican's first radio facility had been installed in 1931, meant to help the Pope communicate directly with Catholics beyond the territorial limits of Benito Mussolini's Italy.¹⁴ Twentieth-century Orthodox patriarchs, meanwhile, had lacked such sophisticated media infrastructure. Hopko was of course aware that prominent Orthodox priests Alexander Schmemmann and Victor Potapov

⁹ "Friends of the Pod," *n+1* 34 (Spring 2019), <https://npluso-nemag.com/issue-34/the-intellectual-situation/friends-of-the-pod/>.

¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan, "Keys to the Electronic Revolution: First Conversation with Pierre Babin" (1977), trans. Wayne Constantineau, in Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999), 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹² Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 31.

¹³ Thomas Hopko, "Roman Presidency and Christian Unity in Our Time," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 50.1–4 (2005): 63, note 10.

¹⁴ Marilyn J. Matelski, *Vatican Radio: Propagation by the Airwaves* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 18–20.

had spent decades broadcasting into the Soviet Union on the US-funded networks Radio Liberty and Voice of America. Nevertheless, in Hopko's account, the Orthodox lagged behind the Catholics in embracing modern mass communication and needed to catch up.

Notwithstanding Father Hopko's grudging praise for Catholic media, the first Christians on the airwaves were actually American evangelicals, and they are still the most successful. Their broadcasting enterprise dates back to the beginnings of commercial radio itself, in the 1920s. Moreover, just a few years after Hopko sounded the alarm about the Orthodox Church's lack of media savvy, it was a former evangelical radio heavyweight who led a revolution in American Orthodoxy's relationship to digital media. John Maddex, who had managed the Moody Broadcasting Network during its dramatic expansion into one of the largest religious radio enterprises, was chrismated in 2000. A few years later, he set about creating a new Internet-based audio business to serve up Orthodox Christian content. Maddex's Ancient Faith Radio (now Ancient Faith Ministries) remains by far the largest platform for English-language Orthodox audio. It is nominally a department of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, though it operates with considerable independence.

Father Hopko greeted this new enterprise with enthusiasm. From 2008 until his repose in 2015, he recorded a weekly podcast for Ancient Faith explaining various aspects of the Orthodox Church, thus endowing the platform with immediate legitimacy in the perception of many American listeners. He even recorded fundrais-



ing messages, telling listeners that Ancient Faith Radio was "such a wonderful part of the lives of all of us" and exhorting them to make "really sacrificial" donations.¹⁵ Over the past decade, Ancient Faith has been the most important model for the various digital audio initiatives launched from diverse corners of the Orthodox Church.

Its meteoric rise and massive influence suggests that Hopko's earlier argument should be revisited. He had assumed that Catholic media were the obvious model for Orthodoxy to adopt, but in fact Protestant radio has proven to be a far greater influence on the American Orthodox Church. There is much to be learned from the development of evangelical radio and its role in the transformation of Protestant Christianity. Its history lends support to McLuhan's thesis about

Paul Rader in a broadcasting studio, c. 1922. Chicago Sun-Times/Chicago Daily News collection, Chicago History Museum.

¹⁵ Thomas Hopko, promotional introduction to "Bishops, Part 1: Prophetic, Priestly, and Pastoral," *Speaking the Truth in Love*, podcast, November 1, 2010, https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/hopko/bishops_part_1_prophetic_priestly_and_pastoral.

medium and message, but in a different way than Hopko originally suggested in his 2005 paper.

In the early 1920s, years before the Vatican radio station was powered on, Chicago preacher Paul Rader began producing a regular Sunday radio program of music and sermons. Rader had been an itinerant evangelist and, despite a brief and controversial tenure as pastor of Chicago's prominent Moody Church, remained an outsider to the city's Protestant establishment. Yet his broadcasts proved extremely popular with fundamentalist listeners. Rader reassured his audience, including many in rural areas who did not attend church regularly, that they were part

of a larger movement. He appealed to their cultural nostalgia and provided them with a sense of religious identity. In the words of a grateful listener from North Carolina: "I am glad that there is a station where I can tune in and hear the old time religion, preached to a dying world."¹⁶

Rader's broadcasts established a persuasive template for evangelical radio. In 1926, Chicago's Moody Bible Institute started its own AM station. While staunchly fundamentalist in its beliefs, WMBI learned to soften its message by combining music, Bible study, and children's programming. It quickly became the most influential evangelical broadcaster, not only airing its own original content but also distributing recordings for transmission on other radio stations.

¹⁶ Letter quoted in Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, & Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 49–50.

Farm family listening to the radio, c. 1925. U.S. Department of Agriculture.



The Protestant embrace of radio exacerbated tensions between mainline and evangelical denominations that were just beginning to emerge as evangelicals questioned the trustworthiness of modern science (for example, arguing that evolution should not be taught in public schools) and denounced the ecumenical movement. Ironically, though, it was the evangelical side in this debate that wholeheartedly embraced the mass media, unconcerned that the new technology might distort its gospel message.

Evangelicals' attraction to radio was, strangely, both utilitarian and deeply romantic. On the one hand, they conspicuously embraced any technology that promised effectiveness at "winning souls." Earlier, in the 1880s, the shoe salesman-turned-preacher Dwight L. Moody (founder of both the church and the Bible Institute in Chicago bearing his name) had mastered the art of courting journalists. He effectively co-opted newspapers as tools for evangelism, brushing off accusations that beneath his marketing acumen there was little theological depth. Radio seemed an even better way to reach the masses, having proven itself effective as a vehicle for commercial advertising. "I am selling the greatest product in the world," declared broadcaster Billy Graham. "Why shouldn't it be promoted as well as soap?"¹⁷ Notwithstanding this seemingly pragmatic stance, though, evangelicals were simultaneously entranced by the suggestive technical characteristics of the medium. "It takes dull and leaden letters, limping phrases, shades and inflections, rhythmic colors and tones, and gives wings to our words," marveled radio preacher William Foulkes. "There is something so uncanny and far-reaching in the persuasiveness of radio waves that to the Christian it might well become another Pentecost."¹⁸

Moved by this complex fascination with the medium, early radio preachers succeeded in cultivating a fiercely loyal audience and in developing a commercially successful broadcasting format. By 1948, evangelicals dominated religious radio, with more than 1,600 broadcasts aired every week in the United States.¹⁹ With this success, their social objectives began to change. Tona Hangen describes how, in a marked shift from earlier efforts to foment a nationwide revival, broadcasters started encouraging a model of Christianity as a multitude of small "house church" cells scattered within an antagonistic secular world.²⁰ There were various reasons for this shift, of course, but it is hard to ignore how their framework came to resemble the dispersed character of a medium that sent invisible transmissions to a large but spread-out audience listening on their home receivers.

Broadcasters gradually adjusted their on-air cadence to correspond with this new mission. The predominant tone became more friendly and colloquial. "If you shout and orate at a man in a small room, he will not listen to you as he would if you speak to him quietly and personally," the early radio journalist Raymond Gram Swing had observed. "The microphone is the door handle into a man's living room."²¹ President Franklin Roosevelt's influential radio "fireside chats" were a case in point. Evangelicals heeded this example, and by the 1970s, the predominant tone of their broadcasts had shifted from that of a large tent revival to a conversation around the kitchen table.²² Not coincidentally, this change paralleled the ascent of conservative talk radio as a major force in American politics, as radio hosts honed new forms of broadcasting charisma to win listeners' loyalty.

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¹⁷ Billy Graham: A New Kind of Evangelist," *Time*, October 25, 1954, 8.

¹⁸ William H. Foulkes, "Radio Evangelism," in *The Message and Method of the New Evangelism*, ed. Jesse M. Bader (New York: Round Table Press, 1937), 228–30.

¹⁹ "Radio Log of Evangelical Broadcasts," *Christian Life*, August 1948: 17.

²⁰ Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 51.

²¹ Raymond Gram Swing, "Radio and the Future," in *Education on the Air*, ed. Josephine MacLatchy and Levering Tyson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 4–5, quoted in Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 6.

²² Mark Ward, Sr., "Give the Winds a Mighty Voice: Evangelical Culture as Radio Ecology," *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 21.1 (2014): 125.

As these developments were unfolding, mainline Protestants frequently registered their discomfort with evangelical radio, but failed to advance an effective critique of it. The Methodist minister Charles M. Crowe lamented that “the public gets a distorted and one-sided picture of current religious thinking because most of these programs follow the ultraconservative fundamentalist pattern.”²³ Yet Crowe gamely maintained an optimistic view of the possibilities of radio, and hosted his own program focusing on positive, inspirational themes and ecumenical teachings. He presumed that it was good for Christians to embrace new media, and limited his criticism to the content and tone of evangelical broadcasts. As Robert S. Fortner writes, American Protestantism, “like most of the rest of the country, was caught up in the romance and promise of radio” and failed to develop a nuanced, critical stance toward the technology and its social consequences.²⁴

What mainline critics overlooked is how the messages they found distasteful might be related to the structural character of the medium. Radio—and more recently the online media into which many Christian stations have directed their efforts—have not simply provided a new platform for existing church activities; they have elevated certain voices and diminished others. Quentin J. Schultze describes Protestant mass media as having a predominantly “centrifugal” tendency, encouraging fragmentation and schisms, because they have tended to reward the efforts of ambitious individual broadcasters at the expense of established church institutions and a coordinated message. Schultze criticizes as naive the belief that Christians could embrace commercial media without being transformed by them.²⁵

The observations of contemporary Protestant scholars such as Fortner and Schulze echo McLuhan’s critique of radio up to a point. McLuhan recognized that this medium would have profound implications for his own Catholic Church, as he noted in 1973: “The present situation puts all knowledge and authority on an oral and personal basis. . . . Whereas the Church has through the centuries striven for centralism and consensus at a distance from the faithful, the electrical situation ends all distance. . . . A complete decentralism occurs which calls for new manifestations of teaching authority such as the Church has never before expressed or encountered.”²⁶ McLuhan made these comments in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, framing the council’s reforms (and especially the Church’s embrace of vernacular languages for worship) as a belated and still somewhat fumbling effort to adapt to the new media environment. By contrast, American Protestants had been much quicker to embrace the “decentralism” of radio. The problem in their case, at least according to Fortner and Schulze, was an overhasty accommodation to the medium’s communicative and economic logic, with no coordinated effort to account for its ecclesial implications.

This critique is timely for the Orthodox Church today. Observing the rise of podcasts and other electronic sound media, one may be tempted to think that the technology is, in itself, neutral—that its consequences depend entirely on the content it is used to transmit. The history of Protestant radio casts doubt on this assumption. In retrospect it is easy to understand why the medium of

²³ Charles M. Crowe, “Religion on the Air,” *The Christian Century*, August 23, 1944: 973–4.

²⁴ Robert S. Fortner, “The Church and the Debate over Radio, 1919–1949,” in *Media and Religion in American History*, ed. William David Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2000), 233.

²⁵ Quentin J. Schultze, “Keeping the Faith: American Evangelicals and the Media,” in *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media*, ed. Schultze (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 41–3.

²⁶ Marshall McLuhan, “Liturgy and Media: Do Americans Go to Church to Be Alone?” (1973), in McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 134.

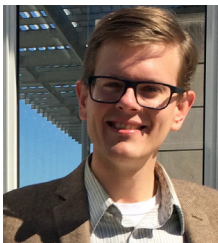
broadcasting, with its disembodied voice capable of reaching thousands or even millions of listeners in their living rooms, would seem like a good fit with Protestant Christianity. Traditionally, Protestantism insists on the autonomy of each individual believer in the interpretation of Scripture, assigns comparatively little importance to the sacraments, and accordingly emphasizes preaching—ideally using vernacular ways of speaking—as the central component of Christian worship. Yet despite these affinities, radio did not simply reinforce preexisting Protestant values. Over time, it gave a distinct advantage to those willing to conform their preaching to its strictures. It overturned existing church hierarchies, empowered the most silver-tongued broadcasters, and aggravated an incipient fissure between mainline and evangelical factions.

Undoubtedly, Orthodox digital media will not develop in exactly the same way—and with the same social consequences—as evangelical radio. There are significant differences, both technological and ecclesiological. Contemporary Orthodox online broadcasters have drawn heavily on the program formats honed over nearly a century of evangelical radio, but have also made unmistakable ef-

forts to adapt to the circumstances of a church that constitutes a small and geographically scattered minority in the English-speaking world, and in which the individual’s theological reasoning is meant to be subordinated to the weight of tradition as experienced sacramentally through liturgy. Do these changes represent a sufficient response to the cautionary tale of evangelical radio? Or, as digital audio media continue to proliferate among English-speaking Orthodox Christians, will familiar tendencies toward sectarianism and culture wars rear their heads?

It would be futile, at this point, to suggest that Orthodox Christians refuse to engage with online audio altogether. But it would be just as misguided to assume that any means of communication is a mere tool, and to ignore its built-in tendencies to promote particular models of community over others. Whether or not podcasting aptitude constitutes a new charism, and if so, where it fits in the Christian structure of teaching are questions the Church has barely started to consider seriously. The new auditory media are unlikely to fall silent on their own, however, and simply “tuning out” is no longer a viable option. *

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