

PRESS & TELEVISION

*Radio's Rough
And Ready Days*

"Written on the Wind: The Impact of Radio during the 1930s" by Alice Goldfarb Marquis, in *Journal of Contemporary History* (July 1984), Sage Publications, 28 Banner St., London EC1 8QE, England.

Radio's golden age occurred during the 1930s in both Great Britain and the United States. Apart from that coincidence, virtually all that radio broadcasts in the two lands had in common was the English language.

So argues Marquis, a California historian. In America, both the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), founded in 1926, and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), created the following year, were purely commercial ventures. NBC was launched by three radio manufacturers who saw professional broadcasts as a way to boost sales. (The strategy worked: Every time NBC opened a station in a new city, radio sales in the listening area doubled within a month. By 1929, one-third of all U.S. households owned a radio; by 1935, 70 percent.) The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), by contrast, was a public corporation from its inception in 1927.

American radio was an exuberant hodgepodge of vaudeville acts, variety shows, soap operas, music, news, and, of course, advertisements. "As early as 1922," Marquis writes, "Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover [argued] that it was 'inconceivable' that such a great medium for public service should be 'drowned in advertising chatter.'" He was



Punch needled the BBC's most popular offering: "What I says is . . . there's too much of this here Variety and most of it's all the same."

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to be disappointed. By 1928, industry giant NBC was taking in \$10 million annually from advertisers. Meanwhile, intellectuals regularly flailed the networks for pandering to low tastes—"the tastes of the mentally deficient," as literary critic Henry Volkening put it.

The BBC faced no such accusations. In fact, it was frequently taken to task for ignoring the preferences of its mostly working-class audience. Directed until 1940 by the dour and opinionated John C. W. Reith, the BBC was a rather dull bastion of propriety and good taste, Marquis reports. Classical music, lectures, and religious programs were its common fare.

The gulf between the BBC and its American counterparts was widest in reporting the news. Partly because of CBS president William Paley's hunger for prestige, American radio correspondents such as Edward R. Murrow and William L. Shirer scoured Europe for stories. By contrast, the BBC's charter and Reith's temperament made for timid journalism. For example, when British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden resigned in February 1938 to protest his government's appeasement of Hitler, CBS broadcast his farewell speech. The BBC did not.

American radio "showered an unconscionable load of trash on the American public," Marquis says. But the failure of the BBC in its early days was more fundamental. It betrayed its chief responsibility: to inform.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

*Rethinking
The Faith*

"Revolution in the Church" by Thomas Sheehan, in *The New York Review of Books* (June 14, 1984), P.O. Box 940, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

"The dismantling of traditional Roman Catholic theology, by Catholics themselves, is by now a *fait accompli*." In their most vigorous intellectual renaissance since the High Middle Ages, declares Sheehan, a Loyola University of Chicago philosopher, Catholic theologians are radically rethinking their faith.

Early in this century, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, worried by "modern" readings of the Bible, proclaimed that the Bible was both literally true and inspired word-for-word by God. In 1965, however, amid the liberalizing influence of the Second Vatican Council, the same commission declared the Gospels to be neither an exact historical record nor an eyewitness account of events. Moreover, Catholic thinkers were for the first time allowed to read the works of their Protestant counterparts without special permission, which spurred a rigorous reexamination of the Bible.

The conclusions of such leading Catholic theologians as Hans Küng of the University of Tübingen and Holland's Edward Schillebeeckx would probably shock most ordinary Catholic churchgoers. In Roman Catholic seminaries, for example, "it is now common teaching that Je-