

Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America. By Tona J. Hangen. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. ix + 220 pp. Photographs, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95; paper, \$18.95. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82752-5; paper 0-807-85420-4.

Reviewed by Joy Elizabeth Hayes

In *Redeeming the Dial*, Tona J. Hangen explores the largely neglected role of organized religion in shaping U.S. radio broadcasting as both a business and a cultural forum. Her study traces the efforts of conservative Protestant organizations to gain access to radio from the 1920s through the 1960s, and it draws on an impressive range of previously unexamined archival sources to paint a detailed picture of pioneering radio evangelists Paul Rader, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Charles Fuller. Although the book is rich in historical detail, it fails to make larger interpretive claims about the changing relationship between religion and radio. In the end, Hangen never makes a clear argument about the influence of religious broadcasters on either the radio industry or American popular culture.

In her introduction, Hangen argues that radio evangelists were “antimoderns,” who held ambivalent attitudes toward modern values (see T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 1994). At the same time that they rejected the perceived instability and immorality of modern culture, they embraced key elements of modern life, including mass media, consumerism, and modern business practices. Radio evangelists depended on modernity both to define their conservative, antimodern identity and to enable their cultural and economic expansion. Although compelling, this thesis is not sufficiently engaged, nor is it supported in Hangen’s subsequent scrutiny of individual evangelists.

Chapters One, Five, and Six frame the history of evangelical broadcasting in three main stages: religious radio before 1939; the struggle for radio access in the 1940s; and the mainstreaming of religious radio in the 1950s and 1960s. As an alternative to the traditional narrative recounting the “rise of commercial network broadcasting,” this framework has the potential to reorient scholarly thinking about how radio broadcasting shaped, and was shaped by, American culture. However, this potential is not realized for

two main reasons: First, Hangen does not adequately situate religious radio within the broader cultural context of conservative Protestantism. Second, she does not demonstrate the relevance of developments in religious radio to the larger industrial, regulatory, or institutional structure of U.S. broadcasting. Without these elements, the book's contribution to business history is greatly limited.

Chapter One examines the role of radio in the “moral battle for leadership of the American religious establishment” that was waged by liberal and conservative Protestants (p. 23). While liberal Protestants (together with mainline Catholic and Jewish groups) were well organized and won early access to network broadcasting, the radio activities of conservative Protestants were constrained by both the networks and the Federal Radio Commission. Although Hangen draws on a rich vein of religious studies to describe these leadership struggles in detail, she ignores the cultural dynamics underlying the rise of conservative Protestantism in America. Specifically, she does not clarify whether evangelical broadcasting was shaped by a single conservative subculture, by many subcultural movements, or by a conservative shift in mainstream American culture. Without answers to these larger questions, the popular cultural significance of religious radio remains unclear.

Chapters Five and Six trace the efforts of conservative broadcasters to organize in the 1940s and to expand their activities in the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1940s, conservatives created a national organization to promote evangelical broadcasting as they struggled with the Federal Communication Commission, Congress, and the industry to legitimize their broadcasting activities. During the 1950s and 1960s, conservative denominations gained a foothold in mainstream Protestant organizations at the same time as regulatory changes caused mainline churches to lose access to network airtime. By the 1960s, commercially supported conservative broadcasters became the dominant voice of religion on the air.

This compelling story of the changes in religious radio, however, is not effectively connected to larger trends occurring in the broadcasting industry (see Hal Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991*, 1992). For example, Hangen does not investigate the role of religious broadcasting in radio's transformation from a national mass medium to a local, targeted medium. Did religious

broadcasting lead the trend in targeted marketing, or did it continue to reach a national, mass audience into the late 1950s and 1960s? How did religious broadcasting change as national network radio gave way to network television? Without a fuller analysis of these connections, Hangen's study does not present a complete picture of U.S. radio history.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four are case studies of radio evangelists Paul Rader, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Charles Fuller. Chapter Two examines Rader's pioneering efforts to extend old-fashioned gospel music and revivalist preaching to thousands via radio. Rader's career demonstrates both the challenges faced by radio revivalists and the enormous audience response they achieved. Chapter Three details the organizational activities and performance style of McPherson, the "Live Wire of Los Angeles," particularly the conspicuous role of consumption in Sister Aimee's personal life and religious performances. Chapter Four traces the rise of Fuller's *Old Fashioned Revival Hour* and examines the "cozy family image" projected by Fuller and his wife, Grace (p. 110). Hangen draws from listeners' letters to the Fullers in describing the audience response to their broadcasts.

These informative chapters would have been strengthened had she established connections to the broader scholarship on U.S. radio history. For example, although Hangen discusses Rader's "almost exaggeratedly masculine" style (p. 41), she does not explore how this style shaped his radio ministry. Several radio scholars, notably Michele Hilmes, Susan J. Douglas, and Leah Lowe, have written about the complex constructions of masculinity and femininity on radio during the Depression era and World War II, and their work would have shed light on the cultural meaning of Rader's masculinist discourse and on Sister Aimee's careful construction of female authority.

In sum, *Redeeming the Dial* is a detailed, well-written narrative of the rise of conservative Protestant broadcasting between 1920 and 1960. However, it is undermined by its failure to address the implications of religious radio for the development of U.S. broadcasting and the history of American popular culture. The study is also weakened by its failure to engage with recent scholarship on the cultural history of radio that has emerged since the late 1990s.

Joy Elizabeth Hayes is associate professor of communication studies at the University of Iowa. She is the author of books and articles on the cultural history of broadcasting, including Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture and Nationalism in Mexico, 1920–1950 (2000) and “Did Herbert Hoover Broadcast the First Fireside Chat? Rethinking the Origins of Roosevelt’s Radio Genius,” Journal of Radio Studies (2000). At present, she is working on a history of radio broadcasting in American life.