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Religious Television: The American Experience (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Religious Television: The American Experience, Peter G. Horsefield, New York, Longman, 1984, 193 pages, \$15.00. Reviewed by David Campbell, Instructor in Communication.

Many in the Reformed community have watched with mixed emotions the rise of the TV preachers over the last fifteen to twenty years. We admire their having shouldered their way onto the mass media street corner where we spot them among the soapboxers boldly promoting Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we have an uneasy sense that the gospel has been swallowed by showbiz, and that the preachers may be draining the resources of the Christian community to waste them on a misuse of TV.

In *Religious Television: The American Experience*, Peter Horsefield, a United Methodist minister, brings together information that may help us sort out some of these feelings, but he also stimulates thought about our own response to television. Horsefield has produced the most comprehensive study to date of the issues relating to current American "religious" TV, including and especially, issues about the role of the TV preachers. His book is essentially a review of the previous studies and debate on the topic, and a drawing of conclusions. Published in early 1984, it does not include material from some important research sponsored by a coalition of liberal and conservative religious groups—including National Religious Broadcasters and the National Council of Churches—and released later the same year.* But that research challenges only a few of Horsefield's conclusions.

The book, which began as a Ph.D. thesis, has three sections. First is a summary of the history of religious television in the U.S. Here Horsefield discusses the factors that led to the near monopoly of religious programming that is now held by evangelicals, the influence of the television medium on their programs, and the debate about the TV preachers that has gone on among U.S. Christians. The second section is a review of what audience research and other "empirical" studies have to tell us about religious TV, and the final section is a consideration of what the future may bring. He concludes that section with suggestions for reform of Christian strategy and practice.

In the course of the study, Horsefield reviews a number of key issues. For example, a major concern is what he calls the "marked imbalance" in the "presentation of American religious faith and culture" on religious TV. In other words, his concern is with the fact that a few fundamentalist and evangelical preachers now dominate the religious programming on television almost to the exclusion of the programs of Mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews and such evangelical denominations as Missouri Synod Lutherans and Southern Baptists.

Here, Horsefield's perspective and sympathies as a Mainline Protestant are not hidden. While he stresses that the greed of the broadcasting industry and irresponsibility of government regulators are partly to blame here, he also blames the evangelical preachers themselves for the problem. Their willingness to pay commercial broadcasters for program time, he argues, has helped drive off the air many of the non-Evangelical religious programs. These programs used to be given free time and were even subsidized by the broadcast industry to fulfill its legal obligation to air religious programs. Today, little of this programming remains, partly because broadcasters can sell their time to paying customers. But whether evangelical broadcasters are to be faulted on this point is questionable.

Ironically, this evangelical tradition of paying its own way by appealing for audience support has roots in the fact that years ago, evangelicals and fundamentalists were often passed over by commercial broadcasters when those broadcasters offered free time for religious programs. Mainline groups were usually accepted as representative of all Protestants. Mainline leaders said little about "imbalance" in the system in those days.

Still, if it is important in modern society and culture that all groups have some level of access to the means of public discussion, then many will agree that there is something wrong with the way power is distributed in broadcasting. What is needed though, is a more broadly ranging discus-

sion about what might constitute a more just framework for the entire broadcasting and other public media systems. Christians have contributed little, if anything, to this discussion from a biblical perspective.

In other areas Horsefield is more helpful. He raises the question, for instance, whether the paid-time evangelical broadcasters have avoided compromising the gospel. Some have claimed that since the evangelicals pay for their TV time, they present the gospel with no compromising dependence on commercially oriented TV executives. Horsefield argues convincingly that while evangelical broadcasters may not be beholden to the TV industry, they have often substituted pleasing their audiences. Only by rapt sensitivity to what audiences will and will not support financially, have the TV preachers been able to survive. In surviving, he shows, they have tended to stress those marketable aspects of the gospel message that blend with television's format and commercial worldview.

Another issue Horsefield discusses is whether the preachers—who have often claimed to be evangelists in the first place—are actually reaching the unconverted. Research suggests, he shows, that very few of those who watch religious TV are not already professing Christians. Religious TV then, appears to function as a support to individual Christians, but rarely as a means for reaching those outside the church.

A third issue is whether the audience-building and fundraising practised by the preachers contribute to or compete with the growth of churches. Again, contrary to what the TV preachers have argued, research suggests that TV preaching contributes little to church growth figures. Horsefield argues that, in fact, there may be serious competition for dollars and loyalty. This is one area where the later research points to a different answer. The NCC/NRB-

sponsored study suggests that the people who give to TV ministries tend to attend and give to their own churches also. Here, there needs to be a discussion of what the role of media in the Christian community ought to be. Can this community do without its own television programs and networks in this age? If it can't, then surely churches should willingly share resources with Christian TV organizations of some sort.

In his last section, Horsefield suggests reforms in the way that Christians strategize and act toward TV. Several of his suggestions are helpful. Christians who think in a reformational vein, however, will find his discussion too narrowly concerned with "religious" television alone. He does suggest that Christians develop a critique of the "dehumanizing and humanly destructive aspects" of television programming in general, but his positive suggestions have to do with what congregations and denominations should do. There is no truly fresh vision for what the church in a broader sense should do. Nor is there any discussion of whether and how this Christian community should challenge secular TV in news and entertainment programming in such a way that Christians could strengthen their own communal life across the board, and at the same time—in appropriate ways—support evangelistic efforts.

Horsefield's discussion should prove helpful for our sorting out of our feelings and thoughts about these preacher-entertainers, and it may help too in discussing the strategies our own churches and Christian communities should adopt in this area of cultural endeavor.

*For a report on this research, see William F. Fore, "Religion and Television: Report on the Research," *The Christian Century*, July 18, 1984, pp. 710-713.

Lectures in Systematic Theology, Robert Lewis Dabney, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 1878, Reprinted 1985, 903 pp., \$24.95. Reviewed by John B. Hulst, President, Dordt College.

Robert L. Dabney (1820-1898) was ordained to the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in 1847, at which time he became pastor of the Tinkling Spring Church in Augusta County, Virginia. His ministry was very effective—a time of hard study, continual pastoral work, and diligent exegetical preaching. At the age of 33, Dabney was called to the Chair of Ecclesiastical History and Polity at Union Seminary in Hampden-Sydney, and six years later was transferred to the Department of Systematic Theology. He remained at Union for thirty years and, according to a majority of his students, "he was the greatest teacher they ever knew." In 1883 he joined the faculty of the University of Texas, where he taught Moral and Mental Philosophy until his retirement in 1894.

Douglas F. Kelly, in *Reformed Theology in America* (edited by David F. Wells, 1985), introduces Dabney as "perhaps the greatest, and certainly the most prolific, Southern Presbyterian theologian of nineteenth-century America." Charles Hodge, A.A. Hodge, and W.G.T. Shedd all considered Dabney to be the greatest teacher of theology in the United States. And B.B. Warfield is quoted as saying: "Dr. Dabney was not only an influential statesman and a powerful ecclesiastical force, not only an acute philosopher and a profound theologian, but also a devoted Christian—which is best of all" (p. 208). Dabney was a Calvinist, whose approach to theology was thoroughly conservative. He accepted the Bible as the Word of God, as inspired and infallible. According to his