

March, 1925

"Religion's Raid on Radio"

A Protest Against the
Encroachments of
Church Propaganda



THE PREACHER BROADCASTING

The Rev. Dr. John Roach Straton, who is shown here in his pulpit in Calvary Baptist Church, New York, was the first minister in the East to broadcast sermons and church services.

ONE out of every fourteen broadcasting stations in the United States is to-day owned by a church and operated by a church—or under a church's direction. So Armstrong Perry declares in a somewhat provocative article in *Popular Radio* (New York). These stations are used, directly and indirectly, for propaganda by the various religious sects, while scores of other "special" broadcasting stations are owned and operated by institutions under the control of religious bodies. It all amounts to what Mr. Perry describes as a "raid on radio," and it ought to be checked, he contends, no less in the interest of religion than of radio.

In taking this attitude, Mr. Perry writes as a church member who thinks that zealots are bringing religion into disrepute. He cites the case of "a prominent divine in New York" who has announced plans for opening a station that will blanket the metropolitan district and a good deal of other territory, and who seems to have taken as his slogan: "Listen to me or to nothing!" Some of the new stations, it seems, have low-power sets and transmit only their Sunday services. Others are using all the power the law will

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allow and operating all day long and into the night. Mr. Perry says that complaints from listeners on Staten Island have been published in the newspapers and are to the effect that WBBR, operated by the People's Pulpit Association, transmits daily and blankets the whole island. The association is composed of followers of the late Pastor Russell. Los Angeles fans, we are told, complain of religious propaganda that crowds out programs they would rather hear; and around Zion City, Illinois, there have been complaints that, in Mr. Perry's view, are but feeble forerunners of the storm that may arise when Voliva opens up with his new five-kilowatt transmitter, one of the most powerful in the world used for broadcasting.

Religious leaders claim that religion has as good a right to the ether as education or business, and no one, Mr. Perry avers, will deny their claim. But educators "usually are modest and unobtrusive" and business "usually has the common sense to avoid trying to force itself upon an unwilling public; while the religious leader "is sometimes the least wise, the least tolerant, the most bigoted of all." The argument proceeds:

"It is bad enough to have different religious denominations preaching against each other and working against each other, all in the name of the same God, within the walls of their own meeting-houses. In that case we do not have to listen to them unless we choose to. But if they get to competing in the air, we broadcast listeners will be out of luck. Already the Fundamentalists and their opponents have had their fling in the ether and a large part of listening America had a bad attack of spiritual nausea. So long as power is limited so that a propagandizing station can be tuned out, the situation is tolerable. The radio manufacturer and dealer especially are not averse to a condition that requires a high degree of selectivity in receiving sets. But when a broadcaster acquires a right to radiate an amount of power that will force oscillations in all receivers within five, ten or fifty miles, for any number of hours he may choose to monopolize the ether, he will have reached the ideal of the religious fanatic and the point where the average listener will junk his receiving equipment."

No new machinery, Mr. Perry intimates, is needed for the regulation of propagandists, religious or otherwise. We have, he says, no adequate radio laws, but we have a Secretary of Commerce who is better than most of our laws. He adds:

"The best law can be evaded and nullified more easily than a public official with common sense, an honest purpose and the nerve to do his duty. He [the Secretary of Commerce] has shown a disposition to listen to all points of view and to make

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regulations to safeguard the rights of all radio users. There is no doubt that religious leaders and societies, especially those of irrational, freakish tendencies, will bring to bear all possible pressure to enable them to monopolize the ether. They can be held in check by the expression of public opinion. To suggest that they should be limited is not inimical even to their own interests. They may not realize it, but nothing does so much to harm their own cause as trying to force it upon the public. The sane, constructive religious leadership of the country should be upheld by an immediate and vigorous expression of public opinion concerning the proper regulation of religious broadcasting stations; otherwise it may be deprived of its share of the ether by the wrongdoing of those who want it all."

Since Mr. Perry's article was written, the newspapers have carried accounts of the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into the radio field. Cardinal Hayes, it seems, is behind the move, and the Paulist Fathers are to do the pioneer work in connection with the installation of powerful broadcasting stations not only in New York City, but also in Chicago and San Francisco. These stations will be "for the purpose of acquainting the public with the Catholic view-point upon current affairs."