

EVANGELISM IN THE AIR

The Christian Awareness Broadcasting System just bought a radio station in Monterey, California. The system's owner was asked whether he would allow the broadcast of synagogue services.

"No," he said. "The only Jewish people will be those who have converted to Christianity."

A few days later he explained that he had not been misquoted, but he had been misunderstood. In the interim, the FCC had announced that it was holding up his license for "clarification," since it is forbidden for any station "to advocate one particular religion to the exclusion of others."

The new owner now assured everyone that non-Christian viewpoints would not be excluded from the station, although "the majority of our programming will indeed be largely Christian." He promptly offered to sell time to synagogues in the area.

The evangelists are hitting the air waves with born-again fervor. An association called National Religious Broadcasters has over 800 organizations, mainly evangelical, which own and operate predominantly religious radio or TV stations, or produce programs for other stations. They reach a weekly radio audience of about 115 million and a weekly TV audience of about 14 million.

The increasing activity of evangelical churches, on this and other fronts, is scarcely surprising. The United States is still the "most religious" country in the world, if counted by such measures as church attendance and "belief in God." For example, about 98 per cent of all Americans say that they believe in God,

while only 77 per cent of all Englishmen say so; and while almost half of all Americans normally attend church on a weekly basis, only about a fifth of Englishmen do. And, contrary to some popular belief, American youth are following in that tradition.

But the cutting edge of America's current church growth is among the evangelical churches. In the last twenty years, for example, while the American population has grown by about 30 per cent, and total church affiliation has grown by about 40 per cent, the Episcopal church has dropped behind the population increase, growing only about 15 per cent; but the evangelical Southern Baptists have grown by about 60 per cent. The number of evangelicals in the country now is about 45 million, one-third of all the church-affiliated, and still soaring -- among the young, as well.

Proselytizing others to their belief, in order to save them, tends to be a central religious tenet of the evangelical churches. This is why there is a boom in evangelical broadcasting, as well as other promotional activity. The Jews are not the sole target of such proselytizing, since the evangelicals feel that two-thirds of those Americans born Christian need to be born again. However, there is a special gusto for converting Jews -- it being particularly troublesome that the religion which sprang from the Jews did not capture them, while capturing the rest of the Western world.

There are some problems posed by the broadcasting and by some of the other promotional programs. Every religious group has to have the right of free expression -- which includes the right to urge others to come over to its belief, as long as there is no coercion. Thus, current court rulings suggest that religious groups have the right to distribute their religious literature on high school

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campuses -- as long as school administrations do not sponsor or help them in any way.

But given the size and temperament of the evangelical movement, what of the sheer weight of their material? That is probably a situation we have to live with. Certainly no one wants to suggest a governmentally imposed "quota system" for allotting time among the various religious expressions, on the streets or on the air.

However, there are certain common-sense protections that can be sought, as suggested by what happened in Monterey. The nation's communication laws are now being reviewed comprehensively by Congress, for the first time since 1934. Provisions should be strengthened which require that no single religious viewpoint totally monopolize the air time of any radio or TV station. But there should also be an overall limit on the amount of our limited air time which can be devoted to sectarian religious indoctrination or services of any kind.