Program in the Field of Religious Television

for the
American Jewish Committee

I. The Field

It is a simple truism that television is here to stay and, with the expansion of the number of television situations, it is likely to grow. Religious television will also probably increase in scope and in the allocation of time. The Federal Communications Commission requires a certain allotment of time for public service programs. The broadcasting industry is, generally, inclined to allocate much of this public service to religion because of the non-controversial nature of programming in this field.

The Christian churches have taken advantage of this opportunity. The Broadcasting and Film Commission of the National Council of Churches is well over $1,000,000. This represents about 20 per cent of the entire budget of the NCC. The Catholic Church spends hundreds of thousand of dollars in the field of broadcasting. Several Protestant denominations have their own television centers, notably, in Atlanta and Dallas, with a budget of several thousand dollars. The Union Theological Seminary has received foundation funds for a television research center, and Yale University Divinity School has long been engaged in a study of the mass media. Despite these large budgets, there is constant church pressure for a substantial increase in funds for radio, television and films. It is also interesting to note that the Catholic Church finds it most practical to use a lay arm, The National Catholic Man, to carry on its religious broadcasting program.

An entirely new field – subscription television – will probably soon see the light of day. This, too, may offer opportunities for religious broadcasting.

Religious groups have been the first to admit inadequacies of religious television. An address by Dean Liston Pope on this subject has been widely quoted. Jewish religious television has fallen far behind the standards of even the mediocre Christian programming. In many instances, programs border on the offensive and harmful. Only three groups have made any serious efforts in the field, and this has been done with modest budgets. The Jewish Theological Seminary has the most ambitions program,
whose high quality is attested by the “Frontiers of Faith” productions. The Jewish Chautauqua Society has prepared 15-minute television films on the subject of Jewish holidays. The New York Board of Rabbis has also made some modest beginnings. The most notable lack is in the area of Jewish film. Christian groups have many commercial sources of supply. Our staff has examined hundreds of these films, especially in the Biblical field, and found few suitable for Jewish use.

II. Objectives of Religious Television

There are seven possible objectives of Jewish religious television:

1. Present an image of the Jew as thoroughly integrated in American life, while at the same time he has something unique to contribute growing out of his own spiritual and cultural heritage. American Jewish history offers many rich opportunities, including the depicting of the influence of Jewish values in changing American, and the activities of Jews in helping to establish the nation.

2. To interpret the values of Judaism to Jews, especially in light of the fact that most Jews are not reached through formal religious channels. Such an agency as ours, with no denominational ties, has a unique opportunity to reflect the application of basic Jewish values to American life. (This last consideration also applies to the next objective.)

3. To interpret values of Judaism to non-Jews. In this connection, the question arises as to whether we should regard the non-Jewish listener as merely on-lookers or whether we should gear our programs, specifically, to mixed audiences. It is interesting to note that representatives of the broadcasting industry, when asked this question, invariably, stress the need for considering the larger audience.

4. To enlist the medium of religious television in support of social action rules, such as better housing, anti-discrimination, etc. In a recent article, the editor of an influential Catholic journal, America, points to the social justice program of the Jews as being the most unique contribution of American Jewry.

5. To develop cooperative relationships among religious groups through joint planning and operation of the television medium. This already exists, in a small measure, as CBS’s program, “Lamp unto My Feet” and “Look up and Live.” On the other hand, the Catholic Church has insisted on referring to its segment as a tri-faith program such as, “The Catholic Hour” refusing to give up its distinctiveness. In the commercial field, the
program, “Cross Roads”, consisting of heroic stories of Christian and Jewish clergyman is another illustration of cooperation. On the other hand, there is danger that the end-affect may result in watered-down material that is neither Jewish nor Christian. It is also desirable to help other faiths in the pursuance of their own programs; for example, the Dean Pike show to bring in Jewish subject matter.

6. To develop technical skills by Jewish religious leaders in order to improve the quality of their own programs, as well as to aid them in appearances of general programs. The AJC has a long history of work in this field, notably the television workshops for rabbis over the past five years in New York City, upper New York State, and hopefully in other communities such as, Chicago and Los Angeles. In addition, we are considering an arrangement with Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati for the training of seminary students in the radio and television fields.

7. To develop film libraries for religious leaders, both Christian and Jewish. The possible use of television kinescopes should be considered. In this connection, the most crying need is for the creation of films that can be used for both television and religious schools. One Christian leader, in the field, has suggested a film series explaining Judaism to Christian children. He estimates the cost would be approximately $3,000 per film.

III. Program Formats

A survey of present and past religious programs, indicating that there are a half dozen formats for use of one or a combination of the following:

1. Worship – explanation of rites, rituals, ceremonies, etc. This is done in the studio or by remote control from church or synagogue.
2. Religious message – educational programs, including children’s Sunday Schools.
3. Dramatic presentation, either for entire program or as illustrative material.
4. Discussion and interview.
5. Religious news.
6. Special events; for example, Seder observance.

Of these formats, few have been of sufficiently high caliber to sustain audience interests. It is also doubtful whether our agency has a role in merely ritualistic program. Our skills are largely in the dramatic field, and it may be possibly advisable to concentrate our efforts on developing a series of dramatic presentations that will reflect
the basis prophetic ideals in Judaism with the major emphasis on the contributions of Judaism to the social idealism within the Fabric of our western culture. On the other hand, we have had success with other formats, especially in connection with holy days, and possibly we should continue pioneering in this field.

IV. Sponsorships

The question of whether our agency should take sole sponsorship of religious television or whether we should invite Jewish religious agencies to join with us. If the latter, which agencies should be invited?

V. Structure

The basic need is for a national Jewish broadcasting and film commission. This has been stressed by the broadcasting industry and would be welcomed by it as a means of ending the present chaos and competition. If one is not created, the vacuum will be filled by groups not adequately equipped to meet the needs of American Jewry and the broadcasting industry. The Religious bodies are not equipped, at the present time to create such an organization. Our own agency, because of our own experience and our long-standing relationship with the broadcasting industry, and our technical know-how, offers an ideal instrument for the creation of such a commission.

At the present time, however, we must content ourselves with the creation of a lay committee that will examine the field and the objectives, and tackle the budget and personnel problems that are required as the first steps in entering the field.

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