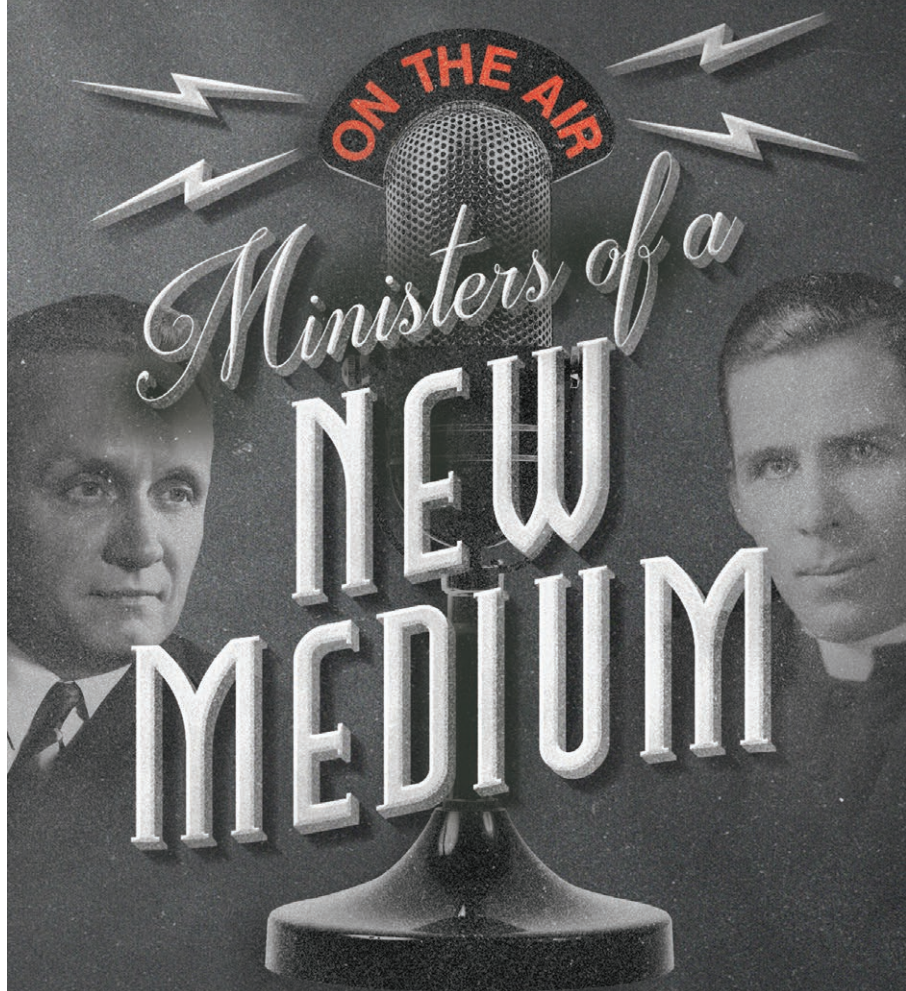


KIRK D. FARNEY



BROADCASTING THEOLOGY IN THE RADIO MINISTRIES OF
FULTON J. SHEEN *and* WALTER A. MAIER



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Chapter One

GOLDEN MOUTHS, ETHEREAL PULPITS



If then eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to imagine what good things are prepared for those who love God, from where . . . shall we be able to come to the knowledge of these things? Listen a moment and you will hear him answer.

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Turn your radio on . . . and glory share . . . get in touch with God . . . turn your radio on.

ALBERT BRUMLEY, “TURN YOUR RADIO ON”

ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 26, 1924—a “perfect Indian summer day”—the cornerstone was laid for the facilities of the new campus of Concordia Seminary in Clayton, Missouri. Special trains brought enthusiastic Lutherans from around the Midwest to witness the celebratory afternoon, and to lift their voices in a rousing rendition of “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Coinciding with this new birth of one of America’s largest seminaries that day was the maiden voyage on the nation’s airwaves of Lutheran radio station KFUE, which introduced itself to the listening public by broadcasting the seminary proceedings. Concordia’s sober, scholarly president, Francis Pieper, stood

before newfangled microphones and began to address the physical and ethereal attendees *in Latin*.¹ As the bowtie-clad churchman spoke of Christ's status as the "true cornerstone of the church," an "immense" biplane flew over the campus. Pieper paused his speech and raised his eyes, along with those of the thousands present, to marvel at the display of gravity-defying technology.² The epiphanic confluence of ancient Scripture, medieval language, Reformation theology, and modern innovation was not lost on the terra firma-bound spectators. In recapping this moment, the lay periodical *The Lutheran Witness* observed, "A conjunction of a living past with the vibrant present . . . could not have been more perfectly symbolized." The German language periodical, *Der Lutheraner*, provided this succinct summation: "Times change, and we change with them. But God's Word remains forever."³

While the observers comprehended the symbolic intersection of modernity and the "faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3 KJV), they could not have known the impact this intersection was about to have. Radio and religion would soon emerge as a match seemingly made in heaven. The faith "once delivered unto the saints" could now be delivered to the living rooms of saints and sinners alike, over broadcast towers sprouting up across the land. And millions were ready to listen.

Two learned clergymen and academics, a Catholic priest and a Lutheran minister, led among those who embraced this opportunity to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ over the airwaves. They did so with remarkable success. Through weekly broadcasts from coast to coast they attained household name status. Those names were Fulton J. Sheen and Walter A. Maier.



¹In that radio transmissions were broadcast invisibly through the air (the heavens, if you will), they were characterized as traversing or manipulating the "ether," especially during radio's Golden Age—thus, the term *ethereal*.

²Estimates of the attendees of this event on the new Concordia Seminary campus varied from 12,000 to 20,000. See "Laying of Corner-Stone, Concordia Seminary," *The Lutheran Witness* 43, no. 23 (November 4, 1924), 396.

³"Laying of Corner-Stone," 396-97; "A Memorable Day for Our Concordia Seminary in St. Louis," *Der Lutheraner* 80, no. 23 (November 11, 1924), 394-95. (I am grateful to Andrew Hansen for his assistance in translating this text.) *Concordia Seminary: 175th Anniversary Special Edition (1839-2014)*, September 2014, 11-12; www.concordiahistoricalinstitute.org/today-in-history/tih1026/.

In February 1940, the diocesan newspaper of New Orleans, *Catholic Action of the South*, referred to Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen, the popular radio priest of the *Catholic Hour* (CH) radio program, as “the John Chrysostom of the US airwaves.”⁴ Three years later, *Time* magazine labeled Reverend Walter A. Maier, the dynamic radio preacher of *The Lutheran Hour* (TLH) broadcast, the “Chrysostom of American Lutheranism.” (As a courtesy to their less historically minded readers, *Time*’s editors did provide a footnote explaining who this renowned fourth-century Christian preacher was.⁵) Such praise was not uncommon for these two powerful preachers whose “golden mouths” spoke every week over the airwaves of the nation and much of the world.⁶ Through radio, both had gained considerable fame, rivaling not just that of other major religious leaders, but of entertainers and politicians as well. Both enjoyed the loyalty of millions of listeners, who formed audiences comparable in size to those of “popular” radio programs. While stylistically different, both preached with urgency and conviction. Both had attained uncommon erudition, yet delivered sermons that touched the common man and woman. Both saw Christian commitment as a central component of the American way of life and the key to the country’s well-being. And both espoused a version of Christianity that reflected conservative orthodoxy and tradition, yet with an ecumenical openness uncommon at the time in their respective denominations.

Those denominational affiliations are a key component in making the stories of Walter Maier and Fulton Sheen so noteworthy, and invite more thorough analysis. That Americans experiencing the Great Depression, then a world war, followed by the war’s aftermath and the rise of communism, would have listened to hopeful Christian messages on the radio is not difficult to understand. But that two of the most popular radio preachers would have come from the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) would have been less predictable, given the religious environment of the time.

When CH was launched in 1930, the Catholic Church represented the largest denomination in the United States, with over twenty million members.

⁴Kathleen Riley Fields, “Bishop Fulton J. Sheen: An American Catholic Response to the Twentieth Century” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1988), 108, 137.

⁵“Lutherans,” *Time*, October 18, 1943, 46, 49.

⁶“Chrysostom,” or *Chrysostomos*, means “Golden Mouthed” in Greek.

Yet anti-Catholic prejudice was widespread, as had been demonstrated by bitter opposition to Democratic Presidential Candidate Al Smith just two years earlier. What is more, many in the American non-Catholic majority viewed Catholicism as the religion of the suspect, ethnically disadvantaged, immigrant population that had come ashore in the latter nineteenth century. Historian Martin Marty has noted that in such an environment “moderates throughout the nation were no less disturbed than [Ku Klux] Klansmen about the threat that America would go Catholic.”⁷ Notwithstanding the uncharitable views non-Catholics expressed toward the less-than-fully American papists, many of them warmed quickly to Monsignor Sheen and tuned in just like their Catholic neighbors—much to the surprise of network executives and social observers.

The LCMS was one of several Lutheran bodies in America when TLH went on the air—also in 1930. At this time, there were roughly four million Lutherans in the United States, found in twenty-one different denominational bodies.⁸ With membership in excess of one million, the LCMS was one of the largest of these Lutheran groups. Yet it was obviously modest in relative size and resources, and even more modest in attracting attention. Though the Lutherans did not elicit the hostility that Catholics endured, they were often viewed as an aloof ethnic enclave, given their sectarian German and Scandinavian ways.⁹ Fellow citizens had displayed especially discomfiting levels of distrust toward German-Americans, of which Lutherans were a sizable component, during World War I.¹⁰ Demonstrable German-American loyalty during that conflict and subsequent conscious efforts to “Americanize” had broken down some of the previous prejudices, bringing Lutherans more fully into the American mainstream. However, Missouri Synod Lutherans remained in a state of semi-isolation of their own construction, primarily because they doggedly maintained theological commitments that avoided any semblance of “unionism” (a form of ecumenism)

⁷Quoted in James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 237.

⁸Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 462.

⁹For a succinct description of the historical marginalization of American Lutheranism, see Mark A. Noll, “The Lutheran Difference,” *First Things* 20 (February 1992), 31-40.

¹⁰See Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German Americans and World War I* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), especially chapters 7 and 8.

or syncretism.¹¹ Yet from this small, easily ignored denomination came Walter Maier and his engaging radio preaching. Like Sheen, he would enjoy the embrace of millions who tuned in. Like Sheen, he would attract listeners across the spectrum of denominational and religious affiliations. And, like Sheen, he would attain a level of recognition, and even celebrity, that many secular competitors within popular culture coveted.

In the anxiety-laden conditions of economic depression, war, and post-bellum change, radio offered Americans a welcome escape. The antics of Lum and Abner, the adventures of the Lone Ranger, the wisecracks of Fred Allen, the tense sleuthing of the Shadow, all provided diversionary transport to fictional places for the masses tuning in. The round trip to such locales, however, took only thirty minutes or less, after which listeners again faced their daily realities. For millions, that task was made less arduous by having a relationship with the God who was the source of their reality. Fulton Sheen and Walter Maier went to their microphones to create and nurture these relationships. Both individual and communal religion flourished in the radio congregations they created. Historian Tona Hangen summarizes, “Religious radio, then, also served as a meeting place, a shared and sacred space that fulfilled the desire for personal connection.” It was “a *vox populi* in every sense of the word.”¹² Maier’s and Sheen’s mastery at making these connections produced audiences that dwarfed many other religious broadcasts and rivaled those of the most popular secular programming. In short, religious radio and two of its most successful broadcasters are integral components of radio history; they belong anywhere but on the periphery.

The purpose of this book is to more fully understand their success and to argue for its significance. It will focus on the radio careers of Maier and Sheen, though with sufficient context provided for their respective Lutheran and Catholic identities. It will describe how they gained national airwave access and the challenges they faced in retaining that access. It will discuss the style and content of their preaching, while relating that preaching to the roles Sheen and Maier played in the emerging mass culture created by radio,

¹¹Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985), 367-68.

¹²Tona J. Hangen, “Speaking of God, Listening for Grace: Christian Radio and Its Audiences,” in *Radio Cultures: The Sound Medium in American Life*, ed. Michael C. Keith (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 135.

especially network radio. It will endeavor to understand the receptivity of radio audiences to the messages of these two purveyors of divine wisdom. Finally, it will assess the impact of their radio ministries on their respective denominations and the broader Christian world.

Fulton Sheen and Walter Maier were extraordinary, gifted men. Both were “Type A” personalities, very busy in the vineyard of the Lord. While Maier was more proactive in pushing a gospel radio agenda in the 1920s, both men embraced the opportunities radio presented when they entered network airwaves in 1930. Before they excelled in radio, both had proven themselves as solid thinkers and effective communicators for other purposes. Though their speaking styles differed, each possessed eloquence that inspired listeners. Each drew on education, intellect, and wit. Both possessed firm theological convictions that they expressed forthrightly. Their ability to enlist respected language and thought from traditional Christianity in such a way as to engage contemporary issues proved enduringly popular.

Yet effective as they were personally in communicating a strong message, it is important in understanding their place in American cultural history to recognize that both Maier and Sheen were in the right place at the right time. The emergence of mass culture offered both opportunity and peril, and the stakes were high. As radio historian Jason Loviglio summarizes, “The struggle over the ideological valence of ‘the people’” played out in the “development of mass media in this dawning era of mass culture.”¹³ Historian David Kennedy has written that the medium of radio “swiftly developed into an electronic floodgate through which flowed a one-way tide of mass cultural products that began to swamp the values and manners and tastes of once-isolated localities.”¹⁴ As Americans experienced this deluge, the messages they heard and the intimacy they perceived while listening to Sheen’s and Maier’s “old-time religion” provided a degree of comfort and continuity that should be recognized by historians seeking a well-rounded understanding of this era. The Catholic priest from Peoria played well in Peoria. So did the Lutheran pastor from Boston. Their surprising success, in turn, lent an unexpected

¹³Jason Loviglio, “Vox Pop: Network Radio and the Voice of the People,” *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 90.

¹⁴David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 228.

respect to their denominations. Such matters are difficult to quantify, but it is almost inconceivable that the acceptance of either Lutherans or Catholics in the broader American society would have advanced as rapidly as it did from the 1920s onward without the effectiveness of these radio preachers.

As the chairman of the Lutheran Laymen's League (LLL) Radio Committee, H. J. Fitzpatrick, chirped at the beginning of his address to the 1943 LLL convention, "Nothing succeeds like success!"¹⁵ Both Sheen and Maier were walking and talking proofs of this axiom. They indeed succeeded in manifold ways. In their own minds and given their own religious commitments, Sheen and Maier, who would have disagreed between themselves on a number of theological points, nonetheless would have agreed on this one: that the only "success" of lasting worth was a soul won for Christ. Surprisingly, however, in the social turbulence of the 1930s and 1940s and the dawn of America's radio culture, the religious success that both preachers sought translated also into an extraordinary and unexpected popular success with the American listening public.

IMPLICATIONS

In concentrating on these two figures, this book illuminates many broader features of American society in the 1930s and 1940s. One issue concerns how Walter Maier and Fulton Sheen fit in the radio landscape of that period. The book will examine how their listening audiences compared in size to other audiences for network radio programming, the nature of their program content, and how this compared to the content of other popular radio programs. It seeks clues as to whether the CH and TLH were perceived as entertainment or preaching and worship. Additionally, it will explore how the celebrity status attained by Maier and Sheen compared to that of other radio personalities.

A broader issue is the presence of religion on the radio from the early days of broadcasting through the 1940s. It is important to understand who the players were on network religious radio during this key period. This book will examine the different means by which network preachers, including Sheen and Maier, gained and retained access to network airwaves, and will

¹⁵H. J. Fitzpatrick, "Report on the Tenth Anniversary Lutheran Hour to the Lutheran Laymen's League Convention, July 9–11, 1943," Lutheran Hour Archives, St. Louis. TLH has operated under the auspices of the LLL since 1930—an arrangement brokered by Walter Maier.

describe the setup for putting TLH and the CH on the air. It will also probe Sheen's and Maier's respective listener bases and the nature of their responses to the radio priest and pastor.

The fact that Maier and Sheen were so successful also reveals much about the culture and religion of the United States during a prolonged period of national calamity—the Great Depression, World War II, and the beginning of the Cold War. Such success raises the question of whether the common belief that organized religion declined during the Depression is, in fact, accurate. This study will also explore Sheen's and Maier's roles in the fundamentalist/modernist controversy within the church, the academy, and society. It will be important to gain an understanding of how the intimacy that audiences perceived with radio personalities allowed Maier and Sheen to fulfill a genuinely pastoral function for individual listeners. Additionally, though Sheen and Maier generally eschewed politics in their preaching, it is important to consider how much their commentary on the economic crisis, the war effort, and the evils of "godless communism," contributed to the state of American "civil religion." Finally, the book provides analysis of how the popularity of Maier and Sheen contributed to greater ecumenism and religious tolerance.

In order to explain how the radio careers of Sheen and Maier worked in this period, it is imperative to understand exactly what they did on the radio. This book attempts to re-create their respective preaching styles, and survey the biblical, theological, pastoral, and topical content of their radio messages. It is especially interesting to see how two men, who had achieved remarkable levels of education, and lived and taught in academic settings, were so adept at engaging their knowledge in ways that reached the average person. A thorough examination of the rarefied theology they preached is required if we are to fully comprehend what their audiences found compelling, and gain a greater understanding of this era of American history as it unfolded.

Finally, this analysis must explore the important denominational aspects of Sheen's and Maier's radio ministries. It will recount what distinctly Catholic and Lutheran elements were contained in their respective CH and TLH messages. In an era when identification with one's own denomination was more pronounced than today, Maier's and Sheen's ability to attract listeners from across the religious/denominational spectrum is significant and must be examined. In turn, it must be recognized that their respective

programs brought Lutheranism and Catholicism from the perceived periphery of American Christianity to more mainstream positions. This book will also explore what kind of support and opposition were given to Maier and Sheen by their respective denominational leadership, as well as how the “average” Catholic reacted to the success of Sheen and the “average” Lutheran reacted to the success of Maier.

HISTORICAL TREATMENT

Even for historians with the benefit of hindsight, it has long been conventional wisdom that the Depression either radicalized religion, or undercut the stature of mainline churches.¹⁶ In addition, scholarly convention has held that well past the 1940s American Lutherans remained largely unrecognized and American Catholics remained a source of considerable suspicion. Yet with Sheen and Maier something quite different was going on.

Their huge popularity calls into question historiographical judgments that either ignore Maier, Sheen, and much of religious radio, or assess their roles as peripheral. Beginning in the 1990s, long-overdue scholarly attention has been directed toward radio—its history, content, and cultural impact.¹⁷ Yet even though religion had been a significant part of broadcast programming from commercial radio’s birth, its treatment in the emerging scholarship has been inadequate. Few have recognized that “it is . . . possible to see religious broadcasting” as a critical “site of the struggle over the cultural ascendancy of religion in modernity.”¹⁸ While a handful of historians have focused specifically on religious radio,¹⁹ most either fail to mention religious content entirely, imply that it was a fringe component, or pay attention only to the more sensational religious radio personalities (e.g., Father Charles Coughlin, Aimee Semple McPherson).

¹⁶For examples, see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), chapters 53 and 54; Robert T. Handy, “The American Religious Depression, 1925–1935,” *Church History* 29, no. 1 (March 1960): 3–16.

¹⁷For a brief summary of radio’s historical treatment, see Michele Hilmes, “Rethinking Radio,” in Hilmes and Loviglio, *Radio Reader*, 1–19.

¹⁸Stewart M. Hoover and Douglas K. Wagner, “History and Policy in American Broadcast Treatment of Religion,” *Media, Culture & Society* 19, no. 1 (1997): 13.

¹⁹Helpful historical treatments of Christian radio have been authored by Tona J. Hangen, Quentin J. Schultze, Joel A. Carpenter, Mark Ward Sr., and Bob Lochte, to name a few. Their works will be cited at various places in this book.

In addition to correcting these historiographical shortcomings regarding Maier's and Sheen's religious and cultural significance, this book will also explore their success in light of recent scholarship addressing how radio was "heard" by those tuning in during this period. As network radio in particular stimulated the emergence of mass culture, it also produced a "sense of intimacy" at multiple levels. Isolation was not an uncommon state of existence for people in the early twentieth century. Network radio provided listeners a sense of belonging to a larger community.²⁰ Mass communication meant mass shared experience, as thousands of citizens came together to form a single audience for popular programs, yet did so primarily in their own personal or familial space. In short, radio created broader community while respecting privacy.

But even as listeners perceived new, substantive communal bonds through shared radio experiences, homogenization of the populace did not occur, as social critics feared. Rather, the voices coming out of radio boxes actually gave audience members a heightened sense of individual empowerment. Every time a radio announcer or personality asked audience members to do something (e.g., try a product, "stay tuned"), listeners sensed that they mattered beyond the walls of their homes. Such personal appeals, coupled with the familiar sound of popular personalities' voices, produced another level of felt intimacy—that between individual listeners and the person to whom such voices belonged. Listeners considered their favorite radio personalities to be trusted friends, with whom they often shared personal opinions (via correspondence), and on whom they projected broad expertise on numerous topics, regardless of whether the broadcaster actually possessed such expertise.²¹

²⁰Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 23.

²¹Bruce Lenthall, *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 64–76. See also Douglas B. Craig, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in the United States, 1920–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), especially chapters 7 and 8; Lawrence W. Levine and Cornelia R. Levine, *The Fireside Conversations: America Responds to FDR During the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1998), 222–23; Derek Vaillant, "Your Voice Came In Last Night . . . but I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared: Rural Radio Listening and 'Talking Back' During the Progressive

Recent historical study of radio's ability to draw early listeners into a perceived community, of the even deeper perceptions of intimacy between listeners and radio personalities, of the free agency listeners considered themselves to wield, and of the authoritative deference afforded radio celebrities, may provide significant explanatory power for the success of Fulton Sheen and Walter Maier, as well as confirmation of their importance in the lives of their listeners.

THE SHAPE OF THIS STUDY

Maier and Sheen aggressively employed the technological and cultural forces of the emerging medium of radio as far-reaching preaching platforms. Listeners across the country, of varying religious affiliations and commitments, embraced their brand of conservative orthodox Christianity, notwithstanding its Lutheran and Catholic packaging. They listened to these ethereal pastors with a remarkable level of perceived intimacy, despite an environment of religious turmoil (modernist/fundamentalist) and within conditions of political and economic upheaval. In short, this is a story of a complex confluence of historical factors. Thus, while this study will focus primarily on cultural and religious history, underlying elements of political, economic, theological, ecclesiastical, and intellectual history are also brought into the conversation.

The next chapter sets the stage by describing the development of radio as a powerful medium of popular communication in the 1930s and 1940s. While attending to the specific role of religious broadcasting in this new medium, it does so while considering networks, the new medium's cultural impact, and what historians have called the "Golden Age of radio." The third and fourth chapters turn to Maier, Sheen, and their "Hours." The biographical sketches in these chapters emphasize the similarities and differences in their youthful formation, formal education, careers as ordained religious leaders, and then their entry into radio. Similar comparisons are also drawn for the Catholic and Lutheran involvement in their programming, in how they funded the programs, and the opportunities and obstacles they

Era in Wisconsin, 1920–1932," in Hilmes and Loviglio, *Radio Reader*, 63–111; Kristine M. McCusker, "Dear Radio Friend": Listener Mail and the *National Barn Dance*, 1931–1941," *American Studies* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 173–95.

faced along the way. The fifth chapter examines in depth the format of their landmark programs, the way each prepared for a broadcast, and the characteristics of their delivery. From printed and archival sources, as well as from contemporary accounts and surviving recordings of their broadcasts, it is possible to reconstruct how the studios from which they broadcast were set up, how Sheen and Maier prepared and delivered sermons, other elements of each week's programs, and what sort of theological content their radio sermons featured.

Two substantial chapters follow with full treatment of the homiletic content of their programs, described first in foundational theological terms and then in what the broadcasters asked of their listeners by way of personal response. It is important to understand that millions of listeners willingly tuned in, week after week, to hear *what* Sheen and Maier had to say, and one cannot fully understand their impact, their audience, or the times in which they preached without a thorough unpacking of their messages.

Finally, the book ends by considering the evidence for treating Maier and Sheen, in their activity on national radio, as deserving more salience in historical accounts, both religious and cultural, of this turbulent period. Factors like the number of stations carrying their broadcasts, the huge volume of correspondence they received, the personal engagement of listeners and correspondents, their prominence in multiple arenas of national discourse, their broad respect within general religious circles, and their celebrity status off the air, all point to the significance of what Sheen and Maier accomplished on the radio. This last chapter and the brief epilogue also come back to the question of how these radio preachers shaped Lutheranism and Catholicism in the unfolding of American and ecclesiastical history.

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