

## **“The Fulton Sheen Affair: Religious Controversy, Nationalism, and Commercialism in the Early Years of Canadian Television, 1952-1958”**

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In 1952, Bishop Peter Fulton J. Sheen was arguably the most recognizable cleric in the English-speaking world. After thirty-two years of success as the keynote speaker on NBC radio’s “The Catholic Hour,” Sheen switched to television, hosting the smash hit, “Life is Worth Living.” With a network audience on DuMont carried on seventy-five stations, soon to mushroom to 139, and an audience of 5.5 million people (in 1955), the half-hour program featuring Sheen’s lectures, netted the prelate an Emmy Award in 1952, while denting the high ratings of “Mr Television,” Milton Berle, and driving Frank Sinatra’s variety show off the air. Sheen also won the American Freedom Foundation Award, was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, was polled by Gallup as one of America’s ten most admired men, and would soon be dubbed the “Chesterton of America.”<sup>1</sup> Scholarly, witty, and theatrical, Sheen electrified audiences with his mixture of political commentary, ethical reflections, and plain-spoken common sense. As for Canadians, Sheen was known, but not seen: the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, in 1952, with its new television monopoly in Canada’s major cities refused to broadcast “Life is Worth Living,” precipitating a three-year struggle that brought into question Canadian identity, inter-faith relations, and the commercialization of the national airwaves.

The question of how one of the most popular religious programs in the history of television was prohibited from Canadian audiences is a complex one. It would be too simple to suggest that the “banning” of Fulton Sheen was yet another episode in the historic tension between Catholics and Protestants in Canada. Indeed, one can find evidence for Protestant discomfort over

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Reeves, *America’s Bishop: The Life and Times of Fulton J. Sheen* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001), 2; *BC Catholic*, 5 March 1953.

the larger than life presentations by Sheen, who always presented himself in full Episcopal regalia. Nevertheless, the “Sheen Affair,” should it be designated such, reflected more the difficulty of Canadian broadcasters and church leaders as they addressed the nature of the content and tone of religious programming, while at the same time grappling with how to nurture the fledgling Canadian television industry, without resorting to over-commercialization of the airwaves, particularly by importing too many American programs. Thus, in the Sheen Affair, one witnesses the confluence of several controversial issues: first, the attempt of broadcasters and clerics to balance the interests of all Canadian denominations on the CBC network; secondly, the attempt of the CBC to walk the tight rope between commercialized television and commercial free broadcasts; thirdly, the struggle to nurture home-grown programming versus over-dependence on American and British programs; and, finally, managing the tension that would arise between privately-owned local stations and the national publicly owned network that had to serve all Canadians, of all religions, in both official languages, and in all provinces and regions. Sheen’s exclusion from the CBC from 1952 to 1955 reflected the inexperience of broadcasters in defining religious television, and who controlled it, as much as it revealed the unease of religious leaders in accepting religious programming that was commercially sponsored and produced in the United States. In the end, Sheen’s program was victim to Canadian insecurity with the new medium television, the prospects of the commercialization and Americanization of Canadian programming, and the dying breaths of home-grown sectarian tension.

Fulton J. Sheen’s explosive entry into American living rooms, in 1952, coincided with the first television broadcasts by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Unlike the development of Canadian radio, which was exclusively in private hands in its early years (1920-1932), public ownership of television by the Government’s corporation had a near monopoly on television broadcasting in the early 1950s. The CBC established its flagship stations in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Halifax, and Vancouver, where legislation prevented private corporations or individuals from obtaining rival television licenses, a situation which assured that the CBC would dominate Canada’s largest viewing markets.<sup>2</sup> The CBC, however, which continued to serve as both broadcaster and regulator of all Canadian broadcasting, would issue licenses to private consortia in smaller markets like London, Sudbury, Hamilton, Wingham, or Victoria, although these stations often affiliated with the CBC in order to carry the national news and other specialty programs

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<sup>2</sup> Albert A. Shea, *Broadcasting the Canadian Way* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1963), 109; Mary Vipond, *The Mass Media in Canada* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2000), 44.

and sporting events offered by the “mother” Corporation.<sup>3</sup> By the mid 1950s, Canadian television came to resemble Canadian radio, which was characterized by a mix of stations owned by the CBC, private affiliates of the CBC network, and independent private stations. This Canadian experience of mixed broadcasting stood in sharp contrast to the United Kingdom, where the state controlled broadcasting through the BBC, and the United States where broadcasting was completely private and stations competed in a free market situation in which the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), DuMont, and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) dominated. In Canada, the CBC was both a competitor to private stations and the regulator of private stations, which became a source of great tension within the industry. Since 1936, when the CBC had replaced the short-lived CRBC,<sup>4</sup> the Corporation was responsible for all licensing of radio stations, the discipline of broadcasters who transgressed regulations, and the monitoring of all matters relating to programming and technology, whether in private or public hands. These powers did not alter with the arrival of CBC Television, in 1952, much to the chagrin of private broadcasters. It was only in 1958, with the creation of the Bureau of Broadcast Governors (BBG), that the CBC ceased to be competitor to, and regulator of, private television outlets.<sup>5</sup> Prior to 1957, and the creation of the Bureau of Broadcast Governors, if Sheen’s award winning “Life is Worth Living” was to be broadcast in Canada’s biggest and most lucrative markets it would have to be acceptable to CBC regulators and, in particular, meet the requirements and answer the concerns of the Corporation’s Religious Department, a special section of the programming division.

Religious broadcasting had been part of broadcast media since its infancy. Reginald A. Fessenden’s first voice broadcast to the ships of the

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<sup>3</sup> Shea, 110-11; Paul Rutherford, *When Television Was Young: Prime Time Canada, 1952-1967* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 47-68.

<sup>4</sup> As a result of the recommendation of the Aird Commission in 1929, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission was established as a national broadcaster, in 1932, by the R.B. Bennett Government. It assumed the radio network stations of the Canadian National Railways and provided a commercial free and coast-to-coast alternative to the numerous private commercial stations across Canada. In 1936, the government of Mackenzie King amended the broadcasting act, abolished the CRBC and created the CBC, which served as both programmer and regulator of all broadcasting in Canada. Margaret Prang, “The Origins of Public Broadcasting in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 46 (March 1965): 1-31; Mary Vipond, *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting, 1922-1932* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 206-55; Shea, 104-106. Frank Peers, *The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting, 1920-1951* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> T.J. Allard, *Private Broadcasting in Canada, 1918-1959* (Ottawa: The Communications Foundation, 1979), 174-214; Shea, 18; Rutherford, 104-6.

United Fruit Company, in 1906, had been Christmas Carols.<sup>6</sup> In the 1920s, Roman Catholics, the United Church, Baptists, and the Christian Missionary Alliance owned their own stations in Canada, and the Wesleyan Methodists (VOWR) were pioneers in radio in Newfoundland.<sup>7</sup> Controversy arising from the bombastic and aggressive preaching from five stations owned by the International Bible Students Association (Jehovah's Witnesses) prompted the cancellation of their licenses by the Minister of Marine and Fisheries,<sup>8</sup> and the calling of the Aird Commission, in 1928, to investigate radio broadcasting in Canada; the Royal Commission, when it reported one year later, recommended the creation of a national government-owned broadcast network. When Catholic priest Charles Lanphier and Presbyterian Minister Morris Zeidman clashed on Toronto's airwaves in the late 1930s, the CBC created Regulation 7c, which prohibited the abuse of any "race, creed or religion" on the air.<sup>9</sup> In addition, in order to keep religious peace in broadcasting, in 1938, CBC General Manager, Major Gladstone Murray, established the National Religious Advisory Council to advise the CBC on religious broadcasts and to determine a fair distribution of free air time on the CBC for Canada's religious denominations, Christian and Jewish.<sup>10</sup> The NRAC consisted of two representatives (usually male clergy) from each of the major denominations (Catholic, United, Anglican, Presbyterian and Baptist), based on the relative size of each religious group in proportion to the Canadian population. In 1952, the NRAC had been doing its work, with remarkable ecumenical spirit, for 14 years, without any significant controversy. One member of the Council, the formerly controversial Father Charles Lanphier, had served as one of two Catholic representatives since the Council's inception, and would retain that position until shortly before his death in 1960. Members of the Council sponsored numerous radio programs, arranged broadcasts each Sunday from each of the country's regions, and divided the air time between each Anglophone denomination, with barely a whimper of protest from any group.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Reported in Sandy Stewart, *From Coast to Coast: A Personal History of Radio in Canada* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1985), 7.

<sup>7</sup> CKFC (Congregational/United Church, Vancouver), CJBC (Baptist, Toronto), CHMA (Missionary Alliance, Vancouver) and VOWR (Methodist, St. John's).

<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Marine and Fisheries, Radio Branch was responsible for the licensing and regulation of radio in Canada from 1905 to 1932 when responsibilities were taken over directly by the CRBC then the CBC, which by the 1930s fell under the Ministry of Transport. Vipond, *Listening In*, 7-22.

<sup>9</sup> Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], RG 41, CBC Fonds, volume 146, file 9-10, Acting Secretary, M. Landry to all Broadcasting Stations in Canada, 23 December 1936.

<sup>10</sup> *Catholic Register* [hereafter CR], 4 August 1938.

<sup>11</sup> LAC, RG 41, vol. 223, file 1-23, pt. 2, Memo from C.R. Delafield, Program Division, 15 February 1939; RG 41, vol. 909, f. PG-11-4. pt. 1, P. Edward to Gladstone Murray, 30 March 1941.

In 1952, however, the Council assumed the responsibilities for programming and monitoring English-language religious television broadcasting and, it was assumed that the addition of the new medium would not alter the daily business of the NRAC significantly.

Nothing, however, prepared the NRAC or the CBC for the maelstrom that would ensue over “Life is Worth Living.” The figure at the centre of the controversy was the Rt. Reverend Peter Fulton J. Sheen. Born in El Paso, Illinois, in 1895, he attended St. Viator’s College, in Bourbonnais, Ill., St. Paul’s Seminary, in St. Paul, Minnesota, and, in 1919, was ordained for the Diocese of Peoria.<sup>12</sup> After briefly working in parishes, his bishop sent him to the University of Louvain, where he earned a doctorate in Philosophy, in 1925, and was the first American student ever awarded the Cardinal Mercier Medal for Philosophy. After having taught briefly in England, Sheen returned to the United States, where he took a teaching position at the Catholic University of America, in Washington DC. In 1930, his skill as a lecturer and public speaker won him an invitation to be a regular contributor to the “Catholic Hour,” a weekly live Sunday evening program, broadcast by NBC in New York and sponsored by the National Council of Catholic Men.<sup>13</sup> He distanced himself from the highly controversial Catholic polemicist, Father Charles Coughlin, indicating that the Detroit priest dealt primarily with “material” matters, while Sheen himself dealt with the “spiritual,” which he believed had lasting value.<sup>14</sup> Sheen’s talks ran the spectrum of issues from devotional practice to theology, from practical day-to-day common sense approaches to living, to vehement anti-communist diatribes and a defence of the American way of life. Proceeds from his programs and talks went primarily to the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, of which he was American director. His fame on radio and on the platform, in addition to his financial largesse to the missions, likely earned him his elevation, in 1951, to the office of auxiliary bishop of New York. That same year, with the advent of television, and an eagerness of American Catholics to exploit this new medium, the DuMont Network invited Sheen to host his own prime time television program.

Few American Broadcasters, including DuMont who offered the air time free of charge, gave Sheen’s program much of a chance. Taped at the Adelphi Theatre in New York, Sheen’s stage was very plain – a parson’s study complete with bookshelves, a statue of the Madonna and child, and

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<sup>12</sup> Janel Rodriguez, *Meet Fulton Sheen: Beloved Preacher and Teacher of the Word* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, Servant Books, 2006), 4-9; *Canadian Register* [hereafter *CR*], 26 February 1955. At this time the *Catholic Register* had become the *Canadian Register*.

<sup>13</sup> Rodriguez, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Reeves, 107.

a blackboard upon which Sheen would inscribe his characteristic “JMJ” at the top, before making notes. He dressed in full bishop’s regalia – cape, *zucchetto*, pectoral cross – swept on to the stage with dramatic flair, spoke in modulated tones with charm, wit, and passion, and never used notes. The director of “Life is Worth Living” later claimed that he had never worked with a performer with such “self-assurance.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, DuMont Executives knew that the show was in an “obituary spot” facing an 8pm Tuesday night line up which included CBS’s “Frank Sinatra Show,” and NBC’s “Texaco Star Theatre,” featuring Milton Berle, arguably America’s most popular television performer.<sup>16</sup> Once again Sheen surpassed expectations. Slowly building an audience when it first aired on February 12, 1952, Sheen drove Sinatra from the timeslot and ate into the first half-hour of Berle’s show. By October, 1952, the American Admiral Corporation offered to sponsor “Life is Worth Living,” promising Sheen \$26,000 per show and a national audience of 75 stations.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Sheen won the 1952 Emmy Award for Most Outstanding Television Personality, beating fellow nominees Lucille Ball, Edward R. Murrow, Arthur Godfrey, and Jimmy Durante.<sup>18</sup>

By autumn, 1952, Canadians were writing to the brand new CBC television network to include Sheen’s “Life is Worth Living” in the upcoming 1952-53 program schedule. For its own part, the Admiral Corporation had made a formal application to CBLT in Toronto to air the Sheen program. As had been the custom for religious programs on radio, the applications and program suggestions would have to be vetted by the NRAC. Because CBC Television was in its first year of programming, executives still leaned heavily on the precedents set by the radio division, when it came to applying policies, procedures and practices. The head of the Religion Department, W. John Dunlop, took the Sheen program to the NRAC members in November, 1952. If Dunlop succeeded in getting the approval from the NRAC, “Life is Worth Living” would be broadcast on all CBC Network stations, assuring that it would likely appear on nearly every working television set in the country, since, in 1952, there were no private stations, and effectively no competition except from American stations close to the border.

The members of the NRAC did not share the American enthusiasm for “Life is Worth Living.” The Council was uncomfortable with the application because Sheen’s program was commercially sponsored, an American

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<sup>15</sup> Reeves, 225. Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1980), 70. Sheen insisted in his autobiography that each show took him thirty hours to prepare, which included giving the proposed talks (sometimes in other languages) to others two days prior to airing.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>18</sup> Rodriguez, 52.

production, and a religious program that might offset the gentle Catholic-Protestant denominational balance that the Council was trying to achieve on Canadian television.<sup>19</sup> According to CBC Executive E.L. Bushnell:

The members of the Council felt that this would open the field to many United States live and Kinescope programs to the eventual exclusion of Canadian talent. One of the members said he was surprised that such an application had ever been considered. Father Lanphier expressed the opinion that there were just as good men in Canada and we should make an effort to find them, but he wanted to think about it...<sup>20</sup>

In fact Father Lanphier's position was not so different from his fellow counsellors who decided in December that "with rare exceptions as the Council may approve, religious televised programs be Canadian ones."<sup>21</sup> No firm decision on Sheen's program was made, although the NRAC would consider developing a "camera test" for potential Canadian talent and would discuss the matter of commercial religious broadcasting on the CBC in the New Year.<sup>22</sup>

The temporary delay in making a firm decision on "Life is Worth Living" evoked a speedy and heated public reaction from both the supporters and detractors of Sheen. In a similar tone to American fundamentalist preacher Carl McIntire's claim that Sheen's program was a monumental Papal threat to America, Dr. James W. Kennedy, Executive Secretary of the National Council of the Episcopal Church of New York applauded the CBC's misgivings: "We feel that Bishop Sheen's program has done real harm to the general policy of free broadcasting time for religion. You have certainly helped to strengthen our stand down here."<sup>23</sup> Kennedy's argument was sectarian based, reflecting an American Protestant fear of assertive Catholicism, but with a subtext that questioned whether any religious broadcast should be commercially sponsored, in this case by one of America's largest television manufacturers. Most correspondents to the CBC, however, disagreed. Telegrams poured in from southern Ontario and Quebec, from college professors, members of the Catholic Women's League, and from rank-and-file laypersons. One noted Basilian teacher and social critic, Father Eugene Cullinane, was typical of the Catholic response to the delay when he wrote: "Bishop Sheen's program should be televised. It is

<sup>19</sup> LAC, RG 41, CBC Fonds, v. 223, file 11-23-1, part 1, "Minutes, 12 December 1952."

<sup>20</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, "Life is Worth Living File," E.L. Bushnell Memo to Board of Governors, CBC," 21 November 1952.

<sup>21</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 1, "Minutes, 12 December 1952."

<sup>22</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, "Memorandum from the NRAC to the Corporation," c. December 1952.

<sup>23</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, James W. Kennedy to the CBC, 17 December 1952.

non-sectarian and strongly defends the spiritual and moral values that make democracy and democratic ideals possible.”<sup>24</sup>

Amidst this groundswell of popular discontent with the inaction of the Corporation and its Religious Advisors, the NRAC continued to deliberate, with less an eye to sectarian concerns, but with a view to answering three specific questions: first, was “Life is Worth Living” a religious program, purely and simply? Second, could public television accept commercially-sponsored religious programs? And third, can Canadian airwaves avail themselves of American religious programming? The response to the first of these questions – was Sheen’s program religious – would determine the answers to the remaining questions. If it was determined that it was simply “educational,” as E.A. Cullinane’s letter suggests, then the CBC could air the program without referral to the NRAC conventions for free-time religious programming. This is precisely what DuMont and the Admiral Corporation argued. E.B. “Buck” Lyford of the DuMont Network claimed that “Life is Worth Living” was a philosophical program and “this particular philosopher happens to be a Catholic churchman.”<sup>25</sup> The Network officially claimed the program was classified as “educational,”<sup>26</sup> and that had it been designated as religious, Admiral would not have permitted its sponsorship. Furthermore, it was argued that it was because of the program’s non-religious designation that the sponsor refused to have the program air on Sundays.<sup>27</sup> Such claims were supported by some Canadian Catholic intellectuals, such as Dr. J.F. McCaffrey SJ of Loyola College, Montreal, who informed the CBC that:

Speaking as he does, to an audience that is not restricted to any one faith, under the sponsorship of a nationally advertised product, there is little or no probability that what he says gives offence to any except those who are enemies of our country and our civilization ... The war against communism is not only to be fought in Korea but right here in Canada and in the hearts and minds of Canadians ... The CBC can ill-afford to deprive its audiences of the help of Bishop Sheen without running a very grave risk of being misunderstood.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Eugene Cullinane to NRAC, 8 December 1952.

<sup>25</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f.11-23-1, pt. 2, Lyford to Fergus Murtie, Director of CBC Television, 2 June 1953; and f.11-23-1, pt.1, W. John Dunlop to Chairman, 5 March 1953.

<sup>26</sup> CR, 7 August 1954.

<sup>27</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f.11-23-1, pt. 2, Memorandum W.E. Powell, Commercial Manager, 27 August 1954; Sheen, himself, likened his approach to Paul at Athens, indirect, using common denominators, and perhaps making a link to Christianity in his topics. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 72-3.

<sup>28</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f.11-23-1, pt. 2, J.F. McCaffrey SJ to Chairman, Davidson Dunton, 9 December 1952.

On this side of the argument, by reason of Sheen's persistent presentations on the evils of Communism, his plain-speaking approach to life issues and social mores, and his restraint in preaching the dogmas of Catholicism, "Life is Worth Living" was considered by its creators and supporters a non-religious program.

"Naïve," wrote Fergus Murtie, Director of CBC Television, in the margins of Buck Lyford's memo.<sup>29</sup> Neither the NRAC nor the Corporation executives were convinced that Sheen's program was non-religious. In early 1953, John Dunlop, Director of the CBC Religion Department, and the CBC liaison with the NRAC, was clear: "it was the opinion of the Council that the program was definitely a religious one and Roman Catholic."<sup>30</sup> For those Canadians able to view the program, either directly from American stations with strong signals, or by the sample Kinescopes provided to the CBC by DuMont, Dunlop's assessment is not surprising. They would have seen a program principally on moral, social and political issues, narrated by a Roman Catholic bishop, sartorially splendid in his cape (*ferraiolo*), cassock, large pectoral cross, and *zucchetto* (skull cap), watched over by a Renaissance inspired statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. If anything the program sent out a strong symbolic message – this is Catholic and it is for you. In his recent work *Selling Catholicism: Bishop Sheen and the Power of Television*, Christopher Owen Lynch argues convincingly that despite what may have been the denominationally-neutral topic of the day, Sheen, the skilled philosopher and rhetorician, was able to thread Catholic teaching throughout his remarks, as a means of giving comfort to American members of the Church during the Cold War.<sup>31</sup> Noted for his highly publicized conversions of major American figures to Catholicism, this subtlety was not lost on some Protestant viewers. Moreover, the Catholic space created by the set and showman in it endeared the program to Catholics, one of whom, A. J. MacDonnell, a Knight of Columbus from New Waterford, Nova Scotia, wrote that in the opinion of Cape Bretoners, Sheen's religious program would be more appreciated if it broadcast on Sundays.<sup>32</sup> Viewers, regardless of denominational affiliation, were not fooled.

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<sup>29</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 2, Lyford to Fergus Murtie, Director of CBC Television, 2 June 1953.

<sup>30</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 1, W. John Dunlop to Chairman, 5 March 1953 and Fergus Murtie to Assistant General Manager, CBC, 9 October 1953.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Owen Lynch, *Selling Catholicism: Bishop Sheen and the Power of Television* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 11-13.

<sup>32</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 3, A.J. MacDonnell, Recorder, Knights of Columbus Council 3209, New Waterford, Nova Scotia, to Program Director, CBC Television, 11 January 1955.

Once having determined that “Life is Worth Living” was a Catholic religious program, the NRAC had to assess whether or not they could maintain a denominational balance on the CBC schedule by including Sheen. Although there was some protest from Protestants later on, the network could easily balance the Sheen program with two Protestant shows, “What is Your Trouble?” and the Lutheran-sponsored, “This is the Life,” both of which were ready for broadcast in the fall schedule for 1953.<sup>33</sup> The tricky issue was not scheduling, but the policy issue of commercial sponsorship of religious programming. Since the early 1930s, all religious broadcasts on the CBC Network had been free-time, then again, CBC radio had historically been commercial free. While CBC television was not commercial free, would the radio precedent still be upheld with regard to religious programming? If religious programming, it was thought, was presented in a “sustaining” or offered as free-time broadcasts by the CBC, the Corporation could then ensure that all regions and denominations could be represented on the national network, and no particular religious group, by reason of its financial largesse, could dominate Canadian living rooms just because they had the money to do so. Conversely, if wealthy churches and sects could purchase air time and fill the schedule, the voices of many Canadian churches and religious voices would not be heard on the network paid for by the tax dollars of all Canadians. There was particular fear in some quarters that more controversial groups – Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science, and Youth for Christ – might buy their way on to the air.<sup>34</sup> Thus accepting Sheen’s program, with Admiral Television’s advertisement prominent at the beginning and end of the broadcast, would set a very dangerous precedent for the CBC. Private stations, when they emerged, might accept such broadcasts; in fact several Canadian radio stations already carried “Life is Worth Living,” including CKLW, Windsor, one of the most listened to private stations in Canada.<sup>35</sup>

In March 1953, the NRAC met with Corporation Chairman, A. Davidson Dunton, in order to discuss the question of commercialization of religious television. Dunton proposed a two pronged approach: first, to allow the CBC to offer free time to religious groups and, second, allow the NRAC to decide which commercially-sponsored religious shows might be acceptable. His proposal effectively took the CBC off the hook in having to deliberate on thorny denominational issues, and effectively mandated the NRAC to make the tough decision and, as it were, live with the consequences. Council member, Father Charles Lanphier, who had initially balked at Sheen, appeared convinced by Dunton’s suggestion, and began to lobby hard for

<sup>33</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, W.J. Dunlop Memo to the CBC, 20 May 1953.

<sup>34</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 3, Reverend Brian D. Freeland, Assistant Supervisor of Religious Programs to Supervisor of Religious Programs, 7 September 1954.

<sup>35</sup> CR, 30 May 1953.

Sheen's inclusion in the schedule. The rest of the Council was not convinced and, although word of Dunton's compromise was leaked to the press (likely by Lanphier), by May, the NRAC had decided to uphold the principle that no commercially-sponsored religious broadcasts would appear on the CBC and no church or group would be given access to the air by simple reason of their ability to pay. In 1952, it should be added, the CBC, under Control Number 5, did not permit religious groups to "appeal for donations or subscription," so the discomfort of mixing religion and money on air was already part of Canadian broadcasting culture.<sup>36</sup>

It should be understood also that the members of the NRAC were not overtly hostile to the Sheen program itself, with several members acknowledging that its inclusion would have addressed the denominational imbalance on the CBC English language network, once the Protestant programs were aired in late 1953.<sup>37</sup> John Dunlop, on behalf of the NRAC, approached both DuMont and Admiral requesting that the CBC air the program, but without the commercial announcements. The Americans turned down the offer. Next Dunlop and the NRAC suggested that the Sheen Program could be broadcast, without the commercials, but with the inclusion of a credit line at the end of the programs, acknowledging the financial and production support of DuMont and Admiral. This proposal was shot down by the CBC's own commercial department, because it deviated from the commercial policy of the Corporation. There was also some question that should Admiral agree to pull its advertisement, it might be an implicit concession that the program actually was religious.<sup>38</sup> Lanphier, on his own initiative, attempted a different tack. He argued that the NRAC leave the decision to the CBC itself, suggesting that on an ad hoc basis, the CBC could permit commercially-sponsored religious programming in areas where there was inadequate private television coverage and thus the possibility that shows like Sheen's would never be seen. His idea was based on established precedents in private radio, where commercial religious broadcasts were permitted, if no free time was available on the CBC. His remedy would effectively be the inverse of what existed on radio. In this case the CBC would make a programming decision based on "regional coverage," without recourse to the Advisory Council.<sup>39</sup> The one problem with Lanphier's solution was that it had the potential of undermining the effectiveness of

<sup>36</sup> Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto (hereafter ARCAT), James C. McGuigan Papers, SU03.68a, T.J. Allard to McGuigan, 3 December 1952.

<sup>37</sup> Archives of the Archdiocese of Vancouver (hereafter AAV), Archbishop William Mark Duke Papers, Box 54:4, T.P. Slattery to General Manager, CBC, 7 July 1954.

<sup>38</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 2, Memorandum W.E. Powell, Commercial Manager, 27 August 1954.

<sup>39</sup> RG 41, v. 909, PG11-4, pt. 1, NRAC Minutes, 24 June 1954; CR, 14 March 1953.

the NRAC in its capacity to manage the CBC's religious programming. CBC executives thought it ill-advised to ignore or over-ride the decision made by the NRAC regarding commercialization, although John Dunlop conceded, without divulging any evidence, that he was not convinced that the NRAC had refused the Sheen program for "only commercial" reasons.<sup>40</sup> Without a solution in sight, Sheen remained off the air in Canada for the 1953-54 season.

By August 1954, it had been nearly two years since the controversy had begun, the CBC was on the cusp of a new television season, and the NRAC had not changed its policy. In response to heavy criticism from the Catholic community the CBC maintained the hope that it could broadcast "Life is Worth Living" on "a free basis with only a credit line to the Admiral Corporation," because the non-commercialization policy of the NRAC would not be changed. "On the advice of the Council," the Memorandum stated, "the CBC has not agreed to accept the program on a sponsored basis with advertising, under the general policy against sponsored religious broadcasts."<sup>41</sup> The fact that the program was an American production no longer was an issue; even the successful Lutheran program, "This is the Life," was produced in the United States. The NRAC had more of an issue with Mammon than Uncle Sam.

The Catholic protest that ensued that summer read the situation differently – the Sheen prohibition was just another chapter in a series of historical insults to Canada's Catholics. The two epicentres of protest were Toronto and Montreal, not surprisingly Canada's two largest television markets. In the latter city, *The Ensign* and the law firm of Slattery, Belanger and Fairbanks led the charge. Borrowing the DuMont argument that Sheen's program was "educational," while noting Sheen's many international awards and accolades, and suggesting there be a television policy distinct from that of Canadian radio, lawyer T.P. Slattery lobbied the bishops of Canada and members of Parliament, in the hope of applying pressure to the CBC.<sup>42</sup> In Montreal, protesters inundated the offices of the CBC with 1000s of calls; 40,000 post cards were delivered to local parishes and mailed to the Corporation; daily newspapers were targeted with letters supportive of Sheen.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, in Toronto, *The Canadian Register*, led principally by Doug Loney's new column on the media, "Stop, Look, Listen," urged readers to flood the local CBC station with calls and letters of protest.<sup>44</sup> The paper also advertised American Television stations located close to the Canadian

<sup>40</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, Memorandum from Dunlop, 22 September 1953..

<sup>41</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 3, CBC Memorandum, 30 August 1954.

<sup>42</sup> AAV, Duke Papers, 54:4, Slattery to Duke, 26 July 1954, with enclosures.

<sup>43</sup> CR, 7 August 1954.

<sup>44</sup> CR, 17 April 1954 and 7 August 1954.

border that were carrying Sheen, produced times and dates when “Life is Worth Living” could be heard on Canadian private radio, and published American critiques of CBC policy.<sup>45</sup>

The Catholic protest struck at the heart of two significant challenges facing Canadian broadcasting in terms of its relationship to religion. First, Catholics suggested that religious programming might be better served if in the hands of private broadcasters, thereby casting into doubt the vision of a national publicly owned network that was desperately trying to serve all Canadians regardless of creed, language or region. Secondly, some Catholic observers dared to ask the CBC why religious voices were so heavily regulated, when the views of the non-religious, the anti-religious, the communists, and holders of other ideologies were broadcast regularly.<sup>46</sup> In August 1954, a panicked CBC Executive in Montreal reported that there had been local agitation against the CBC’s “Charlie Chaplin Film Festival.” “The contention,” according to F.A.Coleman, “is that if we show films by alleged leftists,” why do we “refuse Sheen”?<sup>47</sup> In sum, the question of inclusion of religious broadcasts on the publicly-funded national network begged the greater question of how time allocations were made to other controversial groups and issues, and by whom. Given Canada’s historical record of sectarian and linguistic tension, it is little wonder that the CBC was skittish about religious matters, erred on the side of caution, and hoped that the NRAC would solve the major religious challenges faced by the Corporation.

The Catholic protest, however, challenged the CBC monopoly itself, claiming that the Corporation had to come to “grips with reality.”<sup>48</sup> Doug Loney went one step farther contending that the CBC was less a monopoly than a censor. He argued fervently that private television was a better forum for the free exchange of ideas:

Today all broadcasting in Canada on a national scale is controlled by the government-owned corporation. If private stations were permitted to form a national network, it would certainly result in the freer exchange of ideas. Such competition would greatly stimulate our broadcasting industry and foster a new sense of national unity. Our private stations are closer

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<sup>45</sup> *CR*, 7 February, 23 March, 3 October, 28 November 1953 and 16 October and 6 February 1954.

<sup>46</sup> *CR*, 17 October 1953 and 6 June 1953 provide samples of this kind of reasoning.

<sup>47</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 3, F.A. Coleman to S.W. Griffiths, 13 August 1954.

<sup>48</sup> *CR*, 3 April 1954.

to the people than the CBC and are capable of rendering a real service to the nation.<sup>49</sup>

The Sheen Affair had forced serious questions about the CBC's programming policies, commercial policies, and its regulatory policies. Loney's attacks were by no means new, private broadcasters had been making them since the 1930s and the creation of government control of the industry.<sup>50</sup> What was different in the mid 1950s was that religious programming appeared to be more heavily controlled than had been anticipated in the early days of broadcast regulation, and the creation of Regulation 7c directed at abusive comments against creed, race or religion.<sup>51</sup> The counter argument that appeared to be emerging was that good religious programs might need commercial sponsorship if they were ever to reach the air, otherwise many religious voices in Canada might be lost through loss of means to produce home-grown programs. Sheen's twenty million person audience<sup>52</sup> in the United States seemed hard evidence of how voices of faith might be given attention, if the opportunity was offered them.

On September 10, 1954, Davidson Dunton, Chairman of the CBC, announced that "Life is Worth Living" would be broadcast on the CBC Network commencing in December. At a meeting on September 9, the NRAC had agreed to the broadcasts because two essential conditions had been met. First, the Council had authorized the experimental broadcast of Sheen, for six weeks commencing the previous June, on two private stations which were network affiliates, CKSO Sudbury<sup>53</sup> and CHCH Hamilton. Ironically, CKLW, a new private station in Windsor, had affiliated with DuMont and had just commenced live broadcasts of Sheen. The two CBC affiliates, however, were permitted only delayed broadcasts by means of Kinescope, with all the advertising deleted, except for a credit line at the end of the program to acknowledge DuMont and Admiral, which had been the second CBC and NRAC stipulation. The audience response was very

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<sup>49</sup> CR, 12 June 1954. Loney anticipated the formation of the CTV network, in 1962, consisting of seven private stations, many of which had been permitted by the BBG to set up facilities in the major markets in direct competition with the CBC: CFCF (Montreal), CJOH (Ottawa), CFTO (Toronto), CFCN (Calgary)...see Shea, 71.

<sup>50</sup> Allard, 97; Shea, xi-xiii and 105-8; Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada's Broadcast Policy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 54 and 57-9.

<sup>51</sup> Mark G. McGowan, "Air Wars: Radio Regulation, Sectarianism and Religious Broadcasting in Canada, 1922-1938," *Canadian Society of Church History Papers* (forthcoming, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> CR, 27 February 1954.

<sup>53</sup> CR, 26 September 1953. CKSO was the first private television station in Canada.

positive.<sup>54</sup> With these successes noted the NRAC voted to accept the Sheen Program for the 1954-55 season. The only two dissenting votes came from the Presbyterian representatives “on grounds that programs of such a kind should not be in any way connected with commercial sponsorship or financial support.”<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, endorsement of the Sheen program came from Catholic, United, Anglican, Baptist, and Lutheran members of the committee, with one Lutheran commenting that “Such a by-line [for Admiral] is surely Christian, giving credit to where credit is due.”<sup>56</sup> So much for any alleged serious sectarian division on the Council.

By December 1954 “Life is Worth Living” was featured on CBLT (Toronto) and CBOT (Ottawa) and three affiliates in Kingston (CKWS), London (CFPL), and Kitchener (CKCO), on Saturday nights at 7:00 pm. Some southern Ontarians could pick up the live Tuesday night feed from CKLW (Windsor), WHEN (Syracuse) or WHEC (Rochester), something which could have also been done with a strong aerial as early as 1952.<sup>57</sup> These earlier signals may account for Sheen’s modest ratings in the CBC rebroadcasts five days later. According to the International Surveys Limited, that charted TV viewers, in March 1955, “Life is Worth Living,” captured between one fifth and one quarter of the Toronto viewers in its Saturday timeslot, or between 51,700 and 64,320 households, thus ranking first or second, depending on the week in its Saturday timeslot.<sup>58</sup> The following season, 1955-56, Sheen appeared courtesy of ABC (which assumed control of DuMont) on Thursday nights at 8pm, competing with Groucho Marx’s “You Bet Your Life.” The CBC had twenty-five stations and affiliates, coast-to-coast, broadcasting the program by Kinescope on either a one or two week delay, with the credit line acknowledging Admiral and ABC.<sup>59</sup> Once again Toronto and Vancouver stations had to compete with American border stations that carried the program live weeks before. In a timeslot ruled by Groucho and Bob Cummings, Sheen, now in his fifth season and with the novelty of his presentations having worn off south of the border, could only muster a ten to twelve per cent share in the Toronto area, or

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<sup>54</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 2, Teletype from John Dunlop to C. Jennings, 25 October 1954; Memorandum from John Dunlop, 2 July 1954; f. 11-23-1, pt. 1, NRAC Minutes, 24 June 1954; f. 11-23-1, pt. 3, W.E. Powell to Denis Olerenshaw, Advertising Manager, Canadian Admiral, 11 August 1954. CR, 8 January 1955.

<sup>55</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 2, Memorandum from Dunton, 10 September 1954; Press Release, 28 October 1954.

<sup>56</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 3, Lutheran Reaction: A Statement, 1954, document 18-19-5-11-8.

<sup>57</sup> CR, 8 January 1955.

<sup>58</sup> RG 41, v. 514, ISL Ratings, Toronto, 1953-1955, January to April 1955.

<sup>59</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1; CR, 21 May 1955.

between 31,900 and 33,500 households.<sup>60</sup> In the Vancouver-Victoria viewing region, the first available season of Sheen was a great success,<sup>61</sup> although Sheen's ratings trailed off in 1956 to a point where he frequently ranked fourth in a five station market, with a share of only four to eight per cent of viewers, or between 4,280 and 8,320 households.<sup>62</sup> British Columbia, with Catholics forming a small percentage of the population, would be a tough sell thereafter for Sheen.

Perhaps the greatest Canadian success story for "Life is Worth Living" came in the Montreal viewing region, which included the St. Lawrence Valley, Eastern Townships, and Laurentians. Despite the fact that the ISL reported that only nineteen per cent of televisions in Montreal were owned by Anglophone households, in 1955-56, "Life is Worth Living" captured between 26 and 32 per cent of the viewing audience, or between 73,580 and 81,920 households, depending on the night assessed.<sup>63</sup> Sheen's timeslot was won consistently by the French-language CBFT's "Le Fil d'Ariane." Given Sheen's high numbers relative to English-speaking viewers, he must have been able to entice many bilingual Francophones to his program. Hinting at this, one viewer from Quebec City wrote:

Bishop Sheen's program is one that nobody in our family ever wants to miss, and I am sure that as he gets better known, he will be popular in Canada, as he is in the USA. I know many French people right here in Quebec City who had never heard of Bishop Sheen a month ago are now among his most fervent admirers, and I am convinced that you have now for yourself the gratitude of practically all viewers by granting them this half hour of charm and truth.<sup>64</sup>

Notwithstanding such praise by one member of the Catholic viewing public, it should also be noted that Montreal broadcasters were blessed by their geography: distance from transmission towers in Vermont and New York State and the hilly terrain of the Eastern Townships made for poor reception of American stations and therefore less competition for local Canadian signals.

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<sup>60</sup> RG 41, v. 515, ISL Rating Books, Toronto 1956-1957, January to April 1956.

<sup>61</sup> CR, 19 February 1955.

<sup>62</sup> RG 41, v. 517, ISL Rating Books, Vancouver and Victoria, 1956, January to April 1956.

<sup>63</sup> RG 41, v. 511, ISL Rating Books, Montreal 1955-56, November to December 1955 and January to April 1956.

<sup>64</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 1-23-1, pt. 3, Violet McKenna to General Manager, CBC, 18 January 1955. Lynch estimates that Sheen may have had a Protestant viewing audience in the USA of just a little over 13%, which may very well have translated roughly into Canadian viewer habits as well. Lynch, 8.

The awaited coming of “Life is Worth Living” was not without its detractors. Letters of opposition and anger were received from several predictable sources. Edward Morris, President of the Canadian Protestant League, in Halifax, expressed his “emphatic protest to this program ... a most subtle denomination propaganda” brought to the CBC under Roman Catholic pressure.<sup>65</sup> A single Presbyterian Congregation from Perth, Ontario, petitioned Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent to prohibit the program from the CBC.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the head of the Christian Homes for Children, Reverend H.G. Martin, complained that the program had no Protestant counterpart, to which Dunton replied the balance had been struck by the Lutheran “This is the Life.”<sup>67</sup> There were even a few non-religious complaints, including a condemnation of Sheen and his “lying assertions regarding the Russian people during the last war,” or how the Bishop slipped references to Admiral Televisions into his monologues.<sup>68</sup> For the most part, the complaints were few and the program continued in Canada until 1957, when Sheen, under duress from his superior, Cardinal Francis Spellman, gave up broadcasting.<sup>69</sup> Sheen re-emerged with several new programs and formats in the 1960s, some of which were sponsored in Canada by the Knights of Columbus,<sup>70</sup> but these new shows made Sheen look like a “relic in an era of change.”<sup>71</sup>

By mid 1957, the Sheen Affair in Canada was over. The five years of debate over “Life is Worth Living” revealed much about the uncomfortable relationship between religious broadcasting and the CBC. As a national network, with a virtual monopoly in large markets in its early years, CBC Television tried to be all things to all Canadians. The fact that Sheen was Catholic may have mattered in some quarters, but the fact that he was an American, produced by the American television industry, and financed by one of that industry’s giants posed serious questions about how distinct Canadian television could survive such an onslaught of American programming,

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<sup>65</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 2, Edward Morris to Gordon Cullingham, Talks and Public Affairs, CBC, 28 May 1955.

<sup>66</sup> RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 3, Reverend Robert Milroy, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Perth, to Prime Minister (copy), 21 May 1955.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, Davidson Dunton to H.G. Martin, 10 July 1956, and H.G. Martin to Dunton, 18 June 1956.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, James Ormerod, Vancouver, to Manager of CBC Vancouver, 31 March 1956; John Dunlop to Supervising Producer, CBLT, 8 February 1956. There is no evidence to suggest Sheen was even aware of the controversy in Canada; the Sheen Archives in the Diocese of Rochester Archives have very little of his correspondence and virtually nothing relating to Canada. It cannot be established with any certainty that Sheen adlibbed about Admiral Televisions with an intent to make a point to the CBC.

<sup>69</sup> Reeves, 256. “Life is Worth Living” lasted 125 episodes. Lynch, 11.

<sup>70</sup> Archives of the Archdiocese of Edmonton, Archbishop John H. MacDonald Papers, I.6.11.0, Lloyd Moss to MacDonald, 13 February 1960.

<sup>71</sup> Reeves, 274.

including religious programming. Moreover, the commercialization of “Life is Worth Living” struck to the heart of Canadian broadcasting in two ways. First, it raised the uncomfortable question of whether or not the CBC should engage in commercial advertising, and particularly linking the broadcast of the “sacred” for filthy lucre’s sake. Secondly, the CBC and its advisors saw the problem of the public broadcaster being subject to dollar-driven religious programming, thereby creating “have” and “have-not” religious groups. This seemed to be an anathema to a public network whose mandate it was to serve all Canadians in a fair and balanced manner. In the end, the issue of commercialization proved to be the most important one as to whether Sheen was broadcast or not.

The Sheen Affair, however, also reveals the new challenges facing the concept of a religious presence in the public square in Canada by the late 1950s. Knowing the fragility of the denominational peace between Catholics and Protestants in many parts of the country, the CBC sailed gingerly into matters of faith-based programming, relying heavily on the National Religious Advisory Council to keep the peace and assure equity between the major Anglophone religious groups. For its own part, despite its Toronto-centric membership and clerical composition, the NRAC undertook its deliberations with an uncharacteristic ecumenical *esprit-de-corps*, long before the doors to formal Catholic-Protestant dialogue were eased open by Vatican II. The Sheen Affair was perhaps the greatest test in their short fourteen year history, and it managed the controversy reasonably well without significant sectarian fisticuffs or rhetorical abuse. As members of the Council may have discovered, in a network where religious programming in English may have accounted for between one and nine per cent of all programming, depending on the region, there appeared more to be gained by co-operation than sectarian bickering.<sup>72</sup> If the NRAC could not achieve consensus, some network executives would have been prepared to abandon religious programming altogether, allowing this to be the exclusive domain of private stations.<sup>73</sup> Sheen’s presence signalled the arrival of a new means of evangelization for North American churches, and methods that might be tested and adapted by all denominations. For the churches, television held great promise and positive exposure at a time when their role and relevance in society would soon come under increasing scrutiny.

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<sup>72</sup> RG 41, v. 170, f. 11-15, Programme Statistics, CBC Programmes Statistics Magazine, April 1943-March 1944 and RG 41, v. 223, f. 11-23-1, pt. 3, Network Programme Report, 1953-54.

<sup>73</sup> RG 41, v. 909, f. PG- 11-4, pt. 1, Chairman of NRAC to Gladstone Murray, 27 November 1940.

Fulton J. Sheen, American religious leader, evangelist, writer, Roman Catholic priest, and radio and television personality. He was a gifted orator and a respected teacher who reached millions through his radio and television broadcasts. Learn more about his life and legacy.Â We rely on advertising to provide you with free content! Our third-party vendors or we use cookies to access and use information about your device to ensure the proper functioning of our website or as required for: personalization; ad selection, delivery, and reporting; content selection, delivery, and reporting; or measurement purposes. Read more about any of these purposes or vendors that we use and exercise choices by clicking ["Preference Center"](#)™ or ["Show Vendors."](#)™ The year 1952 in television involved some significant events. Below is a list of television-related events during 1952. Contents.Â There were approximately 146,000 television sets in Canada and most antennas were pointed towards WBEN-TV (now WIVB) in Buffalo, New York. The first telecast of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade is broadcast by CBS.Â In the early 1840s a new settlement emerged ten miles from the mouth of the Willamette River halfway between Oregon City and Fort Vancouver; this community was referred to as "Stumptown" and "The Clearing" because of the many trees cut down to allow for its growth. In 1843 William Overton saw potential in the new settlement but lacked the funds to file an official land claim.