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"Dressed in an Angel's Nightshirt": Jesus and the BBC

Meredith Veldman

Abstract This article examines images of Jesus broadcast on the BBC from the 1930s through the 1950s. During these years, the BBC sought to use its cultural influence to replace popular religiosity with what the clerics who staffed its Religious Broadcasting Department (RBD) regarded as a more masculine, modern, and vigorous national religious faith. To achieve this aim, the RBD marshaled the might of British New Testament scholarship and its image of a warrior-like, apocalyptic historical Jesus. Yet the RBD's hopes of bridging the gap between popular religiosity and its own vision of Christianity went unrealized. Programs on Jesus that reached a genuinely national audience—*The Man Born to be King*, Dorothy L. Sayers's wartime radio drama, and *Jesus of Nazareth*, a popular television series from the 1950s—instead featured Anglicized and ahistorical images deeply embedded within British popular culture. The story of Jesus on the BBC highlights both this popular culture's strength and Christian Britain's fragmentation.

In March of 1955, BBC-Television transmitted *The Messenger*, a one-hour teleplay featuring Jesus and John the Baptist as young boys. The program was not a success. Handwritten notes on a post-broadcast meeting record the glum response: "Too static—too much holy creeping. . . . They're all so miserable." Much of the criticism focused on the girlishness of the child actor who played Jesus. While the young John appealed to viewers as "businesslike," Jesus seemed a "cissy" [*sic*]. The Reverend Francis House, who headed the BBC's Religious Broadcasting Department (RBD), warned that the program's "impression on children—especially on boys" would be "disastrous in that it would perpetuate or reinforce the kind of false impression left by Victorian stained glass windows or illustrated children's books."[1] His program assistant (also a reverend), Robert Walton, concurred. Noting in horror that "the boy Jesus appeared to be dressed in an angel's nightshirt," he complained that the televised image of Jesus was "as sentimental as Holman Hunt's 'The Light of the World.'"[2]

This quick reference to, and dismissal of, William Holman Hunt's iconic painting—one of the most recognized, reproduced, and reworked religious images of modern

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[1] Francis House to Freda Lingstrom, 12 March 1955; BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter WAC) T2/74/2.

[2] Robert Walton to House, 18 March 1955, WAC T2/74/1.

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popular Protestantism—reflects more than mid-twentieth-century contempt for the pre-Raphaelites.[3] As both the "cissy" comment and Francis House's worry about boys "especially" indicate, the negative response to this television program fits within a larger context: the connection of British Christianity's decline to the feminization of Christianity in general and the feminizing of Jesus in particular. Burdened by the conviction that institutional Christianity was in decline, religious leaders linked the "feminisation of piety"—Callum Brown's label for the modern reversal of Protestantism's traditional gendering of religiosity as masculine—to that decline.[4] Women's numerical dominance in congregations became coded as problematic. To take one example from Simon Green's study of Yorkshire churches: in 1890, church leaders at St. Andrew's in Keighley judged their revival a failure once they realized that of the eighty people who answered the altar call, "hardly a dozen" were men.[5] Victorian reformers ranging from muscular Christian Charles Kingsley to Salvation Army founder William Booth to the Boys' Brigades' leader William Alexander Smith sought to draw the unchurched into the pews by linking Christian faith and practice to popular images of masculinity.[6] At the same time, the depictions of Jesus, particularly in literature aimed at boys, became much less feminine.[7]

Yet church leaders found themselves frustrated in their efforts to masculinize the figure of Christ. For example, in a multidenominational survey published in 1919, army chaplains complained that soldiers did not know "the heroic side of [Jesus's] character."[8] Over a decade later, fifteen of the Great and Good—ranging from the bishops of Liverpool and Croyden to the headmistresses of Wimbledon and Manchester High Schools—wrote to the *Times* to bemoan the dominance of "effeminate or weak" pictures of Jesus "in illustrated Bibles and Prayer Books, in gift books and in lantern slides."[9] At a subsequent Council of Christian Education conference, speakers warned against portraying Jesus in "long white clinging garments" and demanded that the "Pretty-Pretty Christ" be replaced by an image more "virile."[10]

[3] See Jeremy Maas, *Holman Hunt and the "Light of the World"* (London, 1984); Madeleine Bunting, "Victorians Valued after Years of Neglect," *Guardian*, 5 November 1994, 2.

[4] Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800–2000* (London, 2001), 58, 16, 25–26; David Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture: Stories of Belief in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 2013), 160–83.

[5] S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organization and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870–1920* (Cambridge, 1996), 272; see also 205–9; Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 156–61; Charles D. Cashdollar, *A Spiritual Home: Life in British and American Reformed Congregations, 1830–1915* (University Park, 2000), 118.

[6] Donald Hall, ed., *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, 1994); John Springhall, "Building Character in the British Boy: The Attempt to Extend Christian Manliness to Working-Class Adolescents," in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800—1940*, ed. J. A. Mangan and J. Walvin (Manchester, 1987), 52–74; Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge, 1985); Pamela J. Walker, *Pulling the Devil's Kingdom Down: The Salvation Army in Victorian Britain* (Berkeley, 2001).

[7] Meredith Veldman, "Dutiful Daughter versus All-Boy: Jesus, Gender, and the Secularization of Victorian Society," *Nineteenth Century Studies* 11 (1997): 1–24, at 10–18.

[8] [D. S. Cairns], *The Army and Religion: An Enquiry and its Bearing upon the Religious Life of the Nation* (London, 1919), 35.

[9] The Bishop of Liverpool et al., letter to the editor, *Times*, 18 February 1933.

[10] *Pictures of Jesus for Children: Addresses by Eight Leading Educationalists* (London, [1935]), 14, 37, 28.

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This article explores the BBC's participation in the quest for a more virile Jesus in the period between the 1920s and the mid-1950s. During these decades, the BBC exerted immense cultural influence. Until commercial television stations under the umbrella of Independent TeleVision (ITV) began broadcasting—in London in 1955 but not until 1962 in some regions—the BBC possessed sole control of broadcasting in Britain.[11] It unapologetically used this monopoly to define British national identity as Christian.[12] The clergymen who staffed the RBD, however, regarded the Christianity of Christian Britain as sentimental and insubstantial. Reimagining Jesus fit their efforts to strengthen and even masculinize Britain's religious culture. They failed. Perhaps paradoxically, however, the resistance of popular Christianity to reform reveals its continuing power, even in a secularizing society.

"GENTLE JESUS, MEEK AND MILD"

Recent scholarship has supplied a detailed picture of British popular religiosity in the first half of the twentieth century. While often detached from if not hostile to the institutional church, this "diffusive" or "indigenous" Christianity centered on a clear moral code linked to an expectation of punishments and rewards, as well as the performance of rituals, particularly the observance of Sunday as a special day.[13] Action counted more than any specific belief or doctrine, but Christian images and ideas—often acquired in Sunday school but also nurtured in family practices—provided both the symbolic vocabulary and the overarching world view of this moral and ritualistic system.[14] And one of the most important of those images was Jesus. Commenting on oral interviews, for example, Sarah Williams noted that "a number of recollections specifically associated the Sunday school with memories of the person and character of Christ." In the words of one of her interviewees, "it was all about Jesus."[15]

But all about what sort of Jesus? As the 1933 letter to the *Times* and the conference it inspired indicate, many leaders in religious education feared that Jesus too often appeared as feminine or weak. Sunday-school writers, too, were determined to challenge "the popular misconception" of Jesus as "the weak and anaemic 'pale Galilean'

[11] Ron Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture: Britain and the Transformation of Modernity* (London, 2007), 24–29; see also Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 2, *The Golden Age of the Wireless* (London, 1965); vol. 3, *The War of Words* (London, 1970); vol. 4, *Sound and Vision* (London, 1979); and vol. 5, *Competition* (London, 1995).

[12] Kenneth M. Wolfe, *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922–1956: The Politics of British Religion* (London, 1984); see also Catriona Noonan, "Piety and Professionalism: The BBC's Changing Religious Mission," *Media History* 19, no. 2 (May 2013): 196–212.

[13] For "diffusive Christianity," see Jeffrey Cox, *English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870–1930* (Oxford, 1982); for "indigenous," see Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 25.

[14] S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c. 1880–1939* (New York, 1999), 87–104, 117–23, 143–47; see also Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 115–44; Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline*, 282–83; Stephen Parker, *Faith on the Home Front: Aspects of Church Life and Popular Religion in Birmingham, 1939–1945* (Bern, 2005), 59–94; Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1985), 4–5.

[15] Williams, *Religious Culture*, 130–31. See also Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, 4–6, 15, 44–45, 170; Elizabeth Roberts, *Working Class Barrow and Lancaster, 1890–1930*, Centre for North-West Regional Studies, University of Lancaster Occasional Paper No. 2 (1976), 62–69.

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so beloved of art."[16] Calling for "a more advanced and virile picture" of Jesus, one author insisted, "We must present Him not as gentle Jesus, but as the mighty Worker, the heroic Leader. . . . Guide, Hero, and Friend."[17] Another commanded teachers to avoid the verse "Jesus wept" because, she explained, "tears are often considered by growing boys and girls as a sign of weakness."[18] Jaunty rather than gentle, Jesus bounds through the pages of contemporary Sunday-school publications.

Yet the effort to paint Jesus as something akin to a first-century Boy Scout leader clashed with and was in many ways negated by a second popular image in twentieth-century Sunday school curricula: Jesus-as-child. Representations of Jesus's childhood sought to solidify the young Sunday scholar's sense of identification with Christ—*he was a child just like me*.[19] By accentuating the connection between childhood and Jesus, however, such representations risked relegating Jesus to the realm of childish things. Moreover, the almost irresistible impulse to hold up Jesus as the model child often ended up painting the youthful savior as the sort of insufferable prig that most children detested: "The Holy Child did all things well, worked hard at His lessons, was good at games, and always kind and fair. . . . 'When His Mother called His Name, how quickly He rose up and came.'"[20] He tends to be a country boy who loved outdoor games and working in the carpenter shop with Joseph.[21] Nevertheless, illustrations featuring young Jesus in a knee-length shift, usually sporting long hair, problematized efforts to make him one of the boys.[22] So, too, did the fact that teachers and publishers persisted in turning for classroom pictures to such Victorian works as John Everett Millais's *Christ in the Carpenter Shop* that hardly suggested the "active, healthy, vigorous Christ" called for by church leaders.[23]

Despite concerted effort, church leaders could not eradicate the Holman Hunt-esque, white-robed, ambiguously gendered Jesus from either the Sunday school classroom or popular religiosity. Reproductions of *The Light of the World* itself continued to show up in religious children's books and Sunday school reward cards, and of course twentieth-century children continued to have access to Victorian religious books featuring that image and its many imitators.[24] According to the *Scotsman* in 1927, "in the homes of those who cannot possess fine paintings … there is no more popular picture."[25] In a similar vein, church leaders may have deplored the

[16] John Gordon Williams, *The Life of Our Lord, Senior Course* (London, 1939), 1.

[17] Ernest H. Hayes, "Sunday School Lessons," in *Christian Education in the Sunday School and Bible Study in Day Schools*, ed. Ernest G. Braham (London, 1933), 77.

[18] Hetty Lee, *Lessons on the Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (London, 1944), 245.

[19] See, for example, *Pictures of Jesus*, 17, 23–24.

[20] D. M. Llewellyn, *Jesus Christ: The Son of God. Kindergarten Lessons 1940–1941* (London), 32.

[21] See, for example, G. R. Oakley, *The Prayer Book Catechism. A Series of Sunday School Lessons (Lent to Trinity)* (London, 1928), no. 44; Elsie Anne Wood, *Giant Picture Book*, series 1, *The Gospels*, book 1, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London, 1950).

[22] See, for example, Robert Payton Reid's "Christ in the Carpenter Shop," *Nelson's Bible Pictures: For Use with the Standard Graded Courses* (London, 1914).

[23] *Pictures of Jesus*, 13.

[24] See, for example, E. A. Gardiner, *The Children's Book of Bible Stories* (London, 1938), frontispiece; "John," *Gems from the Gospels* (Copenhagen, 1929); Sunday school and prayer book stamps, John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library, Texts Box 1; Arthur Mee, *The Pocket Bible* (London, 1927), frontispiece. See also Clyde Binfield, "The Purley Way for Children," *The Church and Childhood*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford, 1994), 461–76, at 473.

[25] "Holman Hunt," *Scotsman*, 2 April 1927, 10.

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pre-Victorian hymn "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild," but it endured, appearing in Carey Bonner's *Sunday School Hymnary*, first published in 1905 and in use in British Sunday schools for the next fifty years, as well as in other influential hymn collections.[26] Even more enduring was the Victorian image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd—decidedly not a virile, sweating Palestinian peasant wrestling with rams but rather a slender man with long golden or light brown hair and English features, wearing an impeccably clean white robe and holding an impossibly clean little white lamb.[27] The still-strong appeal of hymns such as Mary Lundie Duncan's "Jesus, Tender Shepherd, Hear Me," and Jemima Thompson Luke's "I Think When I Read that Sweet Story of Old" (both included in Bonner's *Hymnary*) reinforced this ideal.[28] The "sweet story" in the latter—"*the* children's hymn," according to Alisa Clapp-Itnyre—depicts Jesus calling "little children as lambs to His fold," and the child singer imagining Jesus's "arms had been thrown around me," while in the former, the child asks Jesus "to bless Thy little lamb tonight."[29] In both Jesus is a nurturing, nearly maternal presence—comforting, one assumes, to small children, but a major threat to church leaders.

"TO BAPTIZE THIS INCREDIBLY POWERFUL INSTRUMENT OF THE MICROPHONE"

This sense of threat helped shape the BBC's religious programming. According to its first director-general, John Reith, "Those responsible for broadcasting set themselves the task of being a little ahead of the public."[30] Famously, then, listeners quickly came to perceive the BBC not only as "a great British institution, as British as the Bank of England," but also as a beloved but rather strict "auntie" who gave them not what they wanted but what she thought they needed.[31] Auntie, moreover, was clearly Christian. As the BBC's first handbook explained, "it was natural that from the beginning religion should find its place in British Broadcasting" –and by "religion," it meant only Christianity.[32]

For the clerics who staffed the RBD, however, the task of "being a little ahead of the public" was considerably complicated by the BBC's commitment to promoting "a non-sectarian Christianity—confined, in respect of doctrine, to those simplest

[26] Carey Bonner, ed., *The Sunday School Hymnary* (London, 1905), no. 218; the hymn also appears in *The Church and School Hymnal* (London, 1926), no. 321; *The Methodist Hymn-Book* (London, 1933), no. 842. For the importance of Bonner's *Hymnary,* see Cecil Northcott, *For Britain's Children: The Story of the Sunday Schools, and of the National Sunday School Union* (London, 1953). For the popularity of "Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild," see Alisa Clapp-Itnyre, *British Hymn Books for Children, 1800–1900: Re-Tuning the History of Childhood* (Farnham, 2016), 61, 159–60. For the importance of hymns in popular religion, see Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 137–38; Williams, *Religious Belief*, 148–54.

[27] See, for example, W. H. Margetson, "The Good Shepherd," in *Nelson's Bible Pictures for Individual Work: New Testament* (London, 1936).

[28] Bonner, *Hymnary*, nos. 46, 323. Both also appeared in the *Church and School Hymnal* (nos. 323, 167) and the *Methodist Hymn-Book* (nos. 844, 865).

[29] Clapp-Itnyre, *British Hymn Books for Children, 1800–1900*, 134 (emphasis in original); see also 50, 79, 135–36.

[30] Ian McIntyre, *The Expense of Glory: A Life of John Reith* (London, 1994), 159; see also 188, 189.

[31] Briggs, *The Golden Age of the Wireless*, 12.

[32] *BBC Handbook* (London, 1928), 35.

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essentials to which all Christians of the West can adhere."[33] Would nondenominationalism translate into stripping the Christian faith to its lowest common denominator and thus creating a "BBC Religion"?[34] As one member of the RBD warned, "We must not "allow the Christian content [of religious broadcasts] … to be watered down into washy sentiment and humanitarianism."[35]

Ironically, the RBD's commitment to move beyond religious sentiment and humanitarianism (the religious equivalent of the dance music programs that the public demanded and Reith despised) challenged Reith's own vision of religious broadcasting. Impatient with institutional Christianity, Reith believed the BBC should broadcast a "thoroughgoing, optimistic and manly religion," largely defined by a fierce sabbatarianism.[36] Reith shied away from any programs that might threaten the "Sunday school sort of outlook" of most listeners.[37] By the 1930s, however, church leaders demanded more substantive programming aimed at challenging and changing, rather than protecting and placating, this popular religiosity. In response, Reith appointed the Reverend Frederick A. Iremonger as first head of the RBD.[38] A veteran of East End parish work, Iremonger sought a version of Christianity that would appeal to the unchurched working-class man. Unlike Reith, he believed that such a version would rest not on a "Sunday school sort of outlook" but on an informed faith. According to Kenneth Wolfe, Iremonger "intended to make erudition popular."[39]

This emphasis became even more pronounced under Iremonger's successor, James W. Welch, who was, like Iremonger, an Anglican priest. Shortly after he became the RBD's director, Welch dismissed one of the BBC's most beloved preachers from the midweek preaching slot and thus signaled his determination to substitute "sound dogmatic teaching" and "forceful presentation of the gospel" for the "tabloids of comfort and moral advice" that most listeners favored.[40] For Welch, sermons that rarely mentioned the Bible accentuated the problems of popular Christianity. "Ninety percent of our people," he wrote, "do not know what parts of [the Bible] to believe, where to start when they read it, and are entirely without any key to or any grasp of its total message."[41] He wanted the RBD to give people this key. Welch worked for the Christian Missionary Society in Nigeria before World War I; by the 1930s he was serving as head of a teacher training college in York. He viewed radio as both a new kind of pulpit and an extension of the classroom. Enthusiastic about the chance "to baptize this incredibly powerful instrument of the microphone," he informed a struggling scriptwriter, "You are not writing for the BBC, you are writing for the church."[42]

The central elements of this vision of religious broadcasting remained unchanged in the 1950s under Francis House. Yet another Anglican priest and something of a

[33] Ibid.

[34] Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 47, 95, 154.

[35] Rev. J. G. Williams to the Senior Education Officer, 18 December 1947, WAC R16/230/14.

[36] John Reith, *Broadcast over Britain* (London, 1924), 193.

[37] Reith to William Temple, 23 June 1930, quoted in Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 29.

[38] Ibid., 18–25.

[39] Ibid., 85.

[40] Welch to Melvin Dinwiddie, February 1940, quoted in Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 155; see also 61–62, 154–57.

[41] Welch, "Series of Biblical Plays for Broadcasting to Schools," 11 January 1945, WAC R16/442/6.

[42] Letter from Welch to "Sister Penelope," 1 June 1944, quoted in Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 240.

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clerical action man, House during the 1930s used his position with the Student Christian Movement and the World Student Christian Federation to develop ties between the Church of England's hierarchy and anti-Nazi Christians in Germany. After a wartime stint as the BBC's producer of religious broadcasts to Germany, he turned to refugee resettlement on the Continent.[43] House's experiences with the victims of Nazism cemented his conviction of the importance of Christian commitment in shaping a nation's culture and destiny. Thus House echoed Welch in insisting that the RBD "has one simple overriding purpose: to help listeners to find the way to living faith in Christ as members of a Christian Church."[44] One of his colleagues put it more simply: "The Department's objective is the Christianising of Britain."[45]

THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS ON THE BBC

While the RBD's aim of Christianizing Christian Britain—using the BBC not simply to reflect Britain's Christian identity but to reform and reinvigorate it—remained consistent from the 1930s through the mid-1950s, the content of its programming did not. Its talks programs ranged the denominational and doctrinal spectrum, from the modernism of the "gloomy dean" W. R. Inge to the traditionalism of C. S. Lewis, from the Celtic mysticism of George MacLeod to the social activism of Donald Soper. In one area, however, the RBD maintained considerable more consistency: its effort to introduce its audience to the Jesus of British scholarship.

Welch, recall, had bewailed the biblical literacy of the BBC's audience—"ninety percent of our people do not know what parts of [the Bible] to believe." The phrasing is revealing. Only fundamentalist Christians believed every part of the Bible, and fundamentalists, like Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists, were denied a voice on the BBC. Twentieth-century belief demanded a different sort of reading. In that same memo, Welch argued, "The trouble is though the Church has accepted the conclusions of … textual and higher criticism, yet the gap between the student of the Bible and the ordinary man is still as wide as ever."[46]

To close that gap, the RBD partnered with British Biblical scholars. It soon discovered that "some of the liveliest minds have squeaky voices," but two of Britain's most eminent New Testament specialists proved superb radio performers.[47] Hence the BBC's favorite speakers on New Testament matters became C. H. Dodd—the first non-Anglican since the Restoration to hold an Oxbridge chair and "the greatest British biblical scholar of his age," according to Adrian Hastings—and T. W. Manson, who succeeded Dodd as Rylands professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at Manchester University.[48] For these two scholars, broadcasting was a

[43] Alan Webster, "Obituary: The Venerable Francis House," *Guardian*, 11 September 2004.

[44] Francis House, *The Church on the Air: A Brief Account of the Work of the BBC's Religious Broadcasting Department* (London, 1949), n.p.

[45] Eric Saxon to Francis House, 22 November 1949, WAC R34/815/4.

[46] Welch, Series of Biblical Plays.

[47] "Memorandum on the Review Material, Sept. 1952–June 1953 (Report on 'Religion and Philosophy' series)," WAC-R16/262.

[48] Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920–1990* (London, 1991), 117. See also William Horbury, "The New Testament," *A Century of Theological and Religious Studies in Britain*, ed. Ernest Nicholson (Oxford, 2003), 98–104; Hans Schwarz, *Theology in a Global Context: The Last Two Hundred Years*

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natural extension of not only their teaching but also their preaching and pastoral duties. Both men began their careers as pastors of small churches, continued to preach regularly after embarking on their university careers, and wrote for popular as well as scholarly audiences.[49] Dodd and Manson were well aware, then, of what Wolfe has aptly described as "the divide which separated active and participant Christianity from that indigenous religious consciousness embedded by school and by Christian elements in culture at large."[50]

Their more popular works work, moreover, indicate that they, like so many church leaders, perceived this "indigenous religious consciousness" as overly prone to color Christianity as feminine and weak. For example, in one of Dodd's first publications, he emphasized for his youthful readers Jesus's vitality, gaiety, and the sheer pleasure that men in particular had in his company. As the story darkened, Dodd employed military vocabulary to emphasize Jesus's resolve and strength: Jesus enrolls a "band of volunteers" in a "desperate venture;" they "bivouac" outside Jerusalem; he clears the temple and becomes "master" of the enclosure; his enemies hold a "council of war;" he addresses Judas as "Comrade."[51]

In both their scholarly and popular works, Dodd and Manson drew a portrait of Jesus that seems almost custom designed for the RBD's purposes. It was not, of course. These two professors would have recoiled in horror from any conscious fashioning of scholarly results to suit theological or even pastoral ends. Deeply rooted in the British empirical tradition and in the concomitant belief that the lack of such empirical grounding allowed German scholars to stray into "religious Cloud-Cuckoo-Town" (to use William Sanday's memorable phrasing), Dodd and Manson adhered to what they perceived as fact-based scholarship.[52] They believed they followed only where the evidence led. As Gustaf Aulen said of Dodd, "one of his typical formulations is: 'It may be so; or, again, it may not'"—a description that also applies to Manson.[53]

(Grand Rapids, 2005), 285–91; John Tudno Williams, "The Contribution of Protestant Nonconformists to Biblical Scholarship in the Twentieth Century," in *Protestant Nonconformity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Alan P. F. Sell and Anthony R. Cross (Carlisle, 2003), 1–32, esp. 4–14, 23–28. For Manson's and Dodd's broadcasts, see Manson Papers, DIII, John Rylands Library (hereafter MP); Manson files under WAC Talks; also WAC 910; WAC R16/442/9; WAC R16/774/1; Dodd files under WAC Talks and Contributor Talks; also WAC R16/230/1; WAC R16/230/2.

[49] See, for example, C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London, 1971); idem, *The Gospel in the New Testament* (London, 1926); idem, *The Leader: A Vivid Portrayal of the Last Years of the Life of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (London, 1958); idem, *There and Back Again* (London, 1932); T. W. Manson, "Background to the Ministry of Jesus" and "The Ministry of Jesus," in *The Bible Today* (New York, 1955), 67–75, 88–93, first appearing as columns in the *Times*; as well as Manson's monthly column, "The Free Churches," in the *Manchester Guardian* in the 1940s. See also Matthew Black, *Thomas Walter Manson, 1893–1958* (Oxford, 1959), 330–31; F. W. Dillistone, *C. H. Dodd: Interpreter of the New Testament* (London, 1977), 51, 73–4, 183–92.

[50] Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 25.

[51] Dodd, *Leader*, 7–8, 12, 14, 15, 17 (first published in 1922). See also idem, *Benefits of His Passion: Six Broadcast Talks* (London, 1947), 3–4; idem, *Founder*, 126, 91, 124; Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus: Studies in Form and Content* (Cambridge, 1943), 209.

[52] William Sanday, *Outlines of the Life of Christ* (Edinburgh, [1906]), 250.

[53] Gustaf Aulen, *Jesus in Contemporary Research*, trans. Ingalill H. Hjelm (London, 1976), 4. Aulef is quoting from Dodd, *Leader*, 167.

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In their broadcasts and their publications, however, Dodd and Manson used their scholarly caution to convey confidence. They offered doubters the assurance that religious faith and "scientific history" (Manson's term) were not at odds—that according to this scientific history, Christian orthodoxy, and particularly the story of Jesus, rested on a bedrock of historical fact.[54] In this confidence Dodd and Manson represented a peculiarly British stance. Continental scholars largely abandoned "the quest of the historical Jesus" after World War I; reading the gospels as fragmentary texts that revealed early church ideas about Jesus rather than who or what Jesus actually had been, they drew a sharp line between the "Christ of faith" and the "Jesus of history."[55] In contrast, British New Testament specialists continued to insist, as Manson did in 1949, that "[t]he quest of the historical Jesus is still a great and most hopeful enterprise."[56] And they continued to regard the gospels as reliable guides on that quest; in Dodd's words, "neither [Mark] nor any other evangelist had any idea that in setting forth 'the Jesus of history' he was doing other than illuminate 'the Christ of faith.'"[57]

This was the confident message that Manson and Dodd conveyed to BBC listeners. Take, for example, one of Manson's broadcasts to secondary modern school classrooms in which he tackled the rather problematic question of Jesus's miracles. In this talk, Manson urged his listeners to read critically: While sidestepping any definitive conclusion about the historicity of the nature miracles, he suggested that the students consider "the possibility that the story, though told in good faith and honestly believed by the narrator, may owe its 'miraculous' features to a misunderstanding of what was actually said or done." His caution here, however, contrasts with his clear conclusion regarding Jesus's healing miracles: "There is no good reason for rejecting the evidence of the New Testament." He argued the same of the resurrection: "The most natural conclusion to be drawn from the evidence is that the people who claimed to have had these experiences [of Jesus living again] did in fact have them … How it happened I cannot tell; that it happened I cannot doubt."[58]

Manson and Dodd did more, however, than assure the BBC's listeners and viewers that Christian orthodoxy and scientific rigor could coexist. Their cautious formulations presented a far from cautious Jesus, one who can only be described as masculine. A heroic figure of apocalyptic urgency, Dodd's and Manson's Jesus rages through Galilee and Judea with hurricane force. The common idea of Jesus as the "teacher who patiently led simple minds to appreciate the great enduring commonplaces of morals and religion," Dodd argued, cannot account for the "volcanic energy of the meteoric career depicted in the Gospels."[59] Like a machine gun, Dodd's

[54] Manson, *Teaching*, 101.

[55] Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1st complete ed., ed. John Bowden (Minneapolis, 2001). For twentieth-century developments, see Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986* (Oxford, 1988), 205–312; Walter Weaver, *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century, 1900–1950* (Harrisburg, 1999); for a more succinct narrative, see Robert Davidson and A. R. C. Leaney, *The Pelican Guide to Modern Theology*, vol. 3, *Biblical Criticism* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 246–66.

[56] T. W. Manson, "Quest of the Historical Jesus—Continued" (Rylands lecture, 1949), in *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, ed. Matthew Black (Manchester, 1962), 12.

[57] C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (London, 1928), 225.

[58] T. W. Manson, "The Gospel Miracles" (broadcast to schools, November 19, 1951), in *Religion in Education* 19, no. 2 (1952): 45–51, at 45, 51, 49.

[59] C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1953), 25–26.

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broadcasts delivered their powerful message in short blasts: "All through the story [of the Gospels] there is a sense of crisis. Momentous events are in process. Quick decisions are called for. A conflict is afoot."[60] This Jesus comes not to reform but to rile up; he is, according to Manson, "a vehicle of irresistible power."[61] A man in a hurry, he does not spend much time with children on his knee, nor does he frolic with little white lambs.

Although the storm that this Jesus stirs up will transform all time, he blasts into a particular time, and a particular place. Dodd's and Manson's Jesus, in other words, is a first-century Palestinian Jew. Such a construction might seem obvious, but the racialized history of modern New Testament scholarship reveals that it was far from so.[62] Dodd and Manson, however, made no effort to westernize, anglicize, or modernize their Jesus. He is essentially alien. Only by plunging into the world of first-century Palestine and first-century Palestinian Judaism could the twentieth-century reader of the gospels grasp this alien and his message. Hence the New Testament scholar G. B. Caird identified the unifying thread of Dodd's work as "the conviction that … the Word of God spoken in scripture is so inextricably woven into the fabric of historical events that it can be let loose into the modern world in the fullness of its relevance and power only through historical criticism."[63] The same was true of Manson. Both he and Dodd sought in their broadcasts, as in their published work, to push their audiences into Palestine, to make them encounter Jesus in his Jewish, Roman, and Hellenistic context.[64]

By placing scholars such as Dodd and Manson at the microphone, the RBD attempted to bridge the gap between popular and scholarly versions of Christianity, replacing "washy sentiment and humanitarianism" with an intellectually credible faith and an image of Jesus that subverted the Holman Hunt figure of popular religiosity. Yet few crossed the bridge; the advent of listener research made clear that while talks by Dodd and Manson might earn a high "Appreciation Index," they scored low listening figures.[65] After World War II, moreover, the new "Third Programme" functioned as a kind of intellectual and cultural ghetto for more scholarly broadcasts. To reach a truly national audience, the RBD had to create different sorts of programs and, in the 1940s and 1950s it did so, with positive results—at least in

[60] C. H. Dodd, *The Coming of Christ: Four Broadcast Addresses for the Season of Advent* (London, 1951), 12.

[61] Manson, *Teaching*, 168.

[62] See Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews* (Leiden, 2009); Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London, 2002).

[63] George B. Caird, "C. H. Dodd," in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, ed. Dean G. Peerman and Martin E. Marty (Cambridge, 1984), at 321.

[64] See, for example, Manson, "Christmas: Fact or Fancy?" (broadcast, 14 December 1948), in the *Listener*, 23 December 1948; typed ms, Sermon, Service for Easter Day 1950, BBC Third Programme, MP D1; typed ms, "Steadfastly Towards Jesus," Holy Week Talks, 1951, Dodd's Third Programme talks, MP DII; all published in the *Listener*, "New Testament Scholarship Today," 19 December 1946, 888–89; "The Environment of Early Christianity," 19 July 1951, 103–5; "New Testament Criticism: A Fresh Approach," 26 July 1951, 143–45; "Results of Recent New Testament Research," 2 August 1951, 183–85.

[65] See, for example, Manson's Holy Week Talks, 1951; see Eric Saxon to AHRB, 14 April 1951, WAC 910 File II. See also Robert Silvey, *Who's Listening: The Story of BBC Audience Research* (London, 1974).

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attracting listeners or viewers. The results for the RBD's wider aim of strengthening the national religious culture were less favorable.

THE MAN BORN TO BE KING: AN ANGLICIZED JESUS

In 1939, Dorothy L. Sayers—mystery writer, translator of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, classicist, and playwright—ventured into broadcasting with a radio Nativity play for children.[66] Impressed by her work, Welch contacted her the following year and asked if she would consider writing a series of children's plays on "The Life of Our Lord"; in commissioning Sayers, Welch made clear that he expected any religious drama to convey "consistent Christian teaching."[67] With Britain now at war, Welch was determined that the RBD not make the mistake of "talking about crocuses when the world was going up in flames," that it continue its efforts to Christianize its listeners.[68]

Sayers agreed, and so began the contentious process that resulted in *The Man Born to Be King*.[69] The play was unprecedented in British culture. British censorship law prohibited dramatic portrayals of Jesus; no actor had performed as Jesus on a British stage since the seventeenth century. The lord chamberlain had to grant special permission for the actor Robert Speaight to speak as Jesus, and even once such permission was received, Welch urged the Publicity Department to maintain the anonymity of the cast "for obvious reasons."[70] On the first day's recording, Sayers reported the extreme nervousness on the set, with "everybody fighting against a vague sense that Bobby Speaight was about to undergo a major operation."[71]

The ensuing controversy justified the cast's nervousness. Questions about the play were raised on the floor of the House of Commons, and letters poured in to the BBC. Much of the uproar erupted in response to a press conference Welch arranged before the first play in the series aired on 21 December 1941. Sayers, a former advertising copywriter with a keen eye for publicity, emphasized the two most controversial aspects of the plays: an actor would impersonate Jesus and he would speak in modern idiom. Sayers deliberately read the most exaggerated example of such idiom: a very Cockney and not yet very saintly Matthew telling another disciple, "Fact is, Philip, you've been had for a sucker. Let him ring the changes on you proper. You ought to keep your eyes skinned, you did really."[72] Banner headlines

[66] Dorothy L. Sayers, *He That Should Come: A Nativity Play in One Act* (London, 1939).

[67] Welch to Sayers, 5 February 1940, in Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, vol. 2, *1937–1943: From Novelist to Playwright*, ed. Barbara Reynolds (New York, 1997), 145–46 (hereafter *Letters*).

[68] Quoted in ibid., 157; no source given.

[69] See also Alex Goody, "Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Man Born to Be King*: The 'Impersonation' of Divinity: Language, Authenticity and Embodiment," in *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era*, ed. Matthew Feldman, Eric Tonning, and Henry Mead (London, 2014), 79–96; Donald L. Low, "Telling the Story: Susan Hill and Dorothy L. Sayers," in *British Radio Drama*, ed. John Drakakis (Cambridge, 1981), 111–38; Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (New York, 1993), 298–306, 317–30; Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 218–38.

[70] Welch to Director of Features and Drama, 27 November 1941, WAC R19/1016/1.

[71] Sayers to Marjorie Barber, 27 January 1942, in *Letters*, 346.

[72] Publicity, WAC R1.

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in the tabloid press followed: "BBC Life of Christ Play in U.S. Slang" in the *Daily Mail* and "Gangsterism in Bible Play" in the *Daily Herald*.[73]

As the tabloid headlines make clear, the controversy focused on the issue of language; at its heart, however, lay the question of Christianity and British national identity. All sides defined Britishness as Christian and regarded the struggle over the broadcast as part of an ongoing fight for that Christian Britishness. Sayers warned Welch that a surrender to the protests would constitute another Dunkirk, while outraged correspondents linked Japan's attacks on Britain's Pacific Empire to the BBC's blasphemy in placing Jesus at the microphone. To these fearful listeners, Britain's identity, and its very survival, centered on the right practice of its Christian faith.[74] Two conservative Christian lobby groups, the Lord's Day Observance Society and the Protestant Truth Society, led the fight against *The Man Born to be King* by taking out full-page ads in the religious press and marshalling their troops in a letter-writing campaign.[75] The secretary of the Lord's Day Observance Society expressed his outrage that the BBC had allowed a "professional actor" to speak as Jesus, "a thing only done," Sayers scoffed, "by idolatrous Roman Catholics in the age of superstition, or by nasty foreigners at Oberammagau."[76]

The dismissive tone of Sayers's comment matches the wider BBC response to the protests. Neither the strident approach of the Lord's Day Observance Society and Protestant Truth Society to matters of faith nor their lobbying accorded with middle-class standards of respectability, particularly to individuals of Sayers's and Welch's education, class, and religious beliefs. Sayers shrugged off the protests as the products of "wire-pulling, vociferous, and excessively ignorant sects."[77] A confidential BBC report recorded that "80% of the criticisms are actuated by blind prejudice rather than by any considered opinion" and dismissed these critics as "a certain type of very simple Christian."[78] The director of BBC broadcasting in Manchester was even more forthright: "In no circles whose views are entitled to respect can I find the slightest trace of support for the opposition to the plays."[79] For Welch, the uproar confirmed his sense of the failings of popular religious belief: "The really upsetting thing is that the protests show a very defective belief in the Incarnation; people are prepared to believe that our Lord was born into the Bible, or born

[73] Low, 135.

[74] Sayers to Welch, 6 1942, in *Letters*, 339; C. S. Man Born to be King, A–K, 1941–46, WAC R41/250/1; L–Z, 1941–43, WAC R41/250/2; WAC R1. For additional reactions, see WAC R41/102.

[75] C. S. Report, Confidential, [January 1942], WAC R41/102; for the Protestant Truth Society and Lord's Day Observance Society, see David Bebbington, "Martyrs for the Truth: Fundamentalism in Britain," in *Martyrs and Martyrologies: Papers Read at the 1992 Summer Meeting and the 1993 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford, 1993), 417–51; John Maiden, "Fundamentalism and Anti-Catholicism in Inter-War English Evangelicalism," in *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century*, ed. D. W. Bebbington and David Ceri Jones (Oxford, 2014), 151–70.

[76] Herbert Henry Martin, letter to the editor, *Yorkshire Post*, 17 January 1942; Sayers to Father Taylor, after 8 March 1942, in *Letters*, 353–54; See also the *New Chronicle of Christian Education* headline, "Christ in Woman Novelist's 'Radio Oberammergau,'" December 1940, quoted in Goody, "Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Man Born to Be King*: The 'Impersonation' of Divinity: Language, Authenticity and Embodiment," 79.

[77] Sayers to Welch, 6 January 1942, in *Letters*, 339.

[78] C. S. Report, Confidential.

[79] J[ohn] Coatman to D. G. [Sir Frederick Ogilvie], 30 December 1941, WAC R41/102.

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into stained-glass, but they will not really subscribe to Incarnatus est."[80] He forged ahead with the project, convinced, as he explained to Sayers, that children "will get a picture of Our Lord from our broadcast of your plays which may be decisive for them in determining their attitude to Christ and the Church."[81]

On a more secular level, Welch believed the drama possessed the potential "to make radio history"—and he was right.[82] In the spring of 1942, *The Man Born to be King*, now regarded as "one of the great landmarks of broadcasting," at least British broadcasting, was transmitted for the first time.[83] Although aired as part of the Sunday *Children's Hour*, a popular program with a regular listening audience of five million children, Sayers's play cycle attracted adults as well. An average 8.8 percent of the adult population—about two million people, much higher than usual for a children's program—listened over the whole cycle.[84] The BBC's Listener Research Department reported high appreciation levels for the plays, which were repeated annually for the next four years.

Welch was delighted with the success of the play cycle, which he believed had "done more for the preaching of the Gospel to the unconverted than any other single effort of the churches or religious broadcasting since the last war."[85] Yet Sayers's portrayal of Jesus contradicted the sort of historical and textual scholarship that the RBD promoted. Although conversant in New Testament scholarship, Sayers tended to be impatient with and dismissive of its results.[86] She insisted on basing her plays on the fourth gospel of John, despite the fact that in the 1940s, the mainstream of British New Testament scholarship judged John to be the least historically reliable of the four gospels. Welch occupied such a mainstream position—yet he never gainsaid Sayers on this issue.[87]

The scholarly historical Jesus, the one who appeared in Dodd's and Manson's talks, is a fundamentally alien figure who demands radical transformation. Sayers, however, brought to the microphone a rather less unsettling Jesus, in part because of her desire to gender Jesus properly. She "always thought that 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' was a most disastrous hymn," and was determined from the very start to avoid depicting a "stained-glass-window-like" Jesus. Sayers thus recorded with great glee her cleaning lady's response to the broadcasts: "'There was one thing I never liked about [Jesus]—He was meek… I always felt, couldn't He do something, stand up and fight for Himself? But the play (the Crucifixion) made me see what He did was really braver, wasn't it?'"[88] The cleaner's reaction is not surprising;

[80] Welch to Coatman, 24 December 1941, WAC R41/250/1, emphasis in original.

[81] Welch to Sayers, 4 December 1940, in *Letters*, 212.

[82] Welch to Children's Hour Department, 29 February 1940, WAC R1/910.

[83] B. E. Nicolls, BBC Controller of Programmes, to Sayers, 18 October 1942, in *Letters*, 376.

[84] Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 235.

[85] Welch to the archbishop of Canterbury [William Temple], June 1943, quoted in *Letters*, 428. See also Melvin Dinwiddie, *Religion by Radio: Its Place in British Broadcasting* (London, 1968), 90–91; RBO Glasgow [Rev. Ronnie Falconer] to HRB [Welch], 20 July 1956, WAC R34/815/6.

[86] See, for example, Sayers to unknown recipient, 28 November 1941, in *Letters*, 329–34.

[87] See Welch's comments on Hugh Ross Williamson's use of John's gospel for the "Life of Jesus Interludes" in the Worship Service Broadcasts for Schools: DRB [Welch] to DSB, 12 January 1944, WAC R16/442/5.

[88] Sayers to Derek McCulloch, 25 October 1940, in *Letters*, 186; Sayers to Marjorie Barber, 26 October 1942, in *Letters*, 379.

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throughout the play cycle, Sayers utilized familiar gendered tropes to color Jesus in aggressively masculine hues. For example, like any action hero, her Jesus impresses even his enemies with his unfaltering courage. A Jewish nationalist notes, "I know that quiet sort. He'll walk up to death with his eyes open and his mouth shut," while Pontius Pilate responds, "H'm. Well set-up fellow. Looks you straight in the face. . . . We could do with a man like that in the army."[89]

One of those familiar tropes, however, was the linkage of Jewishness to femininity. Tapping into deeply embedded cultural assumptions—the construction of Jewishness as Eastern, Oriental, prone to physical frailty, emotional excess, and irrationality, *not* British—Sayers set Jesus apart from his Jewish context.[90] A tall, imposing figure with golden hair and a golden beard (as Sayers made sure her listeners visualized him), he speaks with a Standard English articulation that contrasts with the regional accents of his disciples.[91] In comparison, the disciple (and former tax collector) Matthew is "as vulgar a little commercial Jew as ever walked Whitechapel … [with] oily black hair and rapacious little hands, and … common little wits," and a strong Cockney accent. The Romans, meanwhile, do not figure as early-model Nazis, as one might expect. Pilate appears in the play as an English gentleman and many of the Roman soldiers seem to have wandered into first-century Palestine from a World War II British army base. When Pilate notes of Jesus, "By the gods, Flavius, this man's a marvel. He can hold his tongue and keep his dignity. He ought to be a Roman," one cannot help but wonder if Sayers did not think so too.[92]

The familiarity of Sayer's Jesus also stemmed, paradoxically, from her effort to defamiliarize the gospel story for British listeners. Impatient with the liberal rendition of Christianity—"I do not think one can quite reduce the Christian thesis to a doctrine of universal kindliness"—Sayers regarded the incarnation, the idea of God in human flesh, as an indubitable, fundamental, and fundamentally shocking fact.[93] She wanted her listeners to hear "God incarnate as a convincingly human being," to bring them "an ugly, tear-stained, sweat-stained, blood-stained story. . . . Shocked? we damn well ought to be shocked."[94] Seeking to break away from a "dull Christ," she insisted her characters "must be real people," and "nobody, not even Jesus, must be allowed to 'talk Bible.'"[95] An overly reverential approach to the Christian narrative was deadly.

"To get life into the thing," then, Sayers presented her listeners with a story of people rather like themselves, in fact, very much like themselves. As she explained it, she decided "to give a slight Oriental flavour here and there, but to combine

[89] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King* (New York, 1943), 263, 268 (hereafter MBTBK).

[90] See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, 1991).

[91] MBTBK, 60, 83, 89; the Sound Archive of the British Library holds recordings of the plays.

[92] Ibid., 100, 271.

[93] Sayers to Welch, 5 November 1950, quoted in Reynolds, *Sayers*, 302; see also Terrie Curran, "The Word Made Flesh: The Christian Aesthetic in Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Man Born to be King*," in *As Her Whimsey Took Her: Critical Readings on the World of Dorothy L. Sayers*, ed. Margaret Hanney (Kent, 1979), 67–77.

[94] Sayers's press announcement, 10 December 1941, WAC R1; Sayers to Welch, 19 February 1942, in *Letters*, 351–52.

[95] Sayers to Derek McCulloch, 25 October 1940, in *Letters*, 186; Sayers to Welch, 17 September 1941, in *Letters*, 293–96, at 293.

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this with as much familiar daily-life detail as possible."[96] Defamiliarizing the biblical Jesus thus meant setting him within the familiar cultural context of contemporary Britain. While Sayers wanted her listeners to encounter "the whole notion that the Son of God came in the flesh to the roaring, jostling, chaffering, joking, quarrelling, fighting, guzzling, intriguing, lobbying, worldly, polemical, political, sophisticated, brutal, Latinized, Hellenized, confused, complicated, careless civilization of first-century Jewry," what she gave them was not that civilization but their own.[97] Various members of the crowds around Jesus, as well as the minor disciples, often appear in the roles of Shakespeare's clowns and fools, offering both comic relief and homespun wisdom in comforting English vernacular. Two small children, for example, quarrel at Jesus's baptism ("Yes, you can. No, you can't. Can. Can't") while an incidental character cries out, "Oy, mate!" and remembers "old King Herod" fondly ("his son isn't a patch on him").[98]

The result is an often funny and at times illuminating radio drama, one that presented listeners not with the historical Jesus, not with the results of critical scholarship, but rather with a hearty and heartening hero, an Anglicized and masculine Jesus who possessed a powerful appeal in that place and at that time. The BBC transmitted the first episode at the end of 1941—just days after Japanese forces attacked British (as well as American and Dutch) territories throughout the Pacific and one month before Rommel's second offensive commenced in North Africa. The German army stood deep in Soviet territory. Every major industrial city in Britain had been bombed and 43,000 civilians were dead. To anxious listeners, Sayers's plays offered one of Western civilization's most riveting narratives of the weak triumphing over the powerful, of miraculous victory pulled from apparently assured defeat—and it told that story as a quintessentially British tale. Its very appeal, however, called into question the relevance of the historical Jesus, and of biblical scholarship, for British religious culture.

JESUS OF NAZARETH: THE TRIUMPH OF THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL JESUS

The Man Born to be King cracked the barriers to dramatic impersonations of Jesus in front of British audiences. In 1951, those barriers broke further when the British Board of Film Censors permitted filmgoers to view Jesus on screen in *Behold the Man*, a film of Westminster Cathedral's annual passion play. Audiences, however, could only *behold* Jesus (played by a Catholic priest) in the film; there was no dialogue, only an off-screen narration (by another priest). *Behold the Man* aroused little controversy and little critical acclaim. The *Spectator*'s reviewer even warned that its "holy slowness" would "drive its beholders into the arms of atheism."[99] Six years later, however, the BBC broadcast a television series called *Jesus of Nazareth*, in which, for the first time, British audiences both heard and saw an actor impersonating Jesus.

[96] Ibid., 295–96.

[97] Sayers to Father Taylor, after 8 March 1942, in *Letters*, 354.

[98] MBTBK, 54, 53, 5.

[99] Virgina Graham, "Cinieika," *Spectato*r, 20 September 1951, 12. See also "Film of Passion Play," *Times*, 9 September 1951, 8.

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This series took shape as a response to the threat posed to the BBC by commercial television. In 1954, despite Reith's warning that the effect of commercial television on British culture would be comparable to dog racing, smallpox, and the bubonic plague, Parliament passed the Television Act, mandating the end of the BBC's television monopoly.[100] To ready the corporation for the competition, Director-General Ian Jacob set up a special fund to encourage young producers to develop innovative television programming. One such young producer, Joy Harington, used Jacob's fund to develop what she initially envisioned as a documentary series on "the life and times of Jesus" at least partially shot on location in Israel. As Harington explained to her supervisor, Freda Lingstrom, "Children have little idea of the reality of other lands, and the Holy Land in particular remains too remote for them to be able to imagine it in living terms." Through the series, she hoped "to awaken interest in the origin of the most significant influence in their lives."[101]

The RBD quickly seized on Harington's idea. Francis House, who had replaced Welch in 1947, enthused,

> The potential influence of these broadcasts, for good or ill, is tremendous. There are something like 40,000 places of Christian worship in this country. In each of them two sermons will be preached on each of the six Sundays on which "The Life of Christ" will be broadcast. I think it is incontestable that the influence of your six programmes on the attitude to Christ and Christianity of a whole generation of children will be vastly greater than that of all these half million sermons![102]

The following year, House warned Lingstrom, "It is difficult to imagine any single enterprise which is of greater consequence for the religious situation in this country."[103] As head of religious broadcasting, then, he demanded "provision for day to day consultation on all details of the production which have religious significance" and, using the second person to underline his point, warned, "H. R. B. himself would need to keep closely in touch with the whole project and be prepared to bring all the force at his command to bear in support of recommendations concerning 'theological content' or 'religious impact.'"[104]

For House, as for Welch before him, getting the theological content and religious impact right meant gendering Jesus properly. In the introduction to this article, I described House's and his program assistant's horrified reactions to a trial episode of the series. These reactions—"Jesus … dressed in an angel's nightshirt," characters drawn from "Victorian stained glass windows or illustrated children's books," a comparison to *The Light of the World*, special concern for boy viewers—highlight the fear of a feminized or what House termed a "Sunday-school Jesus."[105] Yet the final and much acclaimed series (with a different actor for the boy Jesus) featured exactly that.

Three elements explain this "Sunday-schoolizing" of the series. The first was language. The question of whether the characters should "talk Bible," as Sayers would

[100] Quoted in Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting* (London, 1997), 86.
[101] Freda Lingstrom to C. Tel., 21 May 1954, WAC T2/74/1.
[102] House to Joy Harington, 8 Oct. 1954, WAC T2/74/1.
[103] House to Lingstrom, 1 June 1955, WAC T2/74/2.
[104] House to Colin Beale, 24 May 1955, WAC T2/74/2.
[105] Ibid.

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have said, not only proved problematic but also quickly became entangled in the key issue of gender. House overruled Harington's initial plan to draw her dialogue only from the gospels but Harington's efforts to follow House's instructions and invent "first rate *realistic masculine* dialogue" for her characters kept running into obstacles.[106] The members of the BBC's Central Religious Advisory Committee insisted "that the Christus should use only words from the Gospels," and only from the Authorized Version, that is, the King James Version.[107] A second group of religious advisors agreed that Harington should "keep as close to the familiar Authorised Version as possible," but at the same time insisted that "the most necessary thing was to maintain virility."[108] These conflicting demands produced a predictable mish-mash that lacked the vibrancy of Sayers's dialogue. The young Jesus, speaking in a precise middle-class accent, says to his playmates, "I say, I'd forgotten that we start for Jerusalem tomorrow. I must be off home … Peace be unto you." As the adult Jesus draws nearer to Calvary, he "talks Bible" more and more: "Indeed and indeed I say to you."[109]

Confusion within the ranks of church leaders also contributed to the stained-glass approach of *Jesus of Nazareth*. Unhappy with Harington's lack of theological credentials, House initiated a number of attempts to replace her as producer. "The question at stake" he explained, was "how really good standards of scholarship and of religious teaching for children could be maintained."[110] He insisted that the final script had to be "not inconsistent with the findings of the best New Testament scholarship."[111] But by the 1950s, even clerics like House were confused about what such scholarship actually said. Harington, for example, proposed that the initial episode begin, as does Mark's gospel, with Jesus's baptism and the early ministry in Capernaum. Such a plan accorded with what was then the consensus among British scholars that Mark provides the earliest and most historically authentic version of Jesus's ministry.[112] House, however, rejected Harington's proposal because he objected to the omission of Jesus's "first miracle," the turning of water into wine at Cana—a miracle recorded only in the historically suspect gospel of John.[113]

The theological confusion deepened after House assigned Harington a committee of religious consultants that included a senior inspector for religious instruction from the Ministry of Education, the general secretary of Church of England's Children's Council, the editor of the *Bulletin of the Methodist Ministers' Missionary Union*, and an assortment of chaplains and headmasters. These consultants ordered Harington

[106] Harington to Lingstrom, 20 December 1954, WAC T2/74/1 (emphasis in original); House to Harington, 8 October 1954. See also Memo from Harington, 1 September 1954, WAC T2/74/1.

[107] Minute of the Central Religious Advisory Committee, 31 January 1952, BBC WAC T2/74/1.

[108] R. McKay, "Points Arising from the Discussion at the Consultation on the Life of Christ Series Held on Wednesday July 6th, 1955," 8 July 1955; and "House's Addendum to McKay's Memo, Children's Life of Christ Series (Television) 12 July 55," BBC WAC-T2/74/3.

[109] Joy Harington, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York, 1957), 145.

[110] House, "HCPTEl [Lingstrom] and HRB [House]: Interview 3rd June, 1955 on the basis of HRB's memorandum of 1st June 1955," BBC WAC-T2/74/2.

[111] House, "Life of Christ for Children's Television—Note of Informal Conversation with H. E. B. on May 23rd [1955]," WAC-T2/74/2.

[112] For the priority of Mark, see T. W. Manson, "The Foundations of the Synoptic Tradition and the Gospel of Mark" (Rylands lecture, 1944), in *Studies*, 30–45; Manson, *Teaching*, 23–26.

[113] Harington to House, 6 December 1954; House to Harington, 14 December 1954, WAC-T2/74/1.

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not to overload her account with incidents; still, her scripts must preserve "the variety of characters" from the gospel narratives, embrace the substance of Jesus's teaching, and detail the links between his ministry and Old Testament typologies and prophecies. She was to include the "physical and 'mental' healings" recorded in the New Testament, but to present the miracles "as straightforwardly as possible, with no emphasis on the miraculous." Her coverage of the crucifixion must not cause harm to sensitive children, while at the same time remaining scrupulously faithful to the biblical text. And finally, the committee informed Harington, she must find a way to dramatize the Resurrection in a "naturalistic" fashion that nevertheless showed that Jesus was different than before.[114]

With scriptwriting by committee a clear failure, House turned next to an indisputable authority: T. W. Manson, at this time a member of Central Religious Advisory Committee. The consultants dispersed; Manson became the expert advisor on the project, commissioned "to point out any errors of fact and to comment on the general picture of the life of Christ in the light of New Testament scholarship."[115] In this role, he objected to any proposals that clashed with the scholarly picture of the historical Jesus. Overruling House, Manson insisted that the series follow the gospel of Mark's account of events. When, for example, Harington depicted Jesus swinging a whip in the cleansing of the Temple scene, Manson demanded the script be changed: The whip had to go because of the gospel writers, only John includes a whip in the story.

But the whip remained; Harington's Jesus uses it to clear the temple of the money-changers in Episode 7.[116] Not even T. W. Manson could overcome the third factor that guaranteed that Britain's first television savior would not be the historical Jesus. Quite simply, good television is not the same as good theology or good history. Manson's nuanced portrayal of the divisions in first-century Judaism, set against a complicated backdrop swirling with contradictory apocalyptic expectations, could not translate into a children's television program. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, then, the pharisees are bad, the priests are worse, the people are clueless. The urgency of Manson's Jesus drops away. Eschatology disappears entirely; Jesus's message becomes little more than reminding his listeners that God is a kindly Father to all, and we should be kind to everyone, too. The need to simplify for a young audience and to communicate complex ideas and complicated events quickly, as well as the demands of a visual medium, led Harington to rely on shorthand, on well-known figures and symbols that negated any attempt at scholarly rigor—figures and symbols that were, moreover, embedded in Orientalist tropes.

This final point leads to the most interesting and paradoxical aspect of the project. From the very start, Harington sought to film the series in what she regarded as its authentic setting. In the late spring of 1955, Harington realized her ambition: She embarked for the Middle East with two cameramen, an assistant, and the actor who played Jesus, Tom Fleming, to film introductory, linking, and background material. For Harington and the RBD, this journey ensured that *Jesus of Nazareth* featured a Jesus who was of Nazareth, "different from the picture-books," an historical rather

[114] "Points Arising"; "Notes on Holy Land Meeting," no date [July–December 1955], WAC-T2/74/3.
[115] Robert Walton to H. C. Tel., 5 October 1955.
[116] I thank Deborah Perkin and BBC Wales for enabling me to watch the series.

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than an Anglicized figure.[117] Viewers would encounter "Jesus in the scorching sun of the wilderness with the hot desert wind blowing his robes and hair in disorder, far from the lifeless coloured-print image stamped on the minds of so many." The Middle Eastern scenes, then, would help viewers see Jesus as "a strong virile young man, full of life and energy, convinced of his mission."[118]

While Harington intended to film the authentic, the historical Jesus, instead she resurrected the Jesus of the picture books. As much as any Victorian traveler, she regarded the Middle East as a fossilized version of first-century Palestine. Noting the dark-skinned girls from Jericho in their best dresses "unchanged since New Testament days," Harington enthused, "The wonder of being here never leaves me. It is so easy to imagine Jesus on these hills and woods and among these friendly smiling children."[119] Yet to her surprise, the Jesus Harington imagined in those hills and woods bore a startling resemblance to the Sunday-school Jesus she had been ordered to avoid. She wrote, "It is impossible not to make Tom [Fleming] look like the children's idea of Jesus. He just does. I kept thinking of the idea to make him 'different from the picture-books' but out here everywhere you look is like the paintings of the Holy Land and the Bible stories."[120]

Harington sought to reassure Lingstrom that "you need have no fear that we will get a stained glass or 'holy' performance from [Fleming]."[121] A tall man, he embodied a physically impressive Jesus. The baptism scene, for example, showed off Fleming's impressive physique and even his chest hair. In some of the scenes with the disciples, Fleming hit a warm, natural tone, reminiscent of Sayers's dialogue. Most of the time, however, his performance was overtly reverent, with scriptural sayings delivered in a lofty, sermonizing diction.[122] Little about this Jesus is playful, paradoxical, or mysterious. Despite House's, Harington's, and Manson's best intentions, the Sunday-school Jesus dominates throughout the series. The blocking of many of the scenes, for example, makes them resemble Victorian tableaux; in others, Jesus sits while his bare-chested disciples perform hard physical labor.[123] Throughout the series, the men around him wear supposedly first-century Palestinian costumes (drawn from the BBC wardrobe chest), but Jesus stands apart in a voluminous and always pristine white robe.[124] In the Garden of Gethsemane scene, this Jesus, rapt in quiet prayer and betraying nothing of the agony described in the gospel accounts, kneels in what looks like a white skirt and hood; he rather resembles a nun. His disciples usually wear quasi-Middle Eastern headdress; Jesus, never. Although practicable from a dramatic perspective (viewers need to be able to identify the hero), such

[117] Harington to Lingstrom, 18 May 1955, from Jerusalem, Jordan, continued 22 May, WAC-T2/74/2.

[118] Freda Lingstrom, "Jesus of Nazareth," *Radio Times*, 10 February 1956, 3.

[119] Harington to Lingstrom, 18 May 1955.

[120] Ibid., emphasis in original.

[121] Ibid.

[122] For a similar contemporary critique, see Freda Lingstrom, "A Report on the Cycle of Plays on the Life of Jesus of Nazareth with a Recommendation," August 1956, 4, WAC T2/74/5.

[123] Still from *Jesus of Nazareth*, "Jesus of Nazareth: A Souvenir of One of the Most Memorable TV Programmes yet Produced," in *The Television Annual for 1957*, ed. Kenneth Baily (London, 1957), 52–55, at 54.

[124] Ibid.

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costuming separated this Jesus from a Palestinian Jewish context and echoed Victorian representations of a feminized Jesus.

Viewers loved it. *Jesus of Nazareth* proved a popular and critical success. Although slotted in the children's programming hour on Sundays, it also attracted an adult audience "whose appreciation placed it … next to the Coronation of 1953 in national appeal."[125] About 15 percent of the adult population of Britain, or 35 percent of adult television-viewers, watched the first episode. After four episodes, the program's "reaction index" scored a record high for Children's Television, and overall the series drew four times as many viewers as the competition, *Robin Hood*, on the commercial channel.[126] Harington won a British Academy of Film and Television Arts award and the BBC rebroadcast the series in 1957 and 1958. In the context of the RBD's aim of taking on the "Sunday-school Jesus," however, the series' success seems more like a pyrrhic victory.

CONCLUSION: "JESUS. MEEK. MILD. AS IF"

Jesus of Nazareth in many ways represented the end of an era in the BBC's religious broadcasting. House stepped down before the series was transmitted. Although his replacement, Canon Roy McKay, had no broadcasting experience, he turned out to be "the first Head of Religious Broadcasting to be identified more closely with the BBC than with the Church."[127] McKay recognized and liked good television. He brought in the pop singer Adam Faith to discuss love with the archbishop of York (eight million viewers), began the Sunday night hymn sing *Songs of Praise* (still being aired), and earned a denunciation from the Assembly of the Church of England for a controversial program challenging the historical bona fides of an ordained priesthood.[128] Willing to play to and to play with the masses, McKay often seemed to have more respect for popular religiosity than for the churches. Meanwhile, that popular religiosity was changing rapidly. Whether it was the late 1950s that witnessed the final "passing of Protestant England," as Simon Green argues, or the 1960s that saw the "death of Christian Britain," as Callum Brown insists, by 1970 popular Christian culture had little left of Christianity in it.[129]

And yet Jesus-in-a-nightdress remained—or at least some churchmen continued to think so. In January 1999, the Churches Advertising Network, a public relations body of the mainstream Christian churches in Britain, announced its new Easter campaign. In order to pack the pews at Easter and beyond, 50,000 churches were asked to participate in an advertising blitz featuring five-foot posters to be displayed in bus shelters, rail stations, and churches. The posters featured a familiar

[125] "Jesus of Nazareth. A Souvenir," 52.

[126] Audience research report, 12 February 1956, WAC T2/74/5; Viewer response survey, 25 April 1956, WAC T2/74/5; Lingstrom, "Report," 14.

[127] "Canon Roy McKay," *Priests and Prelates: The Daily Telegraph Obituaries* (London, 2002), 107.

[128] See Oliver Hunkin, "Obituary: Canon Roy McKay," *The Independent,* 18 November 1993; Roy McKay, *Take Care of the Sense: Reflections on Religious Broadcasting* (London, 1964).

[129] Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 170–98; S. J. D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c. 1920–1960* (Cambridge, 2011). See also Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007).

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image: the red and black picture of Che Guevara that adorned students' rooms in the 1960s. Instead of the usual beret, however, this Che sported a crown of thorns—Jesus as revolutionary. Just in case the viewer failed to grasp the point, the posters also included this caption:

> Meek. Mild. As if.
> Discover the Real Jesus.
> Church.
> April 4.

The secretary of the Churches Advertising Network, the Reverend Tom Ambrose, explained for those still a bit confused, "We want to get away from the wimpy Nordic figure in a white nightie." According to the *Daily Telegraph*, Ambrose said he hoped teenage girls would pin the poster up in their bedrooms.[130]

No such sightings were reported.

[130] Victoria Combe, "Church Poster Shows Jesus as Che Guevara," *The Telegraph*, 6 January 1999, 7.

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