

Henson and broadcasting

Henson was a renowned preacher and public speaker, yet he did not become a regular speaker in radio broadcasts. When he agreed to give broadcast talks during the mid 1930s, the *Radio Times* made much of his fluency – ‘he writes the most perfect English without any effort whatsoever’ – but the BBC made little use of his talents.¹ As shown in the list below, he was heard most often delivering sermons in the course of broadcast church services. On three occasions he made broadcasts to support fund-raising appeals, twice during the 1920s for the preservation of Durham Castle. He gave only three extended talks for the BBC, on slavery in 1933 (marking the centenary of abolition of slavery in the British empire), as part of a series on freedom in 1935 (at a time of spreading dictatorship in Europe), and on disestablishment in 1936 (related to the report of the Archbishops’ commission on church and state). These talks were also broadcast on the BBC’s overseas channels. He spoke again on freedom in 1938, for a broadcasting company in the USA.

The comparative scarcity of Henson’s broadcasts, at a time when the BBC had a large demand for effective speakers, religious talks and debates among intellectuals, can perhaps be explained in part by his unusually combative opinions on ecclesiastical as well as other public matters. The BBC carefully balanced his broadcast talk on the issue of disestablishment with a second talk by a firm supporter of church establishment.² However, it is also clear that Henson was not attracted by the opportunities offered by broadcasting, and declined some invitations to speak for the BBC. He disliked the BBC’s convention at that time of asking speakers and preachers to submit their texts before the broadcast for possible editing, and for excision of unduly controversial comments. In 1925 he thought it ‘intolerable that episcopal sermons should be “censored” by broadcasting clerks’. During 1928, to his disgust, a cut was made in one of his talks. In 1933 he refused a request to submit his talk on slavery ‘for inspection by an official’, which he considered ‘not far removed from an insult’.³

Henson bought a ‘wireless’ set for Auckland Castle in 1931, and would listen to the news, to important national addresses, and to some music. But he was ambivalent about the value of broadcasting, and especially about its effects for religion. In 1929 he told a surprised John Reith, the BBC’s director and an evangelist about the benefits of radio for the nation’s religious life, that ‘on the whole, Religion stood to lose rather than gain by Broadcasting’.⁴ As early as 1925 he described the Sunday religious broadcasts as ‘partly religious & partly secular, a spiritual mingle-mangle’.⁵ After Canterbury convocation in 1931 passed resolutions of appreciation for the BBC’s support for the cause of religion,⁶ Henson for a time became a public critic of its programmes. For ‘very large numbers of half-hearted Christians’, religious broadcasting might ‘take the place of attendance at public worship’. Worse, he suspected that the ‘mingle-mangle of unrelated and sometimes contradictory teachings’ that were broadcast, from different churches and different philosophical positions, ‘was creating in the general mind a temperament of universal scepticism highly unfavourable to the reception of the Christian message’. Although broadcasting was ‘a potent instrument for disseminating ideas and distributing information’, as ‘an instrument of teaching it was profoundly unsatisfactory’ because the brevity and compression of programmes gave no opportunity ‘for questioning,

challenging or explaining', leaving many under-informed listeners without adequate means of reaching sound conclusions.⁷ He corresponded privately with Reith to complain about BBC talks which he considered to challenge Christian beliefs; but eventually he concluded that 'it is probably not worth while to criticize the working of this monstrous instrument. It is here: it is developing; its potencies are as limitless as its mischiefs. One can but stand aside, & watch it'.⁸

Henson appreciated that broadcasts had some benefits. He notably credited the 'remarkable steadiness of public opinion' during the crisis over King Edward VIII's proposed marriage to the BBC's broadcast of accurate news and prime ministerial statements, counteracting the 'mischievous' speculations and 'poisonous nonsense' of the sensationalist press: the 'BBC has become an instrument of the highest national value'.⁹ Nevertheless, he continued to worry about the dangers of broadcasting for religious life. During 1937 an editorial in *The Listener* which praised the BBC's religious broadcasts provoked him to write a long letter of reply. He conceded that they had some benefits, particularly for those unable to attend church service because of sickness and other causes. But he asked whether broadcast religious services were really a form of worship, because Christian worship presupposed a congregation. He also warned that the BBC policy of broadcasting services by the various churches was generating a 'competitive sectarianism', a desire to maximise popularity. All this was a 'negation of worship', robbing religion of 'meaning and power'. It damaged church attendance, and it appealed only to the existing church-going public: 'the multitude prefers jazz music'. He also noted that 'broadcasting is the indispensable instrument of modern dictatorship'.¹⁰ This became one of his persistent concerns. During 1940 he even remarked that the relentless patriotism of BBC broadcasts might be harmful:

I grow impatient of the subtle and unceasing pressure of cunningly arranged propaganda. There is not yet such shameless lying as the Dictators employ, & the hand of the Government is not placed so heavily on B.B.C. as it is placed on the wireless systems of the continent. But I feel that the pressure is growing, & that we are rapidly losing such liberty as once we possessed. Nor do I see any way of escape. We are locked into a process of developing bondage.¹¹

List of Henson's broadcasts

RT: announcements of BBC broadcasts in *Radio Times*; reports, extracts and full texts are indicated where these are known to exist.

Sunday 22 June 1924, sermon during service at the Sunday School Convention, Glasgow:
Sunday Post, 22 June 1924

Sunday 12 April 1925 (Easter Sunday), address as part of a service in Jesmond parish church, Newcastle: RT 10 Apr. 1925; extracts of text in *Shields Daily News* and [Hartlepool] *Northern Daily Mail*, both 13 Apr. 1925

Thursday 8 October 1925, a talk on Durham Castle, from Newcastle: RT 2 Oct. 1925

Saturday 16 July 1927, address on the 800th anniversary of the foundation of Furness Abbey, part of a service at Abbey Park, Barrow-in-Furness: RT 8 July 1927: summary report in *Penrith Observer*, 19 July, and *Millom Gazette*, 22 July 1927

Sunday 2 October 1927, address as part of harvest thanksgiving service in Newcastle Cathedral (local Newcastle channel only): RT 30 Sept. 1927: summary reports in *Newcastle Journal* and *Shields Daily News*, 3 Oct. 1927

Saturday 17 March 1928, 15-minute appeal for conservation of Durham Castle (local Newcastle channel only): RT 9 Mar. 1928

Sunday 3 June 1928, address as part of a service in Newcastle Cathedral (local Newcastle channel only): RT 1 June 1928; extracts in *Newcastle Journal* and *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 4 June 1928

Sunday 4 May 1930, address as part of a military service in York Minster: RT 2 May 1930; extracts in *Yorkshire Post* and *Leeds Mercury*, 5 May 1930

Sunday 30 July 1933, 30-minute address on abolition of slavery: RT 28 July 1933; summary reports in *Shields Daily Gazette* and [Hartlepool] *Northern Daily Mail*, 31 July

Tuesday 25 June 1935, 20-minute talk on 'Liberty, religious and ecclesiastical', the last in a series of thirteen on 'Freedom' by various speakers: text in *The Listener*, 3 July 1935

Sunday 20 October 1935, address on Christianity and secularism as part of a service in Auckland Castle chapel: RT 18 Oct. 1935; extracts in *Sunderland Daily Echo*, *The Shields News* and *Yorkshire Post*, 21 Oct. 1935

Sunday 26 April 1936, 20-minute talk on 'The need for disestablishment',¹² the first of a two-part series commenting on the report of the Archbishops' commission on church and state: text in *The Listener*, 29 Apr. 1936

27 September 1936, 15-minute talk on 'Universities and freedom' (from the Newcastle BBC studio) for the Columbia Broadcasting Service in the United States, as part of a series marking the tercentenary of Harvard University: text in *The education digest*, 2:3 (Nov. 1936), 30-1, and *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, 22 (Dec. 1936), 516-17.

Sunday 18 December 1938, 5-minute appeal for the Tyneside Council of Social Service, as 'The week's good cause': RT 16 Dec. 1938; report in *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 19 Dec. 1938

A broadcast was planned of a service and Henson sermon in Westminster Abbey on Tuesday, 3 September 1940, to mark the anniversary of the outbreak of war, attended by the king and queen and by government ministers (*Times*, 31 Aug.). But air-raid warnings led to a last-minute cancellation of both the royal attendance and the broadcast. The service and sermon nevertheless proceeded, in the presence of Churchill and cabinet ministers, and Henson's

sermon was published: *The Times*, 4 Sept. 1940, and reprinted in Henson, *Last words in Westminster Abbey* (1941), 16–22.

¹ *Radio Times*, 21 June 1935, and similarly in *ibid.*, 24 Apr. 1936.

² Thomas Inskip: see *The Listener*, 6 May 1936.

³ *Journal*, 12 Apr. 1925, 17 Mar. 1928, 28 July 1933.

⁴ *Journal*, 18 June 1929.

⁵ *Journal*, 2 Aug. 1925.

⁶ *Times*, 22 Jan. 1931.

⁷ Extracts from sermons in *Times*, 9 Feb. 1931, and *Daily Telegraph*, 21 Nov. 1931

⁸ Henson to Reith, 7, 24 Oct. 1931, HHH 110/39–40, 56.

⁹ *Journal*, 10 Dec. 1936.

¹⁰ *The Listener*, 21 July 1937.

¹¹ *Journal*, Christmas day, 1940.

¹² The text was read out by Frederic Iremonger, director of the BBC's religious department, because Henson was unable to travel to a BBC studio, after suffering a fracture in his foot.