

BBC once more rejects non-religious voices on *Thought for the Day*

Posted: Wed, 3rd Jul 2013

The BBC has announced today that it will not "revisit" the issue of non-religious voices on *Thought for the Day*.

The announcement came in an Executive Response to a review conducted by the BBC Trust into the breadth of opinion that is permitted to be heard on the BBC. This included a review of the BBC's religious output.

The National Secular Society was invited to take part in this review and it raised once more the issue of the exclusion of non-religious voices from *Thought for the Day*."

The independent review was commissioned by the BBC Trust and led by former ITV chief Executive Stuart Prebble. Mr Prebble [wrote in the report](#) (pdf):

I asked for *Thought for the Day* on Radio 4 to be included in the remit for this review because it seemed absurd to examine the provision of range of voice within religion and ethics, without taking into account what must be one of the most listened-to places where religious range of voice is provided.

For my trouble I found myself involved in what has been a lengthy debate between the BBC and the National Secular Society, in which the NSS claims that *Thought for the Day* should not exist at all, and that if it does, it should include contributions from Humanists and Secularists. This is on the basis that to allocate over three minutes of airtime to a single voice, and to allow it to go unchallenged by interrogation or analysis, gives to religion a status which is not accorded to any other aspect of our lives, and which is unjustified.

However, if this argument fails, and *Thought for the Day* should continue, then Secularists and Humanists wish to be included among its contributors on the basis that theirs are "beliefs" just as other religions are — an argument which has been given weight by the law of the land.

This matter has been debated at length within the Editorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust which has taken the view that it is a matter for BBC Management to decide whether *Thought for the Day* should include Humanists or Secular voices among its contributors.

However, it is not simply the BBC which thinks that it has to have belief as part of its output — it is required to do so by the Agreement with the Secretary of State which sets the BBC Trust the requirement to have regard "to the importance of reflecting different religions and other beliefs" as it sets the purpose remits which explain how the BBC should represent the UK, its nations, regions and communities.

Personally I see no difficulty in including a Humanist or Secular contribution within *Thought for the Day* if justified on editorial grounds. David Elstein agrees, but for slightly different reasons. He told us that: "On religion I am an agnostic and have long thought that BBC's commitment to religion can't be right. It is part of the polity and the BBC thinks it has to have belief as part of the output. I am one of those who think TFTD should have regular atheists in it to achieve a full range."

However, in response, the BBC Executive says that it is undertaking its own research into "the mix and flavour of its Religion and Ethics content", but "We do not propose to revisit the issue of atheists or humanists taking part in *Thought for the Day*."

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, commented: "There is no doubt that the changing demographics of the UK — starkly shown in the 2011 Census — mean that the BBC's focus on Christianity is completely out of proportion. Our arguments about *Thought for the Day* have been frequently rehearsed and have the support even of the presenters of the *Today* programme, John Humphreys and Evan Davis. We simply cannot understand why the BBC resists this small change that would prove that it is serious about proper representation of all opinions on the airwaves."

Mr Sanderson said he was disappointed with the report which simply seemed to accept that to devote such a large amount of the of the BBC's resources to religious programming was legitimate.

"All the independent research shows that the number of people interested in religion in this country is very small. Why does the BBC put such an enormous focus on it?"

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