

BBC Trust service review of Radio 3, Radio 4 and Radio 7

Submission by the National Secular Society

26 August 2010

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Our remarks are concerned mainly, but not exclusively, with radio and address these sections of the consultation:

1 (c) *To what extent are services contributing to the BBC's public purposes?*

1(e) *How well are audience groups served by these stations within the BBC radio portfolio?*

2(a) *Future strategy*

3 *Service licence changes*

1. Introduction

The NSS regards Radio 4 as a world leader, but expects a broadcaster of such repute to abide closely by its remit to reflect the totality of life and interests in Britain. In our view, the BBC signally fails that part of its audience who have rejected religious beliefs or who are indifferent to religion. The Appendix below shows how large a proportion of the public the BBC is currently failing based on research statistics.

We do not of course object to programmes for the religious who are entitled to some programmes under the Public Purpose Remit Public Purpose Remit of “representing its nations, regions and communities”. However, we are unhappy that the coverage is disproportionately high. , The BBC currently places far too great an emphasis on religious programming, often ignoring ethical life stances which have no religious basis.

Nor, similarly, do we object to religious viewpoints being expressed in news and current affairs programmes. A frequent canard of some bishops, and the Christian Institute in particular, is that we “wish to exclude religion from the public square”, but this is a misrepresentation of our position, we simply seek to have an equal voice in the public square. What we do resist is that such utterances are privileged in ways discussed below.

This policy of giving privileges to the religious extends beyond specifically religious slots into news programmes, for example, where too much attention is paid to the affairs of the Church of England, or uncontested views of bishops are aired in matters of morals and ethics.

The general impression given is that religious belief is the norm and that anyone who rejects or challenges it is an eccentric to be given strictly limited toleration.

However, church attendance continues its century-long decline; religious teachings in many areas are widely ignored as being irrelevant to modern life; in surveys religion is regularly near the bottom of list of things that matter to people. None of these relevant considerations appear to have had any impact on the BBC's programming policy.

We illustrate below in more detail how this mindset causes the BBC to fall short of its public service principles. Before doing so, however, we wish to highlight the inequality of programming in this area by challenging the Corporation to compile a list from the BBC schedules of programmes by and for unbelievers about free thought and belief that is broadly equivalent in length to the programmes by and for believers about religion – both groups are of approximately the same size¹. We do this because we see no sign of the commitment to maintain the BBC's reputation for “impartiality across **the whole of its output**” given by Director General Mark Thompson.

¹ ONS, Social Trends 38

The argument that much programming does not include religion and is therefore secular is a false one. The equivalent of religious programming is programming on ethical, moral and related matters that takes a non-religious stance.

2. Detailed Comments

*The BBC believes that all licence fee payers have the right to hear their reasonable views **and beliefs** reflected on its output.* [our emphasis]

Overview of points to be discussed

The service licence for Radio 4 includes the following prescriptions (paraphrased: numbering added for purposes of easy reference in this paper):

- 1 inform, educate and entertain
- 2 provide in-depth coverage of news and current affairs
- 3 in domestic coverage reflect the diversity of people in the UK
- 4 create challenging and innovative material
- 5 challenge leading figures from all areas of public life
- 6 take risks
- 7 develop special projects and themes.

In addition, specifically for religion and ethics³ programming under the heading of “Promoting Education and Learning”:

- R1 explore ethnic, cultural and religious groups within the UK to enable wider understanding;
- R2 provide worship, celebration and in-depth reporting of religious affairs across all the major faiths;
- R3 provide at least 200 hours of religious programming annually.⁴

From 5.3:

It should seek to deepen and broaden listeners’ understanding through specialist programmes on subjects such as politics, business, law, finance, health, education, food and farming, international affairs, religion, ethics, travel and gardening.

² Christine Morgan, Executive Producer, Radio 4 (context: Thought for the Day), 2007

³ The very name of this BBC department reveals the unthinking and unjustified assumption that ethics and morals have a basis in religion.

⁴ a figure which the BBC exceeds comfortably in recent years.

We note here that as far as we know there are no programmes on ethics that do not include religion.

Furthermore, in this list of principles, the BBC has failed to make clear in its documents whether or not non-belief is intended also to be included. UK legislation uses the phrase “religion or belief”, which is defined to include philosophical beliefs and life stances that do not include religion.

News and current affairs

Earlier this year some NSS members carried out a three-month monitoring of *Today*. In the 72 editions of the programme in the period monitored, there were 41 occasions when religion or representatives of organised religion were featured in interviews. This number is far exceeded if (a) repeated mentions of the same topic in the same programme are included and (b) it is assumed that general reports about Northern Ireland and terrorism have some sort of connection with religion.

There was a great deal of time devoted to the internal disputes of the Church of Scotland on the question of women bishops, as, indeed, is the case with the Church of England at the time of writing this submission. The editorial attitude is that this internal dispute should be presented as a matter of concern for the whole country, when in fact it concerns a minority within a minority.⁵

When decline in church attendance is being discussed, religious leaders are asked to comment and, predictably, wring their hands. No alternative perspective is ever invited, for example putting the decline in context and asking openly why it is happening.

We also perceive that religious leaders are uppermost in the BBC editors’ minds when looking for opinion on ethics and morals - for example, the ethics of some medical innovation. Although medical ethicists, some of whom will be secular, are now being used more, the false idea that religion has something superior to say about morals or ethics still has a grip.

We offer other examples including controversy about assisted dying or adoption by gay couples. The BBC almost invariably looks to religion, in the form of bishops, usually, for our moral compass in these matters, and any other basis for morality is never mentioned. A further objection we have is that, while other political campaigners are closely questioned and subjected to opposing views, religious leaders pursuing their cause by political means⁶ rarely undergo the same rigorous process.

The *Today* programme of Friday 29 January, 2009 gave us an example of the BBC’s gratuitously granting airtime to the religious without any regard to its appropriateness or to the risk of insulting the listeners’ intelligence. The presenter Edward Stourton followed up a tabloid report about a ghost in a hospital and laid on a completely uncritical and apparently gullible interview with a Benedictine monk on exorcising demons: a full transcript of this interview is available on request. At no point was either a scientist or a non-believer asked to comment to provide balance.

More recently, those promoting the visit of the Pope to the UK have been given an easy time by interviewers. Although they asked pertinent questions about the cost of the visit, and the

⁵ The Christian charity Tearfund said in its own survey in 2004: “In England and Wales around one in four of those adults who would describe themselves nominally as Christian on the Census form do not consider that they actually ‘belong’ to the Christian religion. Similarly around one in six of people classifying themselves as other religions on the Census do not consider they ‘belong’ to that religion.”

⁶ Bear in mind that there are 26 bishops in the House of Lords as of right.

Pope's status as Head of State, they were content to accept anodyne or evasive replies. There has been, as far as we are aware, no rigorous investigation by BBC news teams of the serious questions raised by this visit – not least, the use of tax-payers' money to fund what is predominantly a pastoral visit for which the entire security costs are being borne from public funds.

We are told that presenters have been instructed to avoid using the word "Muslim" when referring to certain kinds of terrorist, even though these men are Muslims and are motivated by Islam to promote the universal Umma. Yet it seems almost obligatory to qualify the word atheist or secularist with a pejorative adjective. So Richard Dawkins is often described as "militant", or secularists as "aggressive secularists". So the unreasonable sensitivities of a religious minority are privileged, while those demanding equality of treatment are insulted.

Fear of condemnation as Islamophobic (a misunderstood term) leads inevitably to self-censorship and restrictions on free speech in an aspect of public life that is desperately in need of rigorous examination and criticism.⁷

Instead, we read this from the Director General, speaking after the comedian Ben Elton accused the BBC of being scared of making jokes about Islam, while Hindus have claimed it favours Muslims over other religions:

"My view is that there is a difference between the position of Christianity, which I believe should be central to the BBC's religion coverage and widely respected and followed.

"What Christian identity feels like it is about to the broad population is a little bit different to people for whom their religion is also associated with an ethnic identity which has not been fully integrated.

"There's no reason why any religion should be immune from discussion, but I don't want to say that all religions are the same. To be a minority I think puts a slightly different outlook on it."⁸

Some specific lapses in the *Today* programme:

11 January: Dr Dan Boucher of Christian organisation Care was interviewed about the Equality Bill's 2nd reading debate. He argued, without any opposition, for religious organisations to be allowed recruitment and other practices otherwise illegal on human rights grounds⁹.

19 January: James Naughtie interviewed John Reid on BA crucifix affair – neither showed any awareness of the facts of the case. (A full transcript of this interview is available on request.)

⁷ For a thorough demolition of the myth and an examination of its pernicious effects, see *Multiculturalism: some inconvenient truths*, Romy Hasan, Politico's, 2010, ch.4, in which he refers to Keenan Malik's article in the March 2005 issue of *Prospect Magazine*, and to a report by the Runnymede Trust entitled *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all*, (Conway 1997), which makes this concession: "The term is not, admittedly, ideal. Critics of it consider that its use panders to what they call political correctness, that it stifles legitimate criticism of Islam, and that it demonises and stigmatises anyone who wishes to engage in such criticism."

⁸ 14 Oct 2008: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/religion/3198804/BBC-boss-says-Islam-should-be-treated-more-sensitively-than-Christianity.html>

⁹ http://www.care.org.uk/Articles/176836/CARE/Stay_Informed/Public_Affairs_News/New_CARE_report.aspx

26 January: item on employment law and religion: votes not given, balance not seen, religious interest not declared and recused.

2 February: Archbishop Nicholls on the Equality Bill and “natural law” – John Humphries failed to challenge him either on legal or rational grounds.

13 February: Nicholls again on assisted suicide and NHS “inhumanity” – BBC religion correspondent Pigott joined in condemnation.

15 February: Visit of Irish bishops to Pope: Pope’s role in child abuse cover-up ignored.

11 March: row about proposed mosque at Sandhurst; council accused of racism; not challenged.

15 March: item on possible burka ban in France: reporter Zuneida Malik not objective.

It seems to us that under this heading the BBC is in breach of these principles:

2 in-depth coverage; 3 diversity; 5 challenging leaders.

Religious Programming

The BBC justifies the amount of airtime devoted to religious programmes by quoting surveys that it has commissioned. These surveys have the same flaw – the assumption (conscious or otherwise) that such programmes ought to be made in some numbers, which leads to biased wording of the questions, having the effect of producing more favourable responses than are justified. Telephone surveys, in particular, are suspect by their very nature. One such was by ICM in 2005, when the question asked was “Which of the following religions do you yourself belong to?” followed by a list of religions in which Christianity came first and “none” next to the end. It has been noted by one NSS member, a retired nurse, that in hospital admissions, the question “What is your religion?” always produces fewer “none” replies than the neutral “Do you have a religion?”

Another survey in February 2009, which the BBC claimed

... suggest[ed] that most people want religion and the values derived from it to play an important role in British public life.

Of 1,045 people questioned by ComRes, 62% were in favour.

Meanwhile, 63% of those questioned agreed that laws should respect and be influenced by the UK's religious values.

This poll was characterised by the usual bias, the use of tendentious and undefined terms, unjustified conclusions drawn from unreliable results.¹⁰

But other surveys that show widespread lack of interest in religious programmes or in religion are simply ignored, especially if the Archbishops let it be known that they are dissatisfied with the BBC’s efforts. Radio Times, 10-16 July 2010, page 71:

Sign of Good Faith

¹⁰ For a reasoned critique of this poll, see <http://www.humanism.org.uk/uploads/documents/1BHA-complaint-about-reporting-on-bbc-site.pdf>

The diagnosis: Earlier this year, the Church of England expressed concern at what it saw as a cut in religious programming across the board...

The treatment: Susannah Reid ... will present Sunday Morning Live, a new hour-long discussion show devoted to religious and ethical issues.

Taking part: Not only religious leaders and politicians in the studio.

Once more we note the routine coupling of “religion” with “ethics”.

Contrast this with the results of a *Have Your Say* question¹¹ in February this year: “Should there be more religion on television?” An NSS member calculated:

There were 157 pages of responses. And, with an average of 12 per page, that's about 1800 people writing in ... Message after message was not only saying 'no' to an increase in religious programmes, most were saying get every religious programme off - even good old Songs of Praise!

When you look at it, you see that for every one comment in FAVOUR of religious programmes on TV, there are 30 against. And these are all ordinary posters on the Have your Say site.

There were 3,814 comments, with 162 rejected. While some may have contributed more than one comment, this number should have given the BBC pause for thought before embarking on another round of commissioning religious programmes.

There are some programmes, religious or not, that are not worth airing: the kind in which a presenter walks about in front of an over-large panel of religious leaders and the odd freethinker, who face an even larger audience from whom opinions are solicited. The result is mostly an airing of prejudices, with no one given enough time to develop a point of view. The Church of England made exactly this complaint in its own submission last year.¹² This sort of programme has only one use: it fills a slot and contributes to the programme allocation for religion. When religious programmes are made in due proportion, they should at least be worthwhile for the prospective audience.

Specific Programmes

Even when atheists or freethinkers are allowed airtime to express their views, the producer often cannot resist interposing the corporation view. The 2005 programme *Losing my Religion* featured three people of different religions who had become atheists – each one followed by a member of that religion reflecting on apostasy, an aspect of the programme that the producer failed to mention to the atheist participants before they recorded their contributions.

A more recent example is the case¹³ of the misrepresentation of the views of clinical psychologist Dorothy Rowe, who

complained to the corporation that her interview on the Radio 2 programme *What Do You Believe?* had been so heavily edited that the final version misrepresented her views. ...

omitting her real view that

¹¹ <http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?forumID=7492&edition=1&ttl=20100711103024>

¹² <http://www.christian.org.uk/news/bbc-treating-religion-like-a-rare-species-says-cofe/>

¹³ <http://www.dorothyrowe.com.au/>

religious belief can cause immense misery. I often summarise this with: 'The church keeps me in business'.

Beyond Belief is an example of a long-running programme that describes itself as exploring the place and nature of faith in today's world but there is no secular equivalent exploring freethinking, rationalism or secular ethics in today's world.

Another example of a programme that lacks balance is *Sunday*. In the edition of 9 April 2006, there was an unsatisfactory interview by Roger Bolton on teaching creationism in schools, featuring the geneticist Steve Jones and evangelical Christian Sylvia Baker, former research biologist. On the one hand Jones was given no real scope to explain why evolution is not "just a theory" while on the other, Bolton was unqualified to challenge Baker's creationist assertions.

Under this heading we believe the BBC is in breach of these principles:

R1 (wider understanding of religious groups); 1 (inform etc.); 3 (diversity); 4 (challenging, innovative); 6 (take risks); 7 (special projects).

Other Programmes

After all these years, of all the items that castaways may take with them to the island in *Desert Island Discs* only a holy book is compulsory. Kirsty Young pressed the bible on David McVicar, who refused it, and she would be placated only by the substitution of the Bhagavad Gita. In an earlier programme, Sue Lawley kept nagging Joe Simpson on the subject of his atheism, apparently unable to believe that an atheist could exist in an ice crevasse. He was not pleased.¹⁴

These incidents seem to indicate that the BBC has a canteen culture of disdain for those who do not at least pretend to adhere to organised religion.

The Moral Maze is often cited by the BBC as a programme which presents the views of freethinkers. We know of no instance of a panellist undergoing a change of mind as a result of hearing the "evidence". The atheists/freethinkers on the panel are, of course, "balanced" by believers and often by the chair.

Radio 3

This network faithfully follows festivals, periods and "holy days" of the Christian calendar throughout the year with a deference as though it were an arm of the Church, yet the public as a whole is largely indifferent, and indeed largely ignorant, of most of them. While we do not object to ecclesiastical music on this station in principle, considering that a great deal of such music is broadcast throughout the year, we consider that large blocks of such programming at Christmas and Easter to be excessive.

3. Suggestions for future policy

The inscription at the entrance to Broadcasting House reads in part:

Deo Omnipotenti Templum Hoc Artium et Musarum ... Dedicant Gubernatores ...

¹⁴ http://www.noordinaryjoe.co.uk/article_2.asp

(This Temple of the Arts and Muses ... the Governors Dedicate to Almighty God)

In order to serve the full spectrum of the public, seminars should be held for programme makers and their supervisors on secularism, what it means in practice, and on the validity of non-religious opinions on matters of faith and morals. They should explore the long history of free thought and its contribution to our present freedoms in programmes such as *In our Time*, and the way in which these hard-won freedoms are being attacked by some religious groups with, in some cases, the cooperation of the government.

Above all, the mindset that gives routine deference and therefore privilege to religion and its leaders must be reshaped, so that all shades of opinion are represented equally over all. Some of the less glorious aspects of religion now abandoned could be ventilated.

But this is not the promise of the speech made by the Director General Mark Thompson on 10 April 2008 at the Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor Lecture 2008 series: *Faith And Life In Britain Today*, Westminster, London, according to these extracts, with our comments:

And yet our commitment to reflect the central role and the continuing life of traditional Christianity in the UK through programmes like The Daily Service is undiminished.

... having previously admitted, in effect, that the words "central role" are less apposite than before.

*We'll also continue to do everything we can to reflect the UK's other faiths and **to do justice to belief-systems which do not involve, or indeed deny the validity of, religious and spiritual beliefs.***

This willingness to include non-believers is seemingly belied by

*But we want to be bold. No programme, I think, has demonstrated that more in recent years than *The Passion*, which was broadcast in Holy Week this March.*

No programme more clearly points to the journey on which we've come, the journey I've been setting out this evening. [our emphasis]

The boldness, it seems, is restricted to the size of the bill for this religious drama, rather than applied to thinking outside the religious box.

And it is entirely legitimate to point out in this context that the DG is a Catholic giving a speech at a Catholic event. Should not the DG, whoever he/she is, declare an interest in this field and be recused from influencing policy?

There are frequent complaints from organised religion that the BBC does not do enough to reflect religious viewpoints in the country. For example:

25 May 2010: The BBC should appoint a religion editor for news to improve its coverage of faith issues, a leading broadcaster and journalist said tonight.

Roger Bolton, who presents the BBC Radio 4 Feedback programme, and at least in the past has headed a production company that has supplied material to the

*BBC, told an awards ceremony in London that the religious perspective was often "bafflingly absent" both on air and behind the scenes in editorial discussions.*¹⁵

We find such an analysis completely baffling.

4. Statistics on Religious Belief and Affiliation

Between 1980 and 2010, church attendance has nearly halved (11% of population down to 6%).¹⁶ Even at Christmas and Easter, traditionally the fullest times for churches, few people now attend - only 5% at Christmas and less than 3% at Easter¹⁷.

A Home Office survey shows that, when people were asked 'Which of the following things would say something important about you, if you were describing yourself?', religion came ninth¹⁸.

An ONS survey found that while 22% of people described themselves as Church of England, 45% said they had no religion¹⁹.

A further indication is that recent research by Ofcom found that only 6% per cent of viewers watch religious programmes on the main TV channels - the lowest score of any programme genre. When Ofcom asked viewers which type of programme was most important to them, only 5% said religion²⁰.

The NSS has been making complaints along these lines since the 1960s. Since that time CofE membership has dropped from 2.7 million to 1.1 million now, and mass attendance has halved in the last 20 years. Yet religious broadcasting seems not to have dropped in any significant way.

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

The National Secular Society does not require any of this consultation to be kept confidential.

www.secularism.org.uk

¹⁵ <http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/Top-broadcaster-calls-for-BBC.6318384.jp>

¹⁶ Religious Trends: Church Attendance in Great Britain, by Country and Gender, 1990-2050 Table 12.6.1

¹⁷ <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/statistics/2007provisionalattendance.pdf>

¹⁸ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors274.pdf>

¹⁹ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social_Trends38/Social_Trends_38.pdf (Extract pp 189-190)

²⁰ <http://www.secularism.org.uk/whatever-the-archbishop-says-vie.html>