

BBC'S REVIEW OF "BREADTH OF OPINION"

NSS RESPONSE

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20 November 2012

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Background to this Response

The National Secular Society (NSS) was invited by Victoria Wakeley to take part in the BBC's formal review of "breadth of opinion"¹ on 16 October 2012. The following day, the NSS sent her an e-mail with 13 attachments setting out a history of the NSS's complaints against the BBC, none of which had been upheld and setting out how a number of which had been dealt with in a biased or even underhand way. In particular, it included letters of 29 April 2009, 28 May 2009 and 29 October 2009 to the BBC or the Trust in respect of *Thought for the Day*, which were passed to Stuart Prebble who is leading the review. We request that the 17 October email be regarded as part of our formal submission.

Victoria Wakeley facilitated a comprehensive discussion on 1 November between Stuart Prebble, and both Terry Sanderson and Keith Porteous Wood (NSS Executive Director). The following is the supporting material that the NSS undertook to provide arising from the points discussed.

¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2012/breadth_of_opinion.html

Our concerns in summary:

1. The BBC has still not shaken off the influence of Lord Reith in its over-respectful approach to religion.
2. Thought for the Day is a prime example of the privileging of religion by the BBC and a disgraceful demonstration of the lack of impartiality when it comes to non-religious voices.
3. The Religion and Ethics Department concentrates almost entirely on religion. It has been caught out on several occasions distorting interviews. Some of its output borders on proselytising and propaganda, something specifically forbidden in the BBC Trust's guidelines.
4. The BBC sometimes seems almost afraid to make challenging programmes about religion. This overcautious approach plays into the hands of those who seek to control the representation of some minority communities.
5. Muslims complain that they are not fairly represented on TV. There is some truth in this, and the BBC should make more effort to show the true diversity of the many Muslim communities that exist in Britain.

Before we make our substantive case that the BBC is not balanced or impartial as far as religion is concerned, we should make clear that we are not in any sense suggesting that religion should be banished from the airwaves. The BBC's duty as a taxpayer-funded public broadcaster is to serve the whole community and ensure all voices are heard, and that would include religious voices.

Our principal complaint is that the BBC places a disproportionate emphasis on the importance of religion in the life of the country. Over the past fifty years there has been a dramatic drop in interest in religion – both in its influence and its practice, but this has only slightly been reflected in the BBC's output. Programmes that question or criticise various aspects of religion are broadcast, but rarely.

But there is still an underlying perception that the BBC accords religion a kind of fawning respect that no other section of society is granted.

Historical context

As BBC founder Lord Reith used the Corporation to promulgate his own religious beliefs, albeit those beliefs were more in tune with those of the nation as it was at the time. Under Reith, the BBC did not broadcast on Sunday before 12.30 pm to give listeners time to attend church, and for the rest of the day only broadcast religious services, classical music, and other non-frivolous programming. It was even called the "Reith Sunday". Meanwhile, European-based commercial

stations such as Radio Luxembourg broadcast on Sundays as on any other day. In the BBC's own biography of Reith², it says:

Reith's reputation as a hardline religious boss was cemented by events in 1929 involving his chief engineer Peter Eckersley. Popular perception has it that Reith sacked him for an extra-marital affair. It wasn't so clear-cut. Certainly Reith had a religious streak to him; one BBC interviewee in the 1920s remembers being asked by the Director-General: 'Do you accept the fundamental teachings of Jesus Christ?'

The dedication carved over the door at Broadcasting House reads (in Latin):

"This Temple of the Arts and Muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first Governors of Broadcasting in the year 1931, Sir John Reith being Director-General. It is their prayer that good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest, that all things hostile to peace or purity may be banished from this house, and that the people, inclining their ear to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the path of wisdom and uprightness."

But Britain has changed fundamentally since 1931. While 72% of the population according to the previous census identified as, in effect, cultural Christians, a significantly lower proportion regard themselves as religiously Christian and only one in 14 of the population are in church on a normal Sunday. We are now one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world - and polls are showing a very large minority (perhaps by now even a majority³) do not regard themselves as religious and are not religiously observant. They are not necessarily anti-religious – and we expect that most of them would still support the idea that *"all things hostile to peace or purity may be banished from this house, and that the people, inclining their ear to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the path of wisdom and uprightness"*, but they would be unlikely to imagine it necessary to appeal to the almighty for the delivery of such results.

The BBC's output has not remotely reflected the magnitude of this change in religious attitudes. We still have daily acts of worship on radio (Christian) and high profile slots reserved exclusively for religious voices, invariably treated with great reverence.

Unpopularity of / indifference to nearly all religious programmes

But who is watching and listening to these programmes? The *Thought for the Day* slot is a source of particular irritation for our members and, judging by the reaction whenever it is raised publicly, an irritant for the majority of those tuning into the *Today* programme, and even its presenters.

² http://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/resources/in-depth/reith_6.shtml

³ Fifty per cent of Britons now say they don't believe in God, although some of those still believe in an undefined "higher power" according to the latest *Sunday Times*, Yougov poll
http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/zksfqcd9sa/Sunday%20Times%20Results%202009-111112%20VI%20and%20Tracker.pdf

All the research into perceptions of religion in broadcasting we have seen indicates that the vast majority of viewers and listeners don't like religious programmes, don't listen to them and don't regard them as important.

- Only four per cent of viewers in a trial of High Definition Television (HD) would opt to watch religious programmes, a study found. The research carried out on Freeview in the London area in 2006 found that of all the programme categories that the 450 trial viewers would most want to watch in HD, religion comes last – by a very large margin.
- Ofcom research into viewing habits published in April 2008 asked the question: “Which of the following types of programmes, if any, would you say you watch regularly on the main TV channels?” News was first at 70%, while religion was last with 6%.
- The same report asked “Which five programme types are most important to you?” Religion scored 5%. Only 9% of viewers thought there should be more religion on TV.
- Viewers were asked what types of programming they most valued on the terrestrial channels. This found that religion came 16th out of 17.
- The same report found that religion that came 16th out of 17 in terms of what programme genres people ranked as having societal importance.
- Research from the Human Capital consultancy showed that in homes with access to Sky Television, religious programmes broadcast by terrestrial channels suffer an audience fall-off of 84%. It seems that when there is an option to switch elsewhere to something more interesting, audiences do so *en masse*.

(Sources for these statements provided on request)

An indication of just how much time the BBC apportions to religion is given in the Corporation's 2009 Annual Report. It revealed that on BBC1 there were 105 hours of religious broadcasting – 25 hours more than they had committed to. BBC3 promised five hours and delivered two. BBC 4 was committed to 15 hours and delivered 36.

Radio 4 committed to 200 hours of religious programming but in the end, unsurprisingly, delivered 223 hours. This did not take into account the large amount of religious input into programmes such as *Today*, *Woman's Hour*, *You and Yours* and other current affairs programmes and drama – where religion is portrayed as being much more the default position than in the real world.

Radio 2 promised 170 hours of religion and delivered 186. Overall, the amount of religion broadcast on BBC radio rose from 1,078 hours in 2006/7 period to 1,114 in the 2007/8 period.

As a public service broadcaster, we recognise that the BBC is required to serve the religious community too, but we believe they are given disproportionate coverage and deference.

Thought for the Day

We said that *Thought for the Day* represented what is probably the ultimate example of religious bias and blatant discrimination on the BBC. The NSS has been complaining about it since 1962 when it was known as *Lift up Your Hearts* and before that *Ten to Eight*. The discriminatory

exclusion of the non-religious without even a token equivalent alternative has become a totemic matter of public discourse.

The NSS has made numerous complaints to the BBC about the fact that this slot for religious believers to comment on the issues of the day is inserted into Radio 4's flagship news programme at a time when the audience is at its peak. We object to this prestigious three minute slot being reserved exclusively for religious voices, which immediately suggests that those who do not have religion do not have legitimate "thoughts" about the moral questions that arise from current affairs.

Furthermore, this slot – albeit it is likely edited in advance – is uncontended which is a particular concern if it is frequently used to make political points at sensitive times (for example during the right-to-die debates in Parliament), but there is no equivalent balancing slot, far less one that is uncontended and in peak time.

The same arguments can be made for Radio 2's *Pause for Thought* slot.

We have been told by the BBC Trust that they will consider complaints about individual contributions to *Thought for the Day* that might breach impartiality guidelines, but before complaints can come to the Trust they must first exhaust all the various appeals procedures within the BBC itself which is a time-consuming and frustrating business.

The NSS has made many approaches to the BBC to open up *Thought for the Day* to non-religious voices, all of which have been rebuffed. We have held meetings with Mark Thompson and with the various directors of the Religion and Ethics Department. All our requests have fallen on deaf or resistant ears.

We should make it clear that we are not, as some have suggested, asking for anti-religious voices to appear on *Thought for the Day*. It is not our desire that this slot be used to attack personal beliefs, but there is a case to be made for rationalist, non-religious voices to comment on matters of ethical importance – a view shared by presenters of the programme⁴.

It is our contention that *Thought for the Day*'s exclusivist policy may even be illegal under equality legislation. We did once try to launch a legal challenge to the programme, but it rapidly became clear that we did not have the resources to match those of the BBC, which seemed absolutely determined to resist our challenge, whatever the cost.

Following a meeting with the BBC Trust in early 2009 we launched the latest in a series of formal complaints. We did hope that that attempt, along with the many hundreds of complaints from our supporters and the general public, would finally convince the BBC that this issue needed a

⁴ <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2012-04-02/evan-davis-open-up-thought-for-the-day-to-non-believers> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/may/26/behind-scenes-today-radio-4>

rethink. Unfortunately this wasn't to be the case. In November 2009 our complaint relating to the exclusive and discriminatory nature of *Thought for the Day* was rejected by the BBC Trust⁵.

We have contended that complaining to the BBC complaints department is a mainly useless exercise. 50 years of complaints have not produced even one that has been upheld and often the responses are patronising and dismissive. You will note from the report linked to above that complaints to the BBC Trust about the BBC's internal complaints procedures were upheld, and I understand some kind of review is under way.

We were careful in our formal complaint to the Trust, already sent to you, to set out the regulatory basis, as well as the common sense and equity basis, for our complaint. Given this, our lawyers still consider the final ruling to be surprising as well as unjust.

We include as an Appendix an extract from a letter to the Trust dated 29 October 2009 showing that hundreds of respondents (the vast majority) took a similarly dismissive view to us about Mark Damazer's justification for the retention of *Thought for the Day*.

On the very rare occasions when NSS representatives are invited on to the *Today* programme we are invariably given challenging treatment by the presenters. We are often told by listeners that the presenters give us "a rough ride". We accept this, but we do mind that religious representatives are permitted to speak during what is, in effect, the same programme uninterrupted and unchallenged.

Former controller of Radio 4, Mark Damazer and the present head of religion Aqil Ahmed have both backed the decision to keep *Thought for the Day* closed to non-religious voices⁶.

Wider concerns about the Religious Broadcasting Department

Up until about 10 years ago, we were regularly invited to take part on the *Sunday* programme, and when they used to invite correspondence our letters were read out challenging the establishment line. We are well aware that our criticisms of the Religion and Ethics Department are not well received, and the NSS – even when it is the centre of a news story – is now never invited on to any of the department's programmes. This is particularly surprising given that:

1. We are interviewed on the *Today* programme and on *BBC Breakfast*, suggesting our broadcasting techniques are not an obstacle.
2. We are one of the few organisations that maintain an in-house 24/7 ISDN broadcasting facility, considerably easing the practicalities of recording, particularly at short notice.

⁵ <http://www.secularism.org.uk/bbc-trust-findings-on-thought-fo.html>

⁶ http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ipm/2009/01/thought_for_the_day_a_genuine1.shtml and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9530350/Thought-for-the-Day-will-not-be-opened-to-atheists-says-BBC-religion-chief.html> respectively.

It is a strange experience to hear our initiatives being discussed on such as the *Sunday* programme on Radio 4 without being asked to contribute (as happened with our recent high profile court challenge to prayers at local council meetings).

Proselytising

Aqil Ahmed's comments (referenced previously) about *Thought for the Day* were made during the run-up to a "major conference" on religion held in Manchester and paid for by the BBC. We question why the BBC are spending licence-payers' money on such a conference.

And if there is to be such a conference, should dissenting voices be invited or should there be a separate conference for those coming from non-religious perspective? And if there are to be specific weeks devoted to major faiths, should this similarly be at least one week devoted to scepticism, agnosticism, atheism, rationalism, losing of faith etc. And in both cases if not, why not?

In 2006, the BBC staged *The Manchester Passion*, a Christian street event which, according to the corporation, was aimed at "attracting people who don't go to church"

We wrote to the then chairman of the BBC, Mark Thompson, pointing out that the BBC's Editorial Guidelines specifically forbid religious programmes from being used to "recruit". In the letter we said: "We feel that this programme will breach the boundary between the reporting of, or broadcasting of, a religious event and actually using licence-payers' money to create a religious event, which the local clergy obviously see as an evangelising opportunity. This is not the BBC's purpose. It is specifically forbidden to do it, and for a very good reason."

We said that if the event were being staged, and paid for, by the church and the BBC was simply broadcasting it, it would probably not break the guidelines. "But using the licence-payers' money to actually stage a religious event that invites active participation from members of the public and which favours one particular religion is not acceptable. It is the church's business to recruit new members for itself, not the BBC's." We have no record of any response to our letter.

Although we accept that *Songs of Praise* is a popular programme (in religious terms) we still feel it has a strongly evangelising approach. Needless to say, the relentless religious services that are broadcast on BBC radio, also fall into this category.

Robert Pigott

The BBC's religious affairs correspondent often skews his reporting of religious events. In a recent report⁷ about the four British Christians who took their claims of religious discrimination to the European Court of Human Rights, he says:

"It seems likely that, whatever is decided in Strasbourg, Christians will soon have the right to wear crosses at work, but the judgement on their beliefs about homosexuality will be far-reaching."

This gives the distinct impression that Christians don't have a right to wear crosses at work, which is ludicrous.

This is not the first time we have had occasion to complain about Mr Pigott's fawning approach to reporting religious affairs, which concentrate very much on the religious leaders' line, almost invariably ignoring the perspectives of both the non-religious and religiously unconcerned, far less the vast majority of those in the pews whose views on sensitive social issues are at complete variance with their church (particularly the Catholic Church, as polls during the Pope's visit showed).

The Religion and Ethics Department costs (according to a Freedom Information Request made by one of our members) somewhere in the region of £10 million per annum. It also uses funds from other departments of the BBC. *The Manchester Passion* referred to above was produced by the Drama department.

Propaganda

The Religion and Ethics Department has been caught out on several occasions "fixing" pre-recorded interviews to fit in with the programme's agenda.

The renowned psychologist Dorothy Rowe had occasion to complain about an interview she gave to the Religion and Ethics Department which was subsequently doctored. Details can be found in the footnote⁸.

As President of the National Secular Society, I too, was invited to take part in the same programme, and suffered the same treatment. Although I did not complain formally, the long interview I gave was reduced to a couple of sound-bites, neither of which represented the opinion I had expressed. More details are given in the footnote⁹.

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19472438>

⁸ <http://www.dorothyrowe.com.au/articles/websites/item/220-bbc-apology-1-introduction>
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/4217646/BBC-forced-to-apologise-for-misquoting-depression-expert-Dorothy-Rowe.html> is

⁹ <http://www.secularism.org.uk/bbcs-expensive-religious-affairs.html>

We have recently come across another complaint¹⁰ about the way the Religion and Ethics Department often strays from the rigorous standards of impartiality that pervades (or should pervade) the rest of the BBC.

In other contexts such distortion would be regarded as dishonest propaganda. There is no evidence that anyone was disciplined for these lapses.

Pope's visit

Another example of disproportionate attention being given to religion was during the Pope's visit to Britain in 2010.

In its saturation and sycophantic coverage, which must have cost millions of pounds, there were twelve and a half hours on BBC1 and BBC2, with Radio 4, Radio 5 Live and other BBC TV, radio and online services adding more hours to the overkill. ITV, on the other hand, did not interrupt its regular schedules for papal events, but covered the visit in its news bulletins and had a *Tonight* special looking at how the sex abuse scandal has affected perceptions of the Church.

In addition to the blanket live coverage during the papal visit on the BBC, there were some current affairs programmes looking at the different aspects of the Catholic Church.

There was also a wide range of papal-themed documentaries. BBC2 aired two documentaries, *Benedict: Trials of a Pope* and *Newman: Saint or Sinner?* fronted by Ann Widdecombe, plus highlights of the trip in *The Pope's Visit*.

BBC 4 screened *Vatican – The Hidden World of God's Servants* and Radio 4 aired *The Pope's British Divisions*, plus highlights of the beatification of Cardinal Newman.

Radio 2 broadcast a special hour-long edition of *Sunday Half Hour* from a vigil in Hyde Park, while Radio 5 Live had "extensive" coverage led by Shelagh Fogarty and including live broadcasts of the Pope's arrival in Edinburgh on Thursday 16 September and of his first mass the same day during 5 Live Drive.

Fogarty also presented 5 Live *Breakfast* from Twickenham, where Pope Benedict was staying, with "live coverage of his official engagements throughout the day", plus broadcast of the final mass of the visit. The BBC said it "will also be covering other events during the papal visit on the BBC News Channel".

This ridiculous over-egging was preceded by polls showing widespread indifference to the papal visit¹¹.

It was also preceded by a visit by the-then Director General of the BBC, Mark Thompson, to the Vatican, where all this was arranged.

¹⁰ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/jmacmillan/100067238/>

¹¹ <http://www.secularism.org.uk/poll-shows-massive-indifference.html>

Mr Thompson is a high-profile Catholic¹² who appears to have let his personal enthusiasm override his judgment in this instance.

Despite all this hype and the massive cost, an official poll taken a year later by ORB showed 29% did not remember the visit, and of those that did, the highest perceptions were about the extent of TV coverage and its cost, rather than any content, and 91% thought the visit had made “no difference” to their “own personal spiritual values”.

During the visit, the NSS and others organised the biggest protest against a papal visit ever seen, anywhere in the world. As our own video coverage shows¹³, more than 20,000 people took to the streets in a parade and rally. This received a few minutes of coverage on the BBC, much of it critical.

Controversial Religious Issues

On the credit side, Mr Thompson took the decision to broadcast *Jerry Springer – the Opera* in the face of massive religious demands to cancel it. In fact, *Jerry Springer – the Opera* was not about religion at all and for those who actually saw it, it was clearly about the cruelty of reality TV, using religious metaphors to make its point. The whole furore was generated by the misrepresentation of one man, Stephen Green of Christian Voice, and it is to the BBC’s credit that it stuck to its guns.

However, I fear that if the programme arrived on the schedulers’ desk today, it would not be broadcast, such is the over-sensitive approach to religious issues. Islam is even more problematic.

Mr Thompson has said: “Muslims in a majority Christian country may already feel in other ways isolated, prejudiced against, and ... they may well regard an attack on their religion as racism by other means”. Thompson agreed with the statement that he “wouldn’t dream of broadcasting something comparably satirical if it had been the Prophet Mohammed rather than Jesus.”¹⁴

We feel strongly that the point has been reached where even if legitimate criticism is due, the BBC would be reluctant to make it too forceful. We have the feeling that the BBC recoils from confrontation on controversial religious issues.

In August this year, the BBC Trust upheld a complaint against Jeremy Paxman on *Newsnight* when he had used the words “hogwash” and “myth” in relation to religion during an interview with Richard Dawkins, and suggested that biblical literalists were “stupid”. In the context of the interview¹⁵, these seemed like reasonable comments, but Lord Patten, a prominent Catholic, who was brought in to rescue the Pope’s visit when planning began to disintegrate, thought otherwise.

¹² <http://www.nycreligion.info/?p=6589>

¹³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gOVN2uEm8Q>

¹⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/mar/14/one-rule-jesus-another-muhammad>

¹⁵ <http://www.secularism.org.uk/blog/2012/08/has-the-bbc-trust-killed-vigorous-debate-about-religion-on-our-national-broadcaster>

If even such mild criticism can bring down the wrath of the BBC Trust, what hope is there for any kind of balanced debate about the place of religion in our society?

The attempt to create a gentle satire on Muslim life with the sitcom *Citizen Khan* was, predictably, attacked by the usual Islamic voices that seek to control completely the perception of Muslims in this country. Anything that does not accord with their vision of what “a Muslim” should be is branded “Islamophobic” and that is the end of the debate.

But given that the “Muslim community” in this country is not monolithic any more than any other community, we need the BBC to reflect this variety much more strongly in order to challenge the stereotype of all Muslims being deeply religious and bordering on the fanatical.

To break that stereotype, Muslims have to be shown in all their diversity. Some of them are deeply devout, but (as we know from personal experience) others live a secular life, going to the pub and not necessarily the mosque. We know that not all Muslim women are shrouded in veils and many are independent and ambitious for their careers. *Eastenders* has made a start on that, but much more needs to be done.

We need to see all of that, but it won't happen when Islamist voices dominate the conversation and threats from repressive quarters lead to programmes being cancelled or to self-censorship that ensures interesting and challenging programmes never get made.

Our own observations, and informal discussions with BBC staff who were involved, confirmed our suspicions that pressure from the Catholic Church ended an important BBC investigation into the activities of Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor when he was Bishop of Arundel and Brighton. He was responsible for covering up the activities of a persistent and notorious paedophile priest, Michael Hill, and moving him around from one diocese to another.¹⁶

Why was this investigation curtailed? Why did it suddenly disappear, literally, overnight?

The BBC needs to be much more courageous in resisting knee-jerk religious protest over anything that is even remotely critical.

¹⁶ http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/archive/features/paedophile_priests.shtml

Appendix

Extract from our letter to the Trust of 29 October 2009

10 No reference to Mark Damazer's Thought for the Day: "a genuinely difficult question" can fairly be included in the material for the adjudicators without noting that less than one in six responders on the website supported his attempted justification for retention, compared with over five in six that specifically did not. Indeed, the adjudicators might find the frustration verging on anger expressed in the responses to be both revealing and relevant - reactions to which Mr Damazer seems unaccountably oblivious.

We suggest that the reason Mr Damazer finds the question so "genuinely difficult" is simply because he seemingly feels he needs to both justify the unjustifiable and ignore the overwhelming weight of listener's opinions. Why he feels these needs is a question that should perhaps be pursued, and at the same it may be thought germane to check whether he disclosed to the Trust (as we feel sure he must have done) that the justification he proffered was one that had been so comprehensively rejected on such a large scale by respondents. We assume that the BBC Trust expects responses of *uberrimae fidei* from BBC employees, especially those with such overarching responsibilities.

His statement prompted over 500 responses and we notice that some supporters of Mr Damazer's position, presumably for want of a valid counter-argument, suggested the many critical responses resulted from an orchestrated campaign on our part in response to Mr Damazer's article, of which I was not even aware. We categorically deny this and ask that convincing corroborative evidence be required of any such assertions before they are given any credence by the Trust. (We have provided supporting evidence separately to the Trust for the "one in six" figure.)

We found the tone of Mr Damazer's statement patronising in the extreme and betraying a bias to one section of the community that was inappropriate for someone charged with even-handedness. We would like the adjudicators to be invited to consider that had this statement been made about the exclusion of Jewish, black, gay or disabled listeners, the complaint would have taken on a very different complexion.

Mr Damazer's statement fails to justify the existence of a slot for "spiritual" reflection in the middle of a news programme in the first place, let alone one made by a different department.