

The BBC is overdoing religion

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New figures show that the BBC is devoting hundreds of hours of programming to religion each year. NSS president Terry Sanderson argues that more of its scarce resources should be spent elsewhere.

In its recently published annual report, the BBC reveals the amount of time it devotes to religion on its TV and radio channels. This year's figures are:

BBC1 - 88 hours (last year 92 hours)

BBC2 - 73 hours (last year 50 hours)

BBC 4 - 20 hours (last year 24 hours)

Radio – 574 hours (last year 573 hours)

The corporation, as we know, is under severe financial strain and needs to make savings in all areas. Surely it is sensible to put most of its resources into programmes that people actually want to watch.

That, quite clearly, doesn't include religion. The audiences for these programmes are often so small that they can't be measured by the usual methods.

Despite this, the BBC is regularly attacked by religious interests for not taking its religious programming seriously and, in fact, reducing its religious output. This claim was given a new impetus earlier this year when it was discovered that the BBC was closing its religion and ethics department in Salford. This followed the announcement that BBC1's only vaguely popular religious show, *Songs of Praise*, was being outsourced to an independent producer.

The usual voices were raised in protest. Roger Bolton, who presents programmes for the BBC and has long campaigned for more religion on TV, said that the corporation is "not fit for purpose". In the *Radio Times* last year, he wrote: "How can young people and immigrants to this country understand the UK without learning of the crucial role Christianity has played in the formation of its political structures and culture?"

"How can people feel they're being welcomed as equal citizens if we don't bother to find out about what is often the most important part of their life, their faith? How can we understand what's going on in the Middle East, for example, without knowing about the Shia/Sunni split?"

"This is not about promoting faith; it's about promoting knowledge and understanding – surely a central role of a public service broadcaster? But the BBC is coming up short."

This is, of course, the familiar argument often put forward by the churches that there is an urgent need for more "religious literacy" in Britain. Religion is so important, they say, that we must all know much more about it.

But, of course, "religious literacy" is never defined and as we have seen in schools, it can very quickly morph into evangelising and proselytising.

The Bishop of Leeds, Nick Baines, is another familiar voice in the push to get more religion on the BBC. He says "the loss of a specialist department in television poses serious questions for the BBC" and his colleague the Bishop of Norwich, Rt Revd Graham James, said: "It is a failure of the BBC as a public-service broadcaster."

Meanwhile, Ofcom – which has been charged with regulating the corporation's output – is to publish a report in the autumn outlining what it expects from the BBC. In a statement, Ofcom says: "Our plans would mean that BBC One and BBC Two would have tougher requirements for showing arts, music and religious programmes, including new requirements to show some during peak viewing times."

Interesting programmes about religion's role in the world - and its frequently dire consequences - are to be welcomed. They will fulfil the BBC's remit to educate the nation. But they must approach the topic objectively, and not be used as a propaganda platform. If you listen to *The Sunday Programme*, which is supposed to be a magazine exploring religious topics in the news, you will hear direct evangelising [slipping in](#) (8m 22s in).

The latest reasoning for demanding more programmes that people don't want to watch is that "religious literacy" is at an all-time low and needs to be increased. The theory goes that because religion is tearing the world apart we all have to know much more about it, we have to know about the theology of various sects and denominations so we can understand why they are murdering each other.

And, of course, in schools, children have to know how to worship and have their heads filled with the idea that religion is essential, important, all-pervasive and inescapable. (Fortunately, their own lives tell them that they can get along very nicely without religion, thank you, and nothing would induce them to start going to church).

Personally speaking, I don't want to know anything more about religion – nothing at all. I don't think that my life would be diminished one iota if I knew nothing whatsoever about it. It has no meaning for me, and as an increasing amount of research is showing, has little meaning for many, if not most, other people in this country.

Why do we have to know about it? If we aren't going to follow it, aren't going to observe it and even consider it to be slightly off the wall, why do we have to educate ourselves about its theology? Isn't it enough to know that its adherents are tearing the world asunder?

If religions want to go to war over tiny differences in theology, there is nothing I can do about it. As recent research has shown, people with dogmatic beliefs hold them on [emotional grounds](#) and they will not be shaken by any logic or reason. That does not mean that the rest of us have to endure their obsessions.

The BBC is a public service broadcaster (unlike ITV, which was long ago relieved by Ofcom of the requirement to provide any religious programmes at all). As such the Corporation must seek to serve all sections of society. It is therefore not unreasonable that religious people should get a look in.

But it should be a proportionate look in; 574 hours of radio is surely more than enough for any special interest group. Religion no longer holds a special place in the hearts of large [swathes](#) of the

British people and that should be taken into account when allotting scarce BBC resources.

I don't think it is the duty of the BBC to provide ill-defined "religious literacy" to a nation that doesn't want it. And the BBC should not be used as a platform for proselytising at public expense.

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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