

**Submission on**  
**Religious Broadcasting**

**to**

**the BBC Charter Review Committee of the House of Lords**

**from**

**the National Secular Society**

**10 October 2005**

# Contents

0	Summary of conclusions and recommendations	3
1	The purpose of religious broadcasting	5
2	Justification of our conclusions	7
2.0	Misconceptions about secularists and non-theists	7
2.1	Examples of the BBC's neglect and misrepresentation of non-theists	8
2.2	Examples of BBC bias towards religion	10
2.3	Examples of the BBC's poor handling of complaints	11
Appendix A	: BBC Staff's concerns about over emphasis on religion	13
Appendix B:	Statistics on religious belief, and the absence of it	15

## **O. Conclusions and recommendations**

[References to other parts of this Submission are in parentheses.]

**A** *Do different faiths (including no faith beliefs) figure sufficiently in BBC programmes and services?*

**We conclude that**

1. on radio there is more than sufficient (indeed, we consider, excessive) programming allocated to religious groups, given the proportion of *active* religious adherents in the population, which is quite low. (Appendix B)
2. on television the existing programmes are too often of “dumbed down” and are lacking in scepticism in the objective sense of that word; (2.1.08, 2.1.09)
3. on both radio and television religious groups are privileged and receive too much deference even during “secular” programmes such as *Today*; (2.2.5, 2.2.6)
4. on both radio and television the non-faith or secular humanist viewpoint is ignored, misunderstood, neglected or misrepresented in a negative way; (2.1 as a whole) particularly given they form a significant proportion of the population -at least three times as much as the total adherents of minority faiths. (Appendix B)
5. Nearly all programmes about religious beliefs or lifestyles are allocated to a theist perspective while practically none are allocated to a non-theist viewpoint, and of the few that are they treat a non-theist perspective as almost pathological, requiring some better qualified, inevitably religious, person to speak for them or explain their behaviour. (2.3.2)

**B.** *How should faiths (including no faith beliefs) be represented in BBC programmes, services and governance?*

**We accept that:**

1. programmes that are religious rituals/services have a place in BBC schedules since worshippers are also licence payers;
2. there is a need for informative and educational programmes about religions; (2.1.13)

**but we recommend that:**

1. **programming that tends towards proselytising should be removed from the schedules, except a bare minimum of broadcasting time being devoted to worship until digital channels become available to make it practical for the existing public service broadcasting requirements for religious programmes to be cancelled; (1.1)**
2. **given the continuing increase in the number of people with no religious belief, the number of religious programmes especially on Radio 4 should be reduced; (app. B)**

3. programmes dealing with the role of different faiths in the community and the world should be made without deference or excessive sensitivity, should be objective and not automatically exclude non-theist views; (1.4)
4. similar programmes<sup>1</sup> should be made showing how humanists live their lives without religion, or how non-theists approach moral problems of our time without invoking the divine;
5. the BBC should commission programmes for the general viewer and broadcast on mainstream channels at popular times (rather than be relegated to BBC4) that dispassionately examine the history and claims of religions even though it may cause discomfiture to some faith groups;

C. *What more can the BBC do the better to involve the public in its decision-making?*

**We recommend that:**

- The equality of religion and other belief systems has been accepted by the government in several strands of legislation, and the population as a whole is little influenced by religious leaders or concepts. Rather than pay lip-service to the foregoing, the BBC should accept this wholeheartedly and reflect this balance in the way they treat the non-religious and make programmes (2.2 as a whole)
- The special interest lobby group known as the Central Religious Advisory Committee should be abolished, or at the very least, reorganised to take account of non-theist viewpoints in a way that broadly reflects the proportion of the population; (2.2.1)
- The BBC reviews (again) the way in which it deals with complaints; (2.3)
- That we should no longer keep referring clumsily to “belief and non-belief” when discussing these matters, which simply underlines the differences, but use the more egalitarian *Weltanschauung*.

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D. **The brief – two concerns relating to the consultation itself.**

1) We note that the question asks “*Do different faiths (including no faith beliefs) figure sufficiently...*”. We are disturbed that the question itself seems to be biased in that it does not seek to find out whether anyone considers different faiths (including no faith beliefs) to figure excessively.

2) We note in passing that we find the description “*no faith beliefs*” to be less than appropriate. Most if not all of those without religious beliefs – particularly Atheists - would not consider that their position was a belief of any description.

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<sup>1</sup> presented by secularists and humanists, so that they can make their own case, instead of having their philosophy filtered through someone who either doesn’t understand it or wants to deliberately misrepresent it.

# 1 The purpose of religious broadcasting

1.0 Recently the BBC has been approached by the churches for more time to be allocated to “religious broadcasting”. On the face of it, not an unreasonable request, until one asks the question, “What is the purpose of religious broadcasting?” Is it one or more of the following:

- a) to bring the word of God to a wider audience;
- b) to boost the commitment and understanding of the faithful;
- c) to bring the church to the housebound;
- d) to comment on current events and social attitudes from a religious perspective;
- e) to educate the public in the beliefs, traditions and history of world religions ;
- f) to subject the history and beliefs of the religion to a professionally competent and objective examination for the education of the public, particularly including the faithful.

1.1 Bearing in mind that the BBC is publicly funded, then from a secular (see 2.01 below and ) viewpoint purposes (a) and (b) are entirely inappropriate, since it is not legitimate for the state or its institutions to promote a religion, since this would lend legitimacy to one set of beliefs rather than another, beliefs which are only a matter of opinion with no basis in fact. The state and its institutions’ obligation under Human Rights legislation to guarantee freedom of worship does not extend to require the financing of or other support for the churches. Existing BBC guidelines already warn against open proselytising. In any case, given the number of sects and denominations, each convinced of its own supremacy and certainties, the entire output of the BBC would probably not be enough to accommodate all of them to their satisfaction. And, having agreed to include some religions, it is not clear on what democratic basis other more extreme religions, sects or cults are to be excluded. If there were no religious broadcasts on the BBC, such questions would not arise.

1.2 Some measure of the deliberate and entirely incorrect overstatement of the importance religion is contained in the Governors’ report of a seminar the BBC instituted *Taking Belief Seriously* which took place on 13th May 2005, but to which no secular or humanist group was invited to send a representative, despite a request by at least one to do so. The Report, a *Summary of The BBC Governors’ Seminar On Religion*<sup>2</sup> contained the following, we consider to be partial, passages:

“4 IN 5 PEOPLE IN THE UK AND WORLDWIDE CLAIM A RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

“Only 1.1 billion of the world's 6 billion inhabitants describe themselves as non-believers. And a surprising 77% of people in the 2001 UK census identified themselves with a faith-group (23% didn't answer or said they had no religion).

“So though active involvement in religion is still declining in Britain, a strong sense of religious identity persists.

**(our emphasis) “And levels of participation mustn't be underestimated . . . ”**

This seems to overlook the fact that, according to a Home Office Survey church attendance has been in decline in each of the last six decades, and according to a according to an Home Office survey<sup>3</sup> religion is only regarded as ninth in importance to self identity, although the ranking is

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bbcgovernors.co.uk/docs/reviews/taking\\_belief\\_seriously.html](http://www.bbcgovernors.co.uk/docs/reviews/taking_belief_seriously.html) 1B

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors274.pdf>

higher among those from minority ethnic backgrounds. It is curious that, having embarked on such an exercise, neither the Governors or their staff were aware of these facts, because had they been so they would have presumably alluded to them in the interests of balance.

1.3 As for (c) – services for housebound worshippers, we do not object to this kind of programme until alternative digital or satellite services become widely available at a reasonable cost, but this is probably just a few years away. Under d) – comment on current affairs - we should expect any such programmes to include a salutary and substantial contribution from freethinkers as well as from faith groups.

1.4 Purpose (e) – educating the audience about different faiths - is entirely legitimate as long as the presentation is objective and cultural rather than confessional. Programmes where this is being done in excessive detail or at great length and/or being frequently repeated will suggest they should be categorised under (a) or (b) as proselytising. In the case of (f) – objective examination of a faith - we doubt that any programme, on TV or radio, that subjected a religion to close scrutiny would go without challenge or even riots. The very few programmes that have done no more than dip toes in this water caused consternation in some quarters. Yet this purpose is entirely legitimate, too.

1.5 If the above is accepted, then the type of programme that would be broadcast under secular rules need not be assigned the special category of “religious” at all, but be part of the mainstream documentary and current affairs. A temporary exception, pending technological developments, would be programmes for housebound worshippers.

## 2 Justification of our conclusions

### 2.0 introduction – misconceptions in the BBC that religious observance is the norm in our society

Whether it is Remembrance Day or commemoration of a great disaster, the public event, attended by the great and the good on behalf of all of us, almost invariably takes the form of a Christian service, thus automatically excluding non-Christians and unbelievers. A recent example was the funeral of Robin Cook, which took place in St Giles' Cathedral. Despite the fact he was an atheist, the *Today* programme called it “defiantly secular”.

### 2.1 Some typical programmes: how the BBC neglects or misrepresents the non-theist viewpoint

#### First, radio – mostly R4.

2.1.01 Melvin Bragg's *In our time*, a discussion programme involving three experts (usually) about ideas in history which are important today, does not seem to be aware of such freethinkers as Voltaire, Diderot or Bradlaugh. Discussions of Enlightenment figures are confined to scientists and their scientific achievements, or in the case of Newton, attention may be drawn to his deep religiosity. A letter from one of our members to the producer commenting on this fact and suggesting the inclusion of big names in freethought was ignored. Indeed, when the discussion tends towards being critical of religion, obviously moving away from Bragg's script, he can almost be heard squirming as he steers the discussion towards safer ground.

2.1.02 Programmes such as *Beyond Belief*, which examines religious belief today, sometimes include a Humanist or atheist, but the presenter is an ordained minister and the token freethinker is never allowed a free run at the subject.<sup>4</sup> The former head of religious broadcasting Rev. Ernest Rhea presented an edition of the programme on 29 August 2005 in which the BBC website billed, somewhat tendentiously, we feel, as follows:

“Beyond Belief this week steps into the secular world when Ernie Rea explores the nature of non-belief and uncovers the aims and intentions of those who clamour for a society without religion. Non-believers see their tolerance as the only possible way of managing a community which is troubled by religious fundamentalism. But can't those very secular beliefs themselves be the source of dispute and disagreement? And how do believers exercise their rights if their faith has been relegated to the private sphere?”

2.1.03 During the programme the word “secularist” was misused by the two believers several times as a synonym for “atheist” or “irreligious”, despite the fact that the two secularists (one identified as an atheist, the other undetermined) were at pains to define secularism (as defined above 2.01 and see glossary) more than once. Furthermore, Rhea as chairman of the discussion showed none of the impartiality expected of such a position, and was shamelessly partisan. He, and others of similar outlook, would do well to follow the advice from the BBC seminar *Taking religion seriously* (May 2005), which recommended (our emphasis):

1K USE OF LANGUAGE

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<sup>4</sup> In discussion programmes of this type or magazine programmes such as *Sunday*, it is surprising how little is said in a five-minute interview, as those of us who have typed transcripts of them are very much aware.

All broadcasters should try to be precise in their use of religious language. Words like "fundamentalism", "conservatism", "**secular**" and "evangelical" need **expert** handling. Particular risks surround phrases (like "Islamic terrorist") linking religion with violent action. **As impartial broadcasters the BBC** should continue to be aware that language is often used as a weapon in religious conflicts.

2.1.04 The highly contentious *Thought for the Day* slot in the *Today* programme is restricted to speakers who are believers. If it is thought sensible to devote two or three minutes to a spiritual (whatever that means) contemplation of an event in the news, then this should not be the opportunity for proselytising or religio-political soap-boxing, as it sometimes is. For example, Rev. X was blatantly political in July 2004 when he demanded "explicitly Christian" legislation on prostitution. Furthermore, the contributors sometimes deliver themselves of opinions which we suspect most of the population would regard as smug or deluded, such as Ms Y on the tsunami disaster last December, or Rev. Z on the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina (names provided on request). While these opinions may be crass or ill-prepared, the BBC is careful to ensure that the speakers do not come from the full range of religious opinion, some of which may be too shocking. Why there should be an objection to a freethinker speaker is not at all clear, when – albeit very occasionally – the speaker makes no mention of God or religion and gives a view of which no freethinker would disapprove. The TftD of 3 August 2005 by Dr. Jeevan Singh Deol is an example. When we tell members of the general public that this ban still remains, most are astonished and the continuance of the ban - despite so much protest - reinforces our contention that non-believers are the last group, after homosexuals, who it is acceptable for public bodies to discriminate against, in a way that would be unthinkable for minority religious groups.

2.1.05 BBC Radio4's *Sunday* programme is broadcast every Sunday morning between 0710 and 0755, devoted to religious news of all kinds and other news on which religious opinions are expressed. Often the topics cry out for a secular viewpoint or a contrasting view to the religious one which is expressed, and indeed up to around three years ago secular or humanist perspectives were heard with reasonable regularity, even if only in letters that used to be read out. Now, revealingly, there are no letters and non-religious dissention is only very occasionally, broadcast, and even then mostly in a tokenistic way.

2.1.06 The Radio 4 programme *The Westminster Hour –The Sunday Supplement* on 2 January 2005 featured material which amounted to an attack on secularism; the programme allowed no access to secularists and misrepresented our viewpoint. Although this was an opinion piece, it was so biased that Dr Evan Harris MP was moved to make an official complaint.

2.1.07 It is also noteworthy that Radio 3 finds it necessary to follow the church calendar throughout the year. Most atheist music lovers will freely admit that much great music has been composed for church use, and do not object to its presence on R3, but there are days in the year when R3 is wall-to-wall religious music and musical worship.

#### **Next, television.**

2.1.08 Those of our members who have sampled BBC1's *The Heaven and Earth Show* on occasion have not been impressed. The treatment of the topic is shallow, with too many people asking questions which there is not enough time to answer in any sensible way. In one programme watched by a member the token Humanist was allowed to say two sentences, more or less, while other contributors made longer statements of dubious validity. At the time of writing the programme is billed to have a studio audience asking a vicar and a sitcom star questions about the paranormal.

2.1.09 Last year the BBC made a TV programme about the state of religious belief in this country, which from previous experience we expected would be fragmentary, shallow and uninformative. It was worse than expected, since one of the speakers, Dr. Jonathan Miller,

stormed out of the studio in protest at the moronic level of the programme. Later, Dr Miller was seen on BBC4 – n.b. not BBC 1 or BBC2 – presenting a series on the history of atheism, which contained little in the way of commentary on religious doctrine, let alone close examination. This sop to Cerberus has yet to be seen on either of the BBC's main channels, an example of the quarantining atheists, who seem to be regarded by the BBC as people apart, to the BBC's least watched channel, and at a late hour, is demonstrably blatant discrimination.

2.1.10 News reporting especially is supposed to be impartial, so it was unpleasant for one of our members to hear a report from News 24 on Christmas Day about Christian missionaries here and in Africa during which the commentator spoke about the 'disease' of secularism, which was a 'threat'.

2.1.11 Another of our members noticed this example (his words quoted) aimed at children, and it is not the only one:

This afternoon (24th October 2001, BBC1, 17:00) there was a disturbing example of religious proselytising on the BBC children's programme "Blue Peter". The show was a special on the subject of ancient Rome and included an account of a story where St. Peter met Jesus on the highway who persuaded him to return to the city to be crucified. The presenter told this story as though it were historically true, whilst we were shown film of an actor portraying a Christ-like figure appearing in the haze. No attempt was made to separate this from other parts of the programme which presented real historical facts about the Romans. I find it particularly disturbing that religious mythology is being presented this way in a programme aimed at children.

2.1.12 The BBC seminar on *Taking religion seriously* (May 2005) opined that

There may be wariness in British television about commissioning and scheduling dramas which are overtly religious, and contain characters who have religious motives. This contrasts with a much more accepting attitude to strong political beliefs.

and suggested making dramas with more overtly religious themes. The BBC is even more wary about making dramas with overtly atheist or humanist themes. A small but significant pointer is the nature of the funeral when a character dies: although humanist funerals are becoming more and more popular, the scene is automatically a Christian service, usually including the bizarre phrase "in sure and certain hope of the resurrection".

2.1.13 The same seminar concluded

Basic knowledge of religion is very poor in Britain.<sup>5</sup> With the expertise of its Religion and Ethics department, the BBC can help to provide much-needed basic education about the nature and history of religion.

but made no mention of objectivity.

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<sup>5</sup> Not least among the BBC's own staff!

## 2.2 Other examples of the BBC's bias towards religion

2.2.1 The BBC website has a page devoted to the Central Religious Advisory Council, which is an independent body advising the BBC on matters pertaining to religion. The list of its members does not include their religious affiliations, except through such titles as bishop or rabbi. There is in fact no secular or humanist representative on this body, although the government in several strands of legislation has established the equality of belief and non-belief.

2.2.2 In May this year (2005) the BBC Governors held a meeting about religious broadcasting, the purpose of which was apparently "to find new ways to engage the audience with religion". It is surely not in the remit of the BBC to help faith groups with their proselytising<sup>6</sup>. It does not, it seems, occur to the BBC that since the BBC's audience is clearly not interested, they should, as in any other field, make fewer programmes not more. See also Appendix B on this point.

2.2.3 In the listing of the panel assembled to discuss "Taking belief seriously" there is no mention of the religious affiliation of the members, except where it may be inferred from titles such as bishop. It appears that no member of the panel was, for example, a humanist or freethinker. We should not expect, for example, the following conclusion being admitted to the report on the seminar without protest from a humanist:

### 1E RELIGION: MORE A MORAL AESTHETIC THAN A SYSTEM OF BELIEF?

It may help to think of religion as an art-form which helps us to avoid despair and see the world in a spirit of wonder and awe. From this perspective the language of "myth" is not the same as "untruth".

Nor is religion necessarily about the supernatural. Most religious experience is less about believing in a creed than behaving in ways that change and transform, and help us see the sacred in other people.

2.2.4 In an age when "old-time religion" has lost much of its hold, it seems that with ideas such as the above the BBC is willing to join with the churches in annexing ordinary decent human impulses and the emotions generated by good art and the natural world.

2.2.5 A Religion and Ethics newsletter this year listed a variety of religious festivals, Christian, and non-Christian, with URLs for explanatory web pages. It seems that the BBC sees itself more and more as an agency for promoting religious bodies.

2.2.6 A BBC report looking at impartiality in representing religions (Impartiality Review July 2004) mentioned atheists once in a statistics section and humanists once in a quote from an evangelical. While it may be argued that the report was about religion, that misses the point – why isn't the BBC considering its partiality / impartiality across the whole range of belief systems? In other words, *Weltanschauung*<sup>7</sup>, rather than belief, non-belief, faith, atheism etc.

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<sup>6</sup> It seems, according to the DG, that "The seminar was never intended to encourage or assist the BBC in "proselytising for religions"", but governors turning up to the meeting with that phrase in their heads would find it difficult to engage with non-belief.

<sup>7</sup> Approximately "world outlook"; no English equivalent, as in the case of *Schadenfreude*, another German word in common use

## 2.3 the BBC's handling of complaints about religious programmes

2.3.1 Complaints about misrepresentation of the secular viewpoint are ignored or fobbed off with a form letter, or if there is a reply, it frequently misrepresents the nature of the complaint. We are told that since most of the output of Radio 4, for example, is “secular”, we have no reason to complain (see 2.3.4 below). This interpretation of the word “secular” in this context is, of course, disingenuous and self-serving.

2.3.2 Sometimes the BBC reminds us of *The Moral Maze*<sup>8</sup>, a discussion programme in which four panellists interview “witnesses” on the topic of the day. Two of the panellists are usually freethinkers or atheists. Leaving aside the main problem of this programme, the fact that at least two panellists usually have entrenched black and white views and never change their opinions as a result of the discussion, This is just one programme to set against many others where the faith position goes unchallenged. When one of our members wrote to the Religion and Ethics department asking them to name one single programme in which humanists, freethinkers and atheists could put forward their points of view in like manner uninterrupted, he received no reply - for there is no such programme. Even less likely on present form is the prospect of programmes made by freethinkers themselves.<sup>9</sup>

2.3.3 Another case in point is the reception given to complaints about the restriction of *Thought for the Day* to believers. The obdurate refusal of the BBC last year to give proper consideration to the complaints of secularists on this matter should be a cause for shame, particularly since the BBC misrepresented the steps it had taken in dealing with the complaint.<sup>10</sup> Alan Bookbinder, the Head of Religion and Ethics, and reportedly an agnostic, had earlier - it seems - expressed the attitude of the BBC management when he wrote in a letter to Daily Telegraph, 23 July 2003 (our emphasis – and a further example of an attitude which would be unthinkable if directed by employees of a publicly funded corporation towards any other minority as our previous objections have to it have resulted in neither apology nor retraction):

Contributors are not dropped from Thought for the Day for being "too religious", but for failing to meet the slot's exacting standards. And our recent success **fighting off the atheist lobby** demonstrates that it is still very much a religious slot.

2.3.4 An example of the way in which the BBC simply does not understand (wilfully?) complaints from secularists is the answer from a Religion and Ethics producer in reply to a complaint the *Pause for Thought* (R2) contained only religious viewpoints (our emphasis):

“The answer to your query is that because *Pause For Thought* and *Thought For The Day* are part of the BBC's religious output, it would not be appropriate to give a platform in these slots to **anti-religious views**. There are, of course, plenty of opportunities for the secular perspective to be expressed across the BBC's non-religious output.”

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<sup>8</sup> Invented by Rev. Ernest Rhea, then Head of Religious Broadcasting.

<sup>9</sup> The exception, Dr Jonathan Miller's series of programmes, noted elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> In a letter date 17 August 2004 to the DG, we wrote “The high profile (100+ signatories reading like an extract from *Who's Who*) formal complaint was rejected on air the morning after it was sent, before it could possibly have been considered in an impartial way. One of our Honorary Associates, Polly Toynbee, was later misled by a senior executive at BH claiming that the Governors had seen and rejected our complaint. She was so affronted by the episode, she wrote about it in the *Guardian*.”

This output includes, we contend, a substantial and increasing proportion of religious proselytisation, (which we consider to be verging on subversive). What is not mentioned in the above answer is that such uncontested slots are used to voice anti-secular views.

Of course, humanists and atheists allowed access to these slots would not put forward anti-religious views, and that is not what was being requested. The DG himself is content to replicate similar excuses (21 September 2004):

The non-religious approach to life has been regularly featured on Belief on Radio 3, The Heaven and Earth Show on BBC One, and Sunday, Beyond Belief and The Moral Maze on Radio 4.

- without, of course acknowledging that the freethinkers in these programmes are all carefully corralled by believers. It is worth repeating that there are no programmes on the BBC (radio and main TV channels) which humanists and atheists have entirely to themselves: this is not the case for the religious.

2.3.5 Many of the BBC's staff also acknowledge that the Corporation favours religion excessively. Evidence of this is shown in Appendix A.

## **Appendix A – The BBC staff’s attitude to the Corporation’s stance on religion.**

BBC’s own staff oppose discrimination against atheists exclusion from TftD in their own house magazine, *Ariel*:

### **Extracts from *Ariel***

#### **28/1/03, P11 -Second Thought**

Within the BBC values framework, it states that we, as an organisation, should 'make sure our output tests all points of view, and gives voice to a wide range of opinions'.

How does this sit with Radio 4's Thought For The Day' The programme continues to disallow atheists from expressing their beliefs. Will the programme makers be changing their policy in light of the newly published values?

#### **Gavin Lennon, Hutchison 3G project**

#### **4/2/03, P10 - Why we must keep faith with format**

I do not think the BBC is failing atheists by excluding them from Thought for the Day (January 28). This item is of a religious nature and atheism is an anti-religious viewpoint. I do not recall seeing members of the Flat Earth Society on The Sky at Night, pro-hunting positions on wildlife programmes, or those who wish to ban boxing on the BBC's sports output, so why should those who are opposed to God expect space in programmes expressing spiritual values?

If this argument seems less than compelling to atheists, they can console themselves in the knowledge that the rest of the BBC's message is generally anti-Christian, atheists getting the last word, the best questions, and the most heroic positions. God is usually left with only the halt, the lame, the mentally confused and the inadequate to speak for him.

As a parting note, I'm left wondering exactly what kind of thought for the day atheism has to offer. I can't see despair or defeatism or self-pity going down too well at that hour in the morning.

#### **John Davis, senior archives researcher**

#### **P10 Thought-Provoking**

John Davis' sour and mean-minded attack on atheists is another great argument for our inclusion in Thought for the Day (February 4). Not that we needed one.

TftD is not a religious item. In practice it is a daily piece about ethics and morality. Restricting it to the religious maintains the fiction that one must have religion to have morality.

Where's the 'despair' in knowing you have just one life and living it to the full? Where's the defeatism in working to improve your world for those around you and those who follow you? Where's the self-pity in realising that, without someone to wipe your slate clean, you alone can take responsibility for your actions?

Recently there was much talk about making TftD less trite'. May I humbly suggest that this could be achieved by inviting contributors who have to think hard about their morals, rather than those who have them dictated by a very old book.

#### **Colin Hazelden, BBC North Yorkshire**

May I reassure John Davis that I suffer no anguish whatever in finding no need for a supernatural explanation of the world? Nature is just as astonishing, beautiful and fascinating whether we believe that it's part of an unfathomable plan, or that it just blunders along on its own. Tragedy and suffering are neither explained nor lessened by the proposition that they serve a greater being's hidden purpose.

#### **Martin Young, studio and location group**

Atheism is an empowering philosophy which values reason over ignorance, enquiry over acceptance. That's why theists have always striven to devalue and censor it. How sad that people like John Davis and the producers of Thought for the Day are still fighting the battles of the Middle Ages.

**Richard Crompton, BBC Four news**

John Davis asks why those opposed to God should expect space in programmes expressing spiritual values? This is the Today programme you're talking about, right? And since when are atheists opposed to God, I thought that was Satanists.

As an incredible parting shot he says he can't see 'despair, defeatism or self-pity going down too well' in the slot. There's a guy who stands at Oxford Circus every day with a megaphone who says pretty much the same thing, judging people he knows nothing about.

**Andrew Badley, Henry Wood House**

John Davis says that he doesn't understand why those 'opposed to God' should expect airtime in a 'spiritual programme'. As I understand it, atheism does not exclude spirituality - individual spirituality is truly an undefinable quantity and not the preserve of organised religions.

**Greg Boraman, Digital radio development**

## Appendix B: Some statistics on religion

The BBC's recent published opinions on religious broadcasting seem to indicate that their audience ought to be interested in religious programmes and would be if only the programme makers could come up with a winning formula, perhaps using a charismatic presenter or packaging the material so that it appears less didactic, or boring. They talk to established representatives of religions, who will naturally put on the best face, but they don't seem to draw appropriate conclusions from any research done with ordinary people. But is the BBC likely to spark interest in religion in an audience that thinks it doesn't matter? While the churches would like to enlist the BBC in their efforts to reverse these trends, that, surely, is not what the BBC is for.

The following extracts from surveys taken in the last few years indicate the increasing rejection of religion in this country.

1. DfES Report no. 546 (2004) on social attitudes among young people 12 – 18:

A third of young people described themselves as belonging to a religion, with the majority, just over a quarter, belonging to a Christian religion. Two thirds did not regard themselves as belonging to any religion, an increase of ten percentage points in as many years (from 55 per cent in 1994 to 65 per cent in 2003).

As the next table shows, young people were markedly more likely than adults *not* to see themselves as belonging to a religion. **It should be noted that the overall figure for adults disguises considerable age related differences; among 18 to 24 year olds, 60 per cent said they did not belong to a religion** (as did 56 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds).

**Table 2.2 Religion**

	12-19 year olds			18 +
	1994	1998	2003	2003
	%	%	%	%
None	55	64	65	43
Christian	36	30	27	50
Islam/Muslim	3	1	5	3
Hindu	1	1	1	1
Jewish	-	-	1	1
Sikh	1	-	1	1
<i>Base</i>	<i>580</i>	<i>474</i>	<i>663</i>	<i>4432</i>

2. The Church of England is fond of quoting the 2001 census figures to the effect that more than 70% of people in England and Wales consider themselves to be Christian. It would be unwise to rely on this figure for two reasons.
  - i. As the Scottish version of the census showed, different results are obtained if you ask first about religion of upbringing, then about religion currently practised. As we noted in our consultation response to the Office of National Statistics in August 2005:
 

In the 2001 Census the Scottish questions came the nearest to being comprehensive and accurate by acknowledging the statistically significant distinction (both qualitatively and quantitatively) between the subjects' religion of upbringing and their religion at the time of the Census, and asking about both. This double question has enabled research to be undertaken which has given a much better understanding of religious belief and adherence in Scotland, such as that carried out by Prof Steve Bruce and Tony Glendinning at the University of Aberdeen.
  - ii. The framers of the question assumed that the respondents would know what was meant by Christianity (or Islam, or ...). A Reader's Digest Survey in March 2005 showed that only 48% of those questioned knew what Christians are remembering at Easter, **the** most important Christian festival. It would be interesting to do a survey to find out what those who labelled themselves Christian really know about Christianity.

Other surveys seem to yield answers at odds with the census:

3. Mori poll, May 2005 (*The Tablet* 20/5/05) shows low levels of religious belief  
24% of electors define themselves as having no religion.
4. National Centre for Social Research Research<sup>11</sup>  
65% of 12-19 year olds define themselves as having no religion
5. Welsh Omnibus Survey - June 2004<sup>12</sup> for C4C  
59% never or very occasionally attend a place of worship
6. Yougov poll 2005 Is C of E important?

In a large-scale of over 3,500 people, the C of E came 32nd out of 37 in a list of what people think defines Britishness. Only 17% of respondents thought that the Church of England was "very important" in contributing to a sense of Britishness, while 23% thought it was "not important at all".

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<sup>11</sup> Report No 564 publ 2004 *Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12 to 19 Year Olds*

<sup>12</sup> *Beaufort Research Limited, 2004* <http://www.beaufortresearch.co.uk>