

PRIVATE MEMBER'S MOTION
RELIGIOUS TELEVISION

A background paper by Nigel Holmes

“That this Synod calls upon the BBC and Ofcom to explain why British television, which was once exemplary in its coverage of religious and ethical issues, now marginalizes the few such programmes which remain and completely ignored the Christian significance of Good Friday 2009.”

Almost ten years ago I moved a motion in the General Synod on religious broadcasting which was passed by 370/0. I had discovered that whilst total output on BBC 1 & 2 in the previous ten years had increased by a half, religious output had declined by a third. At that time, though, there were still 26 religious/moral/ethical documentaries produced each year in the *Everyman/Heart of the Matter* strand by the Religious Broadcasting Department. A few years before there had been 48 per year. How many are there now even with the additional opportunities on BBC 3 & 4? And whereas then ITV still had weekly live worship, popular Christian programmes for children as well as documentaries, last year it failed even to recognise the significance of Easter Day. BBC Television did not mark Good Friday 2009. In *The Times* the Bishop of Manchester wrote: “The BBC’s flagship television channels seem to have overlooked Good Friday this year...many people want an appropriate marker of religious significance whether it is life and death or Easter and Christmas.”

Advent last year, for the first time, was marked not by programmes celebrating or explaining this significant season but by an interview programme presented by Fern Britton. The edition featuring Tony Blair certainly captured the headlines but was this yet another indication that the teaching and devotional aspect of religious broadcasting must now bow to the celebrity culture? There seem to be ever fewer programmes which celebrate faith in the way that natural history programmes rejoice in the living world and gardening programmes aim to encourage horticulture. Why do those in key positions seem to see religion as a problem? Is it the case that the broadcasting hierarchies are not in tune with a sizeable slice of their potential audience? A *YouGov* poll asked the question ‘Would you consider yourself to be religious?’ Of the general public 71% said ‘yes’; amongst those who work in television only 21% agreed. Some who have worked in religious broadcasting maintain that a lack of sympathy for, and ignorance of, religion leads to poor decisions in the corridors of power.

My hope is that the Synod is not perceived to be complaining but rather prompting and encouraging broadcasters to raise their horizons and so make more moving and memorable programmes which more appropriately reflect, celebrate and articulate faith.

Over the past 20 years the output of general programmes on BBC Television has doubled, yet the BBC’s own published figures show that within that period there has been a reduction in religious television output from 177 (1987/8) to 155 hours a year (2007/8). The fall on ITV has been far steeper from 110 hours a year a decade ago to next to nothing now. As A.A. Gill, recording the demise of *The South Bank Show*, put it in *The Sunday Times*, “Cultural magazine programmes have been made extinct along with religious broadcasting. ITV is to become a circus stage for the lightest of light entertainment.” (3 January 2010)

Whilst recognizing the changed ecology of broadcasting in a digital multi-channel age, why is television so different in its editorial judgement from the newspapers and magazines? *The Times* devoted a four-page supplement to Christianity each day last Holy Week. *The New Statesman’s* cover that week carried three large letters ‘GOD’ and devoted 18 pages to faith issues. Internationally, and indeed in multi-faith Britain, religion has rarely been higher on the social and

political agenda. The evening before I wrote this paper I counted five distinct stories relating to Islam on the BBC *Ten o'clock News*.

The BBC Director-General, Mark Thompson, when in charge of Channel 4, said, "It's true that there is an enormous prevailing prejudice inside broadcasting about religion. It's not really based on hatred of religion – I'm sure that exists to some degree as well – but there's a presumption that religion is boringI'm in favour of mandating religious programmes on television because it's the only way of offsetting the prejudice and making sure that religion, which is a big part of many people's lives – and goodness knows a big part of our world – is represented....Religion is pretty interesting and it is by no means obvious that religious programmes get tiny audiences." (*Not Just on Sunday, ITV, 27 June 2004*)

A little over a year ago, the BBC staff newspaper *Ariel* ran the headline "Now is the time for all of us to get religion (and get it right)". Kevin Marsh, Editor of the BBC College of Journalism, wrote "An understanding of religion and its importance in the lives of its adherents is more important to good journalism than it has ever been. Religion has played a critical role in the election of US presidents.....Religion is important in reporting social cohesion and it's difficult, if not impossible, to get beneath the surface of many under-reported communities without understanding their faiths." (*Ariel, 7 October 2008*)

It seems possible that powerful prejudice against the dissemination of religious ideas and practice has led to received wisdom in broadcasting maintaining that religious programmes lose audience. However it can be demonstrated that programmes made to high production standards, well scheduled and effectively promoted can build audience for a given time slot. Some years back *Son of God* shown mid-Sunday evening for several weeks in Lent doubled the audience. In 2008 *The Passion* attracted more than 5 million viewers and the recent much acclaimed *A History of Christianity* drew an exceptionally high audience for BBC 4. BBC Local Radio Sunday breakfast programmes tend to attract the highest audience share of the week and *Good Morning Sunday* is third on Radio 2. The audience Appreciation Index for the broadcast series from the children's hospice Helen House run by Anglican nuns in Oxford was, at 95, the highest ever recorded for BBC 2. Last year the readers of the *Radio Times* voted *Around the World in 80 Faiths* the Sandford St. Martin award. It was an outstanding example of how good religious broadcasting can show the colour, vibrancy and wonder of living religion whilst not ignoring troublesome facets of faith.

However, the regular weekly BBC Television coverage of religion consists of just two programmes, *Songs of Praise* and *The Big Questions*. The former, which is inevitably almost entirely Christian, is seldom trailed or promoted and no longer enjoys a fixed time slot which inexorably reduces the audience. The latter is an independent production for the BBC which leaves much to be desired particularly as it represents the majority of the religious output on BBC 1. The difficulty with the adversarial format of *The Big Questions* is that more than half the BBC television religious output appears to treat religion as a problem. The predecessor of *The Big Questions*, *Heaven and Earth* was far better able to reflect the rhythm of religious life in Britain. Its religious content had strengthened over the years and was at its best when it was removed. At the time it was replaced it had a higher Appreciation Index than the politics programme which preceded it. BBC 3 tackles religion rarely but tends to do so from the angle of the freak show and many of the Channel 4 programmes concerned with Christianity, in contrast to those featuring other faiths, seem to be of a sensationalist and on occasion unduly critical nature. Last May Aaqil Ahmed was appointed from Channel 4 to lead the BBC Religion and Ethics Department. His former post, Commissioning Editor of Religion at Channel 4, is not to be filled.

The Chairman of the Church and Media Network, Joel Edwards, said "There's no doubt that the BBC's specific expertise in religion has been diminished over the past few years as the television

side of the Department has shrunk". It is said that the floor space allocated by the BBC to its Religion and Ethics Department is little more than half what it was just a year ago. Whilst the balance between programmes which reflect the practice of faith and those which debate and analyze is struck satisfactorily in radio, it has in recent years been skewed towards the latter in television.

At the time of the General Synod debate in 2000, the BBC said that religious broadcasting would "develop a broader documentary portfolio" and that the Head of Religion and Ethics, would "work across the BBC to develop a cross-media editorial strategy". A new post called 'creative director for religion' was to be established. We have grown weary of such empty promises and wonder how best to lobby on behalf of the many licence fee payers who deserve better. One of the BBC's own surveys showed that 78% 'recognise Christianity as the backbone of their spirituality'. The 2001 census found that 72% of Britons called themselves Christian. There has rarely been a time in this nation's public life when an ethical critique was more needed. Where are the religious programmes which challenge our political and financial leaders from the perspective of morality, which respond to national and world events from an ethical standpoint? And where are the innovative programmes which describe faith as vibrant, engaging and exciting?

The Mothers' Union, an Anglican organisation which has long taken a keen and concerned interest in the mass media, kindly carried out a survey at my request last November. No fewer than 328 members responded. 80% believed that 'religion is generally not well covered on British television' and almost as many did not think 'the media in Britain understand the nature of my faith'. Almost two-thirds (63%) did not feel 'British television helps to promote religious understanding'. There was an overwhelming plea from 97% of respondents for worship to be broadcast on British television, more than nine out of ten felt 'BBC Television should devote more time to religious broadcasting' and 73% felt the same in relation to the commercial channels. The lack of such programmes for children and young people was bemoaned by 98% and a huge majority backed the view that Ofcom should determine the number of hours for religious television on commercial channels. People were more evenly divided as to whether the provision of satellite religious television channels should reduce the obligation on terrestrial broadcasters but eight out of ten (79%) were firmly of the opinion that BBC Radio covers religion better than BBC television.

I was pleased that the Muslim Council of Britain also completed my questionnaire. They do not consider their faith to be accurately represented on television, religion generally to be well covered nor that British television understands the nature of Islam. They are fully supportive of more time for religious broadcasting, including televised worship and programmes for children and young people. It is surely in the interests of all of us that faith is presented in ways which strengthen community cohesion, cooperation and mutual understanding - orthodox and tolerant rather than dangerous and distorted.

Ten years ago the BBC was chastened by Joan Bakewell's accusations of continual religious budget cuts year after year, ever later transmission times and overall "neglect" – her word, not mine. Melvyn Bragg, who subsequently produced a number of religious programmes for ITV, wrote to me about what he regarded as the sorry state of religious broadcasting and many missed opportunities. In 2004 he said "It [British television] seems so apologetic about Christianity." In that same interview Mark Thompson said, "It's an enormous, growing topic...It's a mistake to assume that religion is naturally something just appealing to a minority". (*Not Just on Sunday, ITV, 27 June 2004*)

So one must ask 'What has gone wrong'? There are still a few memorable religious programmes on television, more on radio and the BBC Religion and Ethics website is most impressive. There is a movement within the churches to look to the opportunities of the new media, which is to be welcomed, but for the vast majority of people their residual contact with religion remains through

print and broadcasting. It is, therefore, crucial that we continue to lobby effectively those who exercise the power to control broadcasting. We have lost so much. There is hardly any religion on television in peak time even at festivals. There is a dearth of programmes with a discernable moral or spiritual dimension aimed at young people, either on radio or on television, in spite of the advent of additional digital channels some of which are aimed at the younger listener and viewer. Where are the powerful emotional programmes which can so effectively demonstrate religion as a force for good through changed lives? As one Mothers' Union member pointed out, stories of faith based on love of neighbour could make compulsive viewing. And where is religious drama? Remember multi-award winning *Shadowlands*? Are there still producers with a passion for powerful religious television? It's profoundly disappointing that the single such 'landmark' series planned for this year *The Bible* was scrapped following BBC internal structural changes. Another drama telling the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer scheduled for Easter this year will not now be shown, nor will a major children's animation series be produced which would have told the stories of the great faiths.

Last summer Don Maclean, for 16 years presenter of *Good Morning Sunday* on Radio 2, said that "the BBC is biased against Christianity" and Professor Alister McGrath of King's College, London, sensed "disturbing attempts to remove religious voices from the public domain and privatise them, what Richard John Neuhaus called 'creating a naked public square'". (*Beyond Belief, Radio 4, June 2009*)

Into the New Quinquennium (GS 1607) hoped four years ago that "religious and faith issues [would] be given proper treatment by the BBC and other channels". Clearly in television, BBC and commercial, that has not happened. My hope is that religious broadcasting can be strengthened. It is difficult to see ITV changing tack; it is fervently to be hoped that Channel 4 does not withdraw from scheduling well-resourced religious programmes in peak time. The BBC will undoubtedly be not just the cornerstone but will become pivotal in public service broadcasting in this country. For that reason we must press the Corporation to take religion as seriously in television as it does in radio. We are truly grateful for what has been achieved over 87 years in radio and almost 70 in television. But today too much policy in the BBC appears to depend on the personal views of those in a handful of key positions. Therein lies the reason for the contrast between BBC television provision and that of BBC radio. That cannot be right.

The BBC Trust has recently carried out a consultation on BBC 1, BBC 2 and BBC 4. The companion paper for this debate prepared by the Archbishops' Council Communications Office in Church House refers to the submission on behalf of the Church of England. The Trust has more independence from the executive of the BBC than was the case with its predecessor, the Board of Governors. It is obliged to represent the interests of the Licence Fee payers. It sets policy. It has clout. It is my hope that this debate and the attendant publicity will help to influence the BBC Trust, persuading its members that not only 'public service broadcasting' but 'faith' needs to be written in rather larger letters in the years to come than in the recent past for the benefit of communities and for the good of society. There can be little doubt that the interplay of the major world faiths will be a key defining characteristic both of this nation and of the wider world in the 21st Century.

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