

PRIVATE MEMBERS' MOTIONS

TV COVERAGE OF RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL ISSUES

Paper prepared by the Archbishops' Council Communications Office as background to Nigel Holmes' motion: *'That this Synod call 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.'*

This paper briefly surveys the contemporary broadcasting context relating to public service broadcasting, details the obligations currently upon the BBC and Ofcom regarding the provision of religious programming, and offers research data on audience attitudes towards such output. It also summarises previous policies and consultation responses on the subject of broadcasting, adopted by the General Synod and/or made on behalf of the Church of England.

A significant recent contribution to discussions around the BBC's portrayal of religion was made on behalf of the Church of England by the Rt Revd Nigel McCulloch, the Bishop of Manchester, the Church's lead spokesman on communications issues, to a consultation carried out by the BBC Trust on the TV Channel Service Licences of BBC One, Two and Four, in December 2009. A number of references to this document, available in full from the Church of England website (at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/bbctrusttvchannels.doc>) are made in the following paper. This submission was covered in both the national and church press.

The submission noted the forthcoming debate at General Synod as a timely "opportunity for the subject to be deliberated with insights gained from across the Church". The debate provides a platform for discussion at a critical time for the future of public service broadcasting, including religious programming.

1. Current broadcasting context

- 1.1. The BBC is the cornerstone of the provision of public service broadcasting for UK audiences, across its TV, radio and web outputs. Its governing body, the BBC Trust, exists to ensure that the Corporation gives value for money from the licence-payer and remains free from political pressure. The BBC is keen to retain its competitive position in terms of audience numbers and appreciation of its output, maintaining that the public places a high value on the breadth of choice that comes from a thriving UK media market with the BBC, as a publicly-funded institution, at its heart.
- 1.2. Non-BBC channels with some form of duty to broadcast 'public service content' face growing pressures in delivering such content (e.g. arts, education, children's, news and religious broadcasting), which they tend to deem less profitable than other types of programming. This trend is exacerbated by rapid and ongoing changes in digital technology and industry structure, including new substitutes for scheduled television viewing (such as internet TV players), increased competition and fragmentation of

audiences. These changes have contributed to rapid declines in the price of television airtime and hence the revenue which can be earned from selling advertising space.

- 1.3. In its Second Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) Review (published in January 2009), the media regulator Ofcom concluded that ITV has strong incentives to concentrate on the most profitable programming; Channel Five is also facing similar pressures; and Channel 4's economic model is no longer sustainable. As a consequence, Ofcom considered it likely that there will be continuing pressure on the commercial public service broadcasters (ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5) to cut back on several areas of public service output.
- 1.4. Ofcom's Review argued that a new PSB model is required, centred on a strong BBC, allied with a second PSB institution centred on Channel 4. As a step towards the goal of creating a strong alternative PSB provider, the Digital Economy Bill (currently working its way through Parliament) seeks to formalise new PSB remits for Channel 4 to "participate in the making of a broad range of high-quality content that appeals to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society, and broadcast or distribute such content on a range of different delivery platforms." This public service obligation for the digital age places Channel 4 in a strengthened position to find new sources of funding; its PSB output will be monitored through an annual statement produced in consultation with Ofcom.
- 1.5. The impact of the trend outlined in 1.2 – 1.3 on the provision of PSB has been observed with disquiet through both formal Church submissions to Ofcom's Reviews of PSB and by contributions by Bishops in the House of Lords; notably the Bishop of Manchester, during a debate on Public Service Broadcasting in June 2009¹, who spoke of how "no aspect of public service programming should ever be seen as a weight around the neck of broadcasters, but rather as an opportunity to enrich the fabric of our shared society. The loss of some of that sense of responsibility and the chasing of ratings as a primary objective have led to some gaping sectors of programming which the marketplace, if left to itself, would simply not provide. In other words, there are certain definable core elements of public service content that should continue to be supported."

2. Statutory position and regulatory powers

- 2.1. **The BBC Trust** seeks to represent licence fee payers and make sure the BBC's Executive delivers the high-quality programmes and services demanded by those licence fee payers. The BBC's Executive is accountable to the Trust for the accuracy and impartiality of its content; Ofcom sets certain programme standards (around taste and decency, for instance). Both have duties to consider complaints relating to programme standards.
- 2.2. Each year, the BBC Trust agrees the number of hours of religious programming that the Executive should ensure is aired on BBC One and BBC Two, as part of a wider settlement over the number of hours devoted to other genres, notably news and current affairs. This agreement does not involve Ofcom.

¹ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200809/ldhansrd/text/90604-0013.htm#09060438000826>

- 2.3. **Ofcom's** role in religious broadcasting can be split into two: firstly, Ofcom currently licenses specifically religious broadcasters, transmitting content of interest to Christian and other religious communities; secondly, it regulates the public service obligations put upon the commercial PSBs.
- 2.4. Ofcom currently has no power to set specific quotas for religious programming on the commercial PSBs, as the previous quotas relating to religious programming on the commercial PSBs were removed by the Communications Act 2003. Religious broadcasting by the commercial PSBs is at the broadcaster's discretion, and is set out in the annual statements of programme policy that the broadcasters are required to produce under the Act (see section 3 below).
- 2.5. Under s.264 of the Act, which deals with the Reviews of UK Public Service Broadcasting which Ofcom must undertake at least once every five years, there are the following relevant purposes relating to PSB:

(f) that those services (taken together) include what appears to OFCOM to be a suitable quantity and range of programmes dealing with each of the following, science, religion and other beliefs, social issues, matters of international significance or interest and matters of specialist interest;

(g) that the programmes included in those services that deal with religion and other beliefs include-

(i) programmes providing news and other information about different religions and other beliefs;

(ii) programmes about the history of different religions and other beliefs; and

(iii) programmes showing acts of worship and other ceremonies and practices (including some showing acts of worship and other ceremonies in their entirety);.

However, it should be noted that this section only describes the purposes of PSB which Ofcom should take account of when conducting the reviews, and confers no power on Ofcom to ensure the delivery of such purposes.

- 2.6. Under the Act, where commercial PSBs propose a "significant change" to the character of their service, they must consult Ofcom before preparing their annual statements referring to the change, and "take account" of any opinions expressed by Ofcom. However, provided a broadcaster can show that it has considered views put forward by Ofcom, it is under no obligation to follow particular directions from Ofcom.

3. Commercial channels' religious programming

- 3.1. Below are the most recent (2008/2009) annual statements of the three commercial PSBs:

- 3.2. **ITV1:** *"In 2008, ITV1 provided a slightly reduced amount of religious programming. Nevertheless we maintained our commitment to a broad variety of subject matter that linked religious topics to the world around us. Highlights included a one hour documentary, 'The Vicar of Baghdad'... [and] 'A Match made in Heaven', which looked at the trials and tribulations of young Muslims, Christians and Jews looking for love through religious dating agencies. In the ten-part 'Faith In the Frame' series, presenter Melvyn Bragg led a detailed discussion about some of the most celebrated and iconic*

religious works of art. ITV broadcast two acts of worship: one at the start of Advent with the theme of forgiveness, the other Midnight Mass from Alder Hey children's hospital".

ITV said that due to economic pressure and structural change; falling audience figures for its religious programming; and the falling value of the ITV licences, its ability to deliver a range of public service output, including religion, is under pressure. ITV said in its Annual Statement that: *"In these circumstances ITV is planning to reduce the volume of religious programming on ITV1 in 2009. ITV plans to schedule one act of worship and a reduced number of hours of other religious output which will comprise 50% new material and 50% repeats"*. This is against a backdrop of dropping from 103 hours of religious broadcasting in 2004 to just 40 hours in 2008.

- 3.3. **Channel 4:** *"Religious programming lies at the heart of Channel 4's commitment to 'champion alternative voices and fresh perspectives'. January 2009 will see the start of an ambitious major series on Christianity: eight one-hour films offering an alternative history of Christianity. Each episode will be a polemic piece presented with passion by an interested party... [Other] 2009 projects include Jane Treays' 'West End Nuns' and a film about a Jewish dating agency"*. During 2009, the channel decided not to appoint a commissioning editor for religious programming to succeed Aaqil Ahmed, who moved to the BBC to take up the revised post of Head of Religion and Ethics and Commissioning Editor for TV.
- 3.4. **Five:** *"We intend to transmit a number of programmes on religious themes... as well as covering religious issues in our overall output. We will commission a major programme analysing religious themes in the cinema [and] we will show 'The Da Vinci Shroud', an investigation into the Turin Shroud... We will also be showing a further series of the religious animation for younger children 'The Angels of Jarm'."*
- 3.5. As noted in 1.5, the Church has previously expressed concern about the clear trend among commercial PSBs in particular to cut back on religious programming. In its submission to Ofcom's Second PSB Review, a joint submission by the Church of England and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales stressed that "there has already regrettably been some reduction in the range of public service content as ITV has withdrawn from some of its obligations... We believe that ITV should not have been allowed to relinquish its obligations so easily".

4. BBC religious programming

- 4.1. Under the agreement referred to in 2.3 above, BBC One and BBC Two are together currently required to broadcast at least 110 hours of religious programming each year. According to the BBC Annual Report 2009, the BBC is exceeding this required number of hours of religious programming.
- 4.2. The total number of hours of religious programming on BBC One, Two and Four increased in 2009 to 164 hours, from 155 hours in 2008. The biggest increase in religious programmes was on BBC Four; there is virtually no religious broadcasting on BBC Three. The proportion of religious programming scheduled within peak hours has stabilised in recent years.

- 4.3. Twenty years ago (1987/1988), BBC One and BBC Two transmitted 177 hours of religious programming. Ten years ago (1997/1998), the comparative figure was 112 hours. In 1998/1999, following the launch of BBC Four and BBC Three, this figure rose to 125 hours across all the BBC's TV platforms. By 2004/2005 this had risen to 155 hours, with 119 hours being broadcast across BBC One and Two.

Examples of programming

- 4.4. These hours include a range of programming overseen by the BBC's Religion and Ethics Department, based in Manchester, including:
- *Songs of Praise* (BBC One), which regularly attracts over 2 million viewers despite regrettably not having a fixed slot in the schedule – and in 2011 celebrates its 50th anniversary.
 - *The Big Questions* (produced by Mentorn Oxford, BBC One), a topical religious and ethical debate show claims an average audience of 1.1 million; in comparison, *Heaven and Earth* drew an average of 0.9 million average viewers in 2007. As the recent submission to the BBC Trust notes, “as one of the staple elements of the religious schedule, it is unfortunate that *The Big Questions*' format makes it difficult to explore subjects in detail, and that a significant part of its potential audience is in church during the transmission time.”
 - *Around the World in 80 Faiths* (BBC Two), an eight-part 60 minute documentary series following the Revd Peter Owen Jones' worldwide journey experiencing the practices of different faiths.
 - *An Island Parish* (produced by Tiger Aspect, BBC Two), which returned in 2009 with a new 14-part series.
 - *A History Of Christianity* (co-produced by OU and Jerusalem Productions, BBC Four), a six-part series examining Christianity from its birth to the present day and beyond, presented by Professor Diarmaid McCulloch. This attracted impressive audience figures (approximately 500,000 for the first screening of each episode; roughly double the usual figures for factual programming on the channel) and it is anticipated to do likewise as it moves to BBC Two for repeat.
- 4.5. There are many more hours of religious and ethical content which other areas of BBC television transmit, not included in the 'hour counts' cited above. For example:
- News and current affairs have a dedicated religion correspondent and religious stories are covered across the BBC network, driven by the news agenda.
 - Some documentaries feature religious and ethical topics: for example *The Art of Russia* with Andrew Graham Dixon (BBC Four) revealed the impact of Christianity on the country in the 10th Century.
 - Within children's programming (now largely found on digital channels), some attempt is made to include religious content. The forthcoming series *Let's Celebrate* (CBeebies) will show how children experience different religions and cultural festivals including Easter, Eid-ul-Fitr and Diwali.
 - Within music and performance, a second series of *Sacred Music* (BBC Four) explores the story of western Sacred Music through the work of Brahms and Bruckner, Faure and Poulenc, Rutter and others.
 - BBC drama also features content related to religious and ethical issues - *The Passion* (BBC One) being the most obvious recent example.
- 4.6. Furthermore, BBC One in particular is continuing to provide live coverage of public religious events. Examples that stand out include the Festival of Remembrance, which

includes an act of worship lasting around 20 minutes, and is scheduled during peak-time on the Saturday evening before the Remembrance Sunday service at the Cenotaph. Both these annual events, broadcast on BBC One, appear within the top ten most watched programmes for that week on the BBC, with the Festival alone claiming around 6 million viewers. Other examples include the live broadcast of the installation of the new Archbishop of Westminster in May 2009. However, in a trend detectable across the BBC's television output, the number of worship services broadcast over the course of a year has fallen considerably in the past decade. As the recent submission notes, "While BBC radio continues to excel at broadcasting worship services, it is regrettable that television has not explored new ways of introducing audiences to the authentic experience of religious communities in worship."

- 4.7. The fact that the BBC won Sandford St Martin Trust awards in 2009 for *The Passion* and *Miracle on the Estate*, both broadcast on BBC One in 2008, indicates that quality religious programmes can continue to be made.
- 4.8. Looking ahead, the BBC has committed itself to the following new output:
- For 2010, a new three-part series, *The Silence* (BBC Two), will follow Fr Christopher Jamison, the Abbot of Worth, as he asks five volunteers to bring silence into their lives to try and connect with God.
 - In *God Don't Live Here Anymore* (also BBC Two), as part of range of programming marking President Barack Obama's first year in office, theologian Dr Robert Beckford will investigate what is known about Obama's faith.
 - A four-part dramatisation of the Nativity story as part of BBC One's Christmas offering for 2010 (this has been commissioned by BBC Drama).
 - For 2011, the Corporation recently announced it would mark the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible across its output (although the only detailed programming commitment so far is to a major documentary on BBC Two presented by Melvyn Bragg).
 - In late 2008 the Corporation shelved a proposed six-part drama series on The Bible, planned for transmission on BBC1 in 2009.

Easter and Holy Week 2009

- 4.9. The BBC has asserted that, across television and radio, the hours devoted to traditional worship, musical celebration and documentary during Holy Week and Easter Weekend 2009 remained constant with 2008. The Corporation points to *This Joyful Eastertide – A Eucharist for Easter Day*, broadcast from Southwark Cathedral on BBC One, followed by Pope Benedict XVI's traditional Easter message and blessing, *Urbi et Orbi*; two documentaries on BBC One, one exploring the early life of Pope John Paul II and another examining *The Narnia Code*; other documentaries on BBC Two, one on Handel, another on a 'lost' Caravaggio painting; and BBC Four's screening of *The Passion* and *The Creation*, the latter a concert from the BBC Proms.
- 4.10. The lack of provision of Christian programming on Good Friday 2009 was highlighted not least in the recent submission by the Church to the BBC Trust and a letter from the Bishop of Manchester to *The Times* published on 8th April 2009, which stated that "while the BBC is broadcasting other relevant programmes across the Easter weekend, it has fallen far short of the mark in its Good Friday output. Many people want an appropriate marker of religious significance whether it is life and death or Easter and Christmas." The BBC points to the screening of *Hallelujah! The Story of Handel's Messiah*, transmitted

on Good Friday on BBC Two at 2pm, as evidence that the significance of the date was not entirely unmarked.

- 4.11. Looking ahead to this Easter, the BBC has indicated that it anticipates the overall hours of religion and ethics television broadcast will slightly increase – including a new commission, *Easter At Kings*, which will feature traditional hymns from Kings College, Cambridge.

BBC Radio

- 4.12. Any survey of religious-related output on the BBC needs to acknowledge the scale and depth of the Corporation's radio output in this genre, including on the World Service. On radio in 2008/2009, the BBC transmitted over 450 hours of religion and ethics content. Uniquely, a proportion of the BBC's religion and ethics radio programming is regional, with specialised BBC teams giving a local perspective to topical religious and ethical issues, worship and debate. A podcast is created each week bringing together highlights from across this regional output.

New ways of receiving BBC content

- 4.13. New technology – much of which the BBC has itself pioneered – is revolutionising the way that viewers can access content, particularly through the digital television platform and future plans for using broadband to watch on-demand services. The majority of the BBC's religion and ethics television output is already immediately available after transmission on iPlayer; for example, *Around the World in 80 Faiths* had 40,000 iPlayer requests to view per episode; *Songs Of Praise* has an average of 10,000 per episode, and *A History of Christianity* received 100,000 requests to view for the first episode.

Management and structure

- 4.14. The BBC's current Director General, Mark Thompson, has addressed the subject of religious programming in a number of speeches since his appointment, stressing that he considers it to be a core part of the Corporation's work, although in a recent address religion was not explicitly included in his summary of key priority areas.²
- 4.15. During the spring of 2009, the BBC introduced a number of changes to the structure of the BBC's Religion and Ethics Department, to create a single point of responsibility for developing programme strategy and delivering religious and ethical programming from across the BBC's in-house team and the independent sector. The outcomes of these changes – and whether they fulfil the stated aim of showing how importantly the BBC views religious programming – have yet to be seen.
- 4.16. However, the Church has consistently argued for the importance of retaining a sufficient amount of in-house expertise within the BBC, both for the production of specific 'Religion and Ethics' output but also as an in-house resource for other departments. Retaining and nurturing such a team of specialists, it has been argued, is absolutely

² Lecture at Theos thinktank, October 2008 (<http://campaigndirector.moodia.com/Client/Theos/Files/MarkThompsonSpeech.doc>); Lecture as part of 'Faith and Life in Britain' series organised by Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, April 2008; *Faith in the Media*, April 2008 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/speeches/stories/thompson_faith.shtml); *Beyond 2012*, November 2009 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/speeches/stories/thompson_beyond.shtml).

crucial to maintaining the current stable of regular programmes and developing innovative new formats.

Standing Conference on Religion and Belief

- 4.17. The Bishop of Norwich, the Rt Revd Graham James, chairs the new BBC Standing Conference on Religion and Belief established only in April 2009. This offers the BBC expert insight into the views, beliefs and practices of a diverse range of the religious groups represented in the UK, and those of no faith. The Conference met twice during 2009, including one meeting attended by the BBC's Director General.

House of Lords Communications Committee

- 4.18. The Bishop of Manchester is the Church of England's lead spokesperson on media issues, and is a member of the House of Lords' Select Committee on Communications. As such, he has taken part in key discussions about the future of the BBC and the development of broadcasting in the UK.

5. Research on public opinion of religious programming

- 5.1. Audience research conducted by Ofcom for its Second Public Service Broadcasting Review showed that audiences place less importance on what they perceive as religious programming compared with other genres³
- 5.2. Ofcom's research found that original religious programming is rated as the lowest priority genre amongst viewers, with 9 per cent wanting more, 59 per cent the same and 16 per cent, less.
- 5.3. However, serious questions remain about exactly what the survey participants understood by 'religious programming' – perhaps some only think of televised church services as religious content, for instance. The high audience figures and extremely high audience appreciation figures noted by the BBC for programmes like *Seaside Parish*, *Helen House* and *The Monastery* bear this out.
- 5.4. Also, the same Ofcom research found that the vast majority (75 per cent) of people believe that "TV should help to promote understanding of religions, cultures & lifestyles". Comparison of similar 2003 and 2007 research indicates there has been a growth in valuing this role.

6. Previous General Synod Motions

- 6.1. A 1997 General Synod motion recognised the tensions between freedom and regulation of the media in a democratic society. Likewise, it noted the potential for both positive and negative impacts of the media and asserted a link between media content and public morality.

³ Ofcom's 2nd PSB Review, paragraph 3.6 and 3.11

- 6.2. A previous private members' motion from Nigel Holmes, passed in 2000 after amendment by the Synod, expressed gratitude to broadcasters who accurately reflect and enrich the spiritual life of the nation, while noting with regret the reduction and rescheduling of some religious programming. The motion also called on the Churches to support and engage with those involved in broadcasting, and led to the setting up of the General Synod's Religion in Broadcasting Group.
- 6.3. In 2007, an amended version of a motion from the Lichfield Diocesan Synod welcomed the media's contribution to an open and informed society, affirmed the Church's support for the highest media standards, called on Christians to contribute positively to the debate about standards in the media, and suggested that carefully framed research may shed further light on the influence of media as a significant factor affecting behaviour.
- 6.4. Following this debate, the Religion in Media Network of the General Synod was set up to succeed the Religion in Broadcasting Group, serviced by the Archbishops' Council's Communications Office. This small group, chaired by the Bishop of Reading, the Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, seeks to provide a forum to engage with developments in the way that media are produced and consumed in Britain today; encourage the accurate depiction of religion in the media; and promote the quality and quantity of religious content. A Religion in Media Network fringe meeting arranged during the Synod in July 2009 explored how the evolving digital landscape presents significant challenges and opportunities for the Church institutionally and Christians individually. The Network invited Nigel Holmes to attend its meeting in October 2009, discussed a range of issues helpfully raised by his motion, and will be returning to these in future meetings. This paper has been informed by that discussion.

7. Other policy contributions by the Church of England

- 7.1. The Church has made several submissions to the Government in recent years⁴, and arranged for a group of faith leaders to give evidence to the Lords Communications Committee in 2005. The Church has consistently argued that:
- It is vital that everyone has access to strong and vibrant public service content, including religious broadcasting, provided on the widest possible range of media platforms;
 - It is particularly important that education and public service information is delivered in ways that are independent of commercial interests, but that the BBC should not be allowed to become the sole provider of public service content;
 - Religion should be explicitly mentioned within the BBC's Public Purposes, so that the factor giving many people's lives meaning and purpose should form a part of the BBC's requirement to "sustain citizenship and civil society" and to "reflect Britain to the world and the world to Britain";
 - We welcome regular reporting of religious affairs within the news, but are concerned that increasingly moving religion out of specialist slots and into news and magazine programming, given the lack of specialist knowledge in some

⁴ Key submissions include:

BBC Charter Renewal (White Paper response), 2006: <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/bbccharterwpresp.rtf>

Culture Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry on public service media content, January 2007:

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/pr0807.html>

Oftcom's Second Consultation on Public Service Broadcasting, December 2008: <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/pr5708.html>

BBC Trust review of TV channel service licences, December 2009: <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/pr11809.html>

newsrooms, can lead to the “David Attenborough” effect: religion reported from the point of view of an observer of a fascinating and increasingly rare species, rather than explored as something of fundamental importance to the majority of the country.

Church House, Westminster
January 2010

**Published by the General Synod of the Church of England
and on sale at the Church House Bookshop**

31 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BN

Copyright © The Archbishops' Council 2010

£3

