



PROMOTING EXCELLENCE IN
RELIGIOUS PROGRAMMES

Submission to: A Future for Public Service Television Inquiry

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"My generation grew up thinking that religion was completely marginal to British life, which, as for the rest of the world, has been proved more and more wrong..."

Simon Schama, historian.

About the Sandford St Martin Trust

1. In this submission, the Sandford St Martin Trust will deal with a key element of public service broadcasting, religious programming, since this is the focus of the Trust's activity and its area of expertise. Its Trustees include people with many years' experience of broadcasting, including the presenter of Radio 4's Feedback and former BBC and ITV editor Roger Bolton; the former director of the Radio Authority Tony Stoller; and the former BBC media correspondent Torin Douglas. Other trustees bring wider experience of both religion and the media and include experienced producers, directors and journalists from a variety of faith backgrounds.

2. The Sandford St Martin Trust has been making annual awards for the best broadcast programmes about religion, ethics and spirituality since 1978. These are the UK's most prestigious awards for religious broadcasting and previous winners have included Melvyn Bragg, Simon Schama, Rabbi Lionel Blue, David Suchet, Danny Boyle, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Howard Jacobson, Ian Hislop, Rageh Omar, Lyse Doucet, Sally Magnusson, Tom Hollander, Mark Tully and many more. Details can be found on our website: www.sandfordawards.org.uk

3. As well as making awards, the Trust acts as an advocate for excellence in broadcast coverage of religion. It stimulates debate about the value of this kind of broadcasting and promotes religion, ethics and spirituality as important and rewarding subjects for programme-makers to engage with. In the past two years, it has produced events in partnership with the Edinburgh International Television Festival, the Media Society, Sheffield Doc/Fest and the Church & Media Network. It has submitted evidence to Ofcom's Third Public Service Broadcasting Review (February 2015), the BBC Trust's Charter Review Consultation (November 2015) and other inquiries. You can see details of these events and submissions, and other information about the Trust, on our website. The Trust is politically independent and is not affiliated with any media company or organisation. It does not proselytise on behalf of or promote any particular religion or faith, nor does it engage in religious activities itself.

Religious broadcasting: "core public service broadcasting territory" and an "immediate issue" of concern – Ofcom.

4. As stated in the Trust's submission to Ofcom's Third Public Service Broadcasting Review consultation in February 2015 ¹, we support Ofcom's view that religious programming is "generally considered to be core PSB territory" ². We concur with the 2005 Parliamentary Select Committee on BBC Charter Review's finding that "broadcasting covering religion and other beliefs is part of the remit of all public service channels"³. We have also noted with dismay the dramatic decline in hours and investment by ITV and Channel 4 in religious programming since this element of the PSB requirement was removed ⁴.

5. The Trust believes that it is impossible to understand the world these days without an understanding of religion. Contrary to the assumptions of a largely secular media, religion is not a private matter for individuals – an add-on to the rest of life. Rather, religion is a prime motivator of both individuals and communities, inspiring and informing their political, economic, ethical and social behaviour. Lyse Doucet, BBC News' chief international correspondent and a Sandford Award winner, wrote: "Sadly, distortions of religious belief and texts are used as political weapons in many conflicts as well as clashes over traditional beliefs and practices. That requires us to know more about the tenets of major religions and systems of belief, to be able to better assess and analyse different interpretations". ⁵

¹ <http://sandfordawards.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/SMMT-submission-OFCOM.pdf>

² Ofcom Review of Public Service Television Broadcasting: Phase 1: Is television special (2006), para 16. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbbsc/128/12811.htm#note51>

³ Select Committee on BBC Charter Review Second Report (2006), para 141 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbbsc/128/128i.pdf>

⁴ Ofcom, PSB Output and Spend PSB Report 2013 – Information pack, August 2013, Figure 5, p. 7 http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb2013/output_and_spend.pdf

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ariel/32901415>

6. At a time when religion is seen as such a powerful influence on world events (for good or ill), the need for religious literacy has never been greater – and, with it, the need for good reporting and informed, intelligent interpretation of religion. In the Sunday Times, the journalist AA Gill wrote: “Religion has never been more tangible in world affairs and public life. Not having more sensible and serious religious broadcasting isn’t modern, it’s a failure to face modernity”.⁶

7. The Sandford St Martin Trust believes that this is a critical moment for the future of religious broadcasting in the UK and a significant opportunity to reassert and strengthen the PSB remit as it pertains to religion. The Trust supports Ofcom’s ambition to address how the rapid evolution of media markets, shaped by the growth of the internet, declining spend and output by PSBs, and, market developments, either individually or in combination, have affected core religious output.

8. The Trust notes that Ofcom describes religious programming as one of several “immediate issues” of concern in its July 2015 report ‘Public Service Broadcasting in the Internet Age’: “There are some immediate issues emerging from our review: news consumption and the provision of news for young people, drama that reflects and portrays British society back to a British audience, content tailored to the specific needs of the UK Nations and their regions, **religious programming**, children’s programming and investment in other areas such as music and arts.”⁷

9. This reference was highlighted in the BBC’s own Charter Review report of September 2015, ‘British Bold Creative: The BBC’s programmes and services in the next Charter’. It declared that “We have designed our proposals to address these needs.”⁸ But the Trust was dismayed to see that the 99-page document made no further reference to religion – the only programme genre on the list of “immediate issues” which got no mention in its proposals for the next Charter period.

10. The BBC has always held the prime responsibility to provide high-quality religious programming on television and radio in the UK. The Trust believes that this obligation is now even more important because of:

- (a) the need for greater understanding of religious issues, in order to deliver proper coverage of world affairs and community issues in the UK, and
- (b) the clear market failure in religious programming as a result of changes to the PSB regime in commercial broadcasting.

11. We note with real concern that Channel 4 has not had a dedicated Commissioning Editor for Religion since 2009. The Trust believes that the withdrawal of the commercial TV channels from a core element of public service broadcasting increases the BBC’s obligation to provide such coverage and to make good the deficiency as far as possible. It should certainly not reduce its own religious programming output.

⁶ AA Gill review of ‘Rev’ in Sunday Times on Sunday 30 March 2014

⁷ (emphasis ours) Para 2.4, http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/consultations/psb-review-3/statement/PSB_Review_3_Statement.pdf

⁸ <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/pdf/futureofthebbc2015.pdf>

12. We have identified other areas of concern, including the effective downgrading of the post of BBC Head of Religion as a result of budgetary cuts. BBC TV's Factual Commissioning division has merged the role of Commissioning Head of Religion with those of Science, Business and History. We fear that future cuts outlined in the BBC Charter Review document will put further strain on the BBC's religious output. When we asked the BBC and the Secretary of State for Culture Media & Sport "Who will take overall responsibility in the BBC for the range quantity and quality of religious programming?" we got no reply.

13. Our fears were realised at Christmas 2015 on BBC Television, when we saw a total absence of original work and just eight hours of Christian-themed television broadcast over seven days. In 2005, the BBC scheduled eight hours on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day alone.

14. Despite this, some good programmes in the area of religion, ethics and spirituality are still being made, as can be seen from the shortlists for this year's Sandford St Martin Trust Awards. These can be read on our website:

<http://sandfordawards.org.uk/the-awards/2016-awards/2016-awards-shortlists/>

We think it important that the winning programmes were specifically "Religious programming" commissions. The Trust has a wide view of what constitutes a religious programme for the purpose of our awards, including drama, comedy, news, current affairs and music programmes as well as documentaries.

15. In 2015 we gave our special Sandford St Martin Trustees award to the BBC's Chief International Correspondent, Lyse Doucet, for raising the profile of religion in the media through her reporting on world events, including the Arab Spring and the ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Syria and Northern Iraq. She was presented with the prize by James Harding, Director of BBC News and Current Affairs, in a ceremony at Lambeth Palace on May 27th.

16. James Harding said: "This Sandford St Martin award recognises the profound influence of religion on the world we live in and Lyse has fearlessly brought us greater understanding of religion from some of the most perilous places on the planet. She is a more than worthy recipient of this great honour and I'm very glad to have this opportunity to recognise her immense achievement."

17. We applauded the BBC's decision to broadcast Songs of Praise from the migrant camp at Calais⁹ and to resist pressure from some politicians and the media to stop the broadcast.¹⁰

18. We were pleased to hear assurances from the BBC's Director of Radio Helen

⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b067862y>

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-33931995>
<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/6578181/BBC-film-Songs-of-Praise-at-Calais-migrant-camp.html>
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3200315/Songs-Praise-Calais-migrant-camp-NO-songs-DAMIAN-THOMPSON-BBC-stunt-gone-wrong.html>

Boaden, speaking at the Church and Media Conference in October 2015, about the BBC's commitment to religious programming particularly on its various radio networks. We hope this commitment applies also to television.

19. Yet, with these few notable exceptions, most broadcasting executives, regulators, producers and editors seem unaware of the importance of religious broadcasting and indeed hold a prejudice against it. This may be understandable. Many senior broadcasters grew up in an era when religion was seen as irrelevant. The then BBC Director General, Mark Thompson, noted in a 2008 speech that when he joined the BBC in 1979 there was an assumption within the media "that the decline and marginalisation of religion was a straightforward corollary of modernism and was inevitable."¹¹ The historian Professor Simon Schama has made the same point: "My generation grew up thinking that religion was completely marginal to British life, which, as for the rest of the world, has been proved more and more wrong."¹²

20. Despite the Trust's award to Lyse Doucet and the acknowledgment by James Harding of the importance of religion, we are concerned at other aspects of BBC News coverage. The BBC religious affairs correspondent Caroline Wyatt is another excellent broadcaster but we believe she does not get enough exposure on the TV bulletins. We believe that most news editors have insufficient knowledge, experience and understanding of religious affairs to judge properly when and how a major religious story should be covered, or when the religious specialist should be used to cover a story that has wider ramifications.

Recommendations

21. We have said before that – for all the reasons outlined above - the status of the role of BBC religious affairs correspondent should be raised. BBC News should have a religion editor, as it has editors for other important specialisms such as science, economics, business, politics, home, education, health, arts and sports.

22. We now go further and say that the BBC should be given a new Public Purpose to promote religious literacy, alongside the existing six public purposes set out by the Royal Charter and Agreement, which outline the values the BBC holds when striving to achieve its mission to inform, educate and entertain".

23. We believe that the seventh public purpose of the BBC should be drafted on the following lines: "Promoting Religious Literacy: BBC viewers, listeners and users can rely on the BBC to reflect the many religious communities that exist in the UK with the aim of building a better understanding of the beliefs people hold both between those communities and by UK audiences as a whole".

¹¹ <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/bbc.boss.defends.track.record.on.religious.programming/21662.htm>

¹² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2666485/Historian-Simon-Schama-says-UK-religious-country.html>