



PROMOTING EXCELLENCE IN  
RELIGIOUS PROGRAMMES

### **Submission to the BBC Charter Review Consultation**

Submitted by the Rt Rev Nicholas Baines, Bishop of Leeds  
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*“Good broadcasting about religion matters – in fact, it matters more than ever before.”*  
Edward Stourton, presenter, 'Sunday', BBC Radio 4.

*“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.

*“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.”*  
Lyse Doucet, chief international correspondent, BBC News.

*“Religious literacy has never been more important but the potential of programmes in the field of religion is far from being realised.”*  
Roger Bolton, presenter, 'Feedback', BBC Radio 4, and Sandford St Martin Trustee.

## **Executive Summary**

1. In this submission, the Sandford St Martin Trust will deal with a key element of the BBC's output, namely religious programming, since this is the focus of our Trust's activity and its area of expertise. Our 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 Chief Executive 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](http://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. More details about the Trust can be found at the end of this submission.

4. As stated in the Trust's submission to Ofcom's Third Public Service Broadcasting Review consultation in February 2015,<sup>1</sup> we support Ofcom's view that religious programming is "generally considered to be core PSB territory".<sup>2</sup> 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"<sup>3</sup> and we note the dramatic decline in hours and investment by ITV and Channel 4 in religious programming since this element of the PSB requirement was removed.<sup>4</sup>

5. 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

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

<sup>2</sup> Ofcom Review of Public Service Television Broadcasting: Phase 1: Is television special?, para 16 (2006)

<sup>3</sup> Select Committee on BBC Charter Review Second Report (2006) para 141

<sup>4</sup> Ofcom, PSB Output and Spend PSB Report 2013 – Information pack, August 2013, Figure 5, p. 7

and output by PSBs, and, market developments, either individually or in combination, have affected core religious output.

6. The Trust notes that Ofcom describes religious programming as one of several “immediate issues” 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.”<sup>5</sup>

7. The Trust also notes that this reference is highlighted in the BBC’s September 2015 Charter Review report, ‘British Bold Creative: The BBC’s programmes and services in the next Charter’, with a declaration that “We have designed our proposals to address these needs”.<sup>6</sup> But the Trust is dismayed that this 99-page document makes no further reference to religion - the only programme genre on the list of “immediate issues” which it neglects to mention in its proposals for the next Charter period.

**8. The BBC has always held the prime responsibility to provide high-quality religious programming on television and radio in the UK. We believe 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.**

**We expand on these points below – and**

**(c) we analyse the BBC’s own statements and aspects of its record in coverage of religion and ethics.**

**We believe that the BBC's existing coverage, though valued, needs significant improvement. The complete absence of any proposals, or creative thinking, relating to this area does not give us any confidence that the BBC or the BBC Trust recognises its importance.**

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<sup>5</sup> Ofcom July 2015, Paragraph 2.4

[http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/consultations/psb-review-3/statement/PSB-Review\\_3\\_Statement.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/consultations/psb-review-3/statement/PSB-Review_3_Statement.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> BBC 'British Bold Creative' September 2015, page 49

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

**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 for a greater recognition of the impact of religion on social cohesion and citizenship**

9. The Trust believes that awareness of religion and faith – in all its diversity – is key to a better understanding of the world and its cultures, of local communities and of what it means to be human. It believes that an essential pillar of maintaining a modern, democratic society and a prerequisite for active citizenship is a good understanding of both the central role that Christianity has played and continues to play in the development of our society as well as a fair and unbiased understanding and appreciation of the value systems and ethics of minority faith groups.

10. Such minorities can often feel isolated and undervalued when politicians, journalists and/or broadcasters, among others, do not understand or accurately represent the complexities of their faiths. For example, on 5 February, 2015, in an item on female genital mutilation (FGM), a BBC Radio 4, Today presenter, referred to the practice as “Muslim”, when, in fact, it is a cultural phenomenon practised by some Muslims as well as by some animists and some Christians.<sup>7</sup>

11. The BBC journalist Edward Stourton, presenter of Radio 4’s Sunday programme, has written in the *Daily Telegraph*:

*“For millions of human beings, God is where you turn in joy or sorrow, and religion is what comes to mind when you think about who you are. Recognising that reality is not the same as saying it is a good thing, but failing to recognise it can lead to serious journalistic mistakes.”<sup>8</sup>*

In *Press Gazette* he said the British media suffered from a "blind spot" about the importance of religion around the world and this damaged its news coverage. He warned programme-makers: *"Never ignore the power of religion - you don't have to like religion, but do take it seriously."*

12. Writing in the *Sunday Times*, the journalist A A Gill said:

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<sup>7</sup> 'Director of Public Prosecutions defends FGM charge', BBC Radio 4 'Today', 5 February 2015  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02jb65h>

<sup>8</sup> Edward Stourton, Never ignore the power of religion, The Daily Telegraph, 24 May 2014  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8630553/Never-ignore-the-power-of-religion.html>

*“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.”<sup>9</sup>*

**13 The Sandford St Martin Trust believes that it is impossible to understand the modern world – its politics, economics, military and humanitarian events – without understanding religion, and that religion should be prioritised as needing expert commissioning and interpretation in the public and broadcast sphere.**

14. We note with real concern that Channel 4 has not had a dedicated Commissioning Editor for Religion since 2009; that BBC TV’s Factual Commissioning division announced in January 2015 plans to merge the role of Commissioning Head of Religion with Science, Business and History; and that, while BBC News has editors for science, economics, business, politics, home, education, health, arts and sports, it has no religion editor.

15. In his testimony to a previous Select Committee on BBC Charter Renewal, the Bishop of Southwark suggested one reason why broadcasters fail to provide the public with objective background information required to understand the context of a news story is that *“the depth of knowledge is not there to handle the story”*. Dr Ram-Prasad, another member of the multi-faith panel asked to report to the Committee, agreed

*“The lack of strategic thinking comes from thinking ‘Okay, we have somebody, somewhere in Asia, let’s bung him in and ask him to give a report’ rather than having somebody who would have the kind of training that you would expect over a longer period of time...”<sup>10</sup>*

16. The Sandford St Martin Trust does not believe that this lack of knowledge exists only among general audiences or at a grassroots level of UK broadcasting. In her book ‘Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent’, the BBC radio journalist Innes Bowen recounted a meeting with a man who was advising a senior Cabinet minister on relations with Britain’s Muslim communities:

*“He told me that a mosque mentioned in an August 2005 edition of the BBC series Panorama should have been identified as Shi’ite. He was quite sure about this because the mosque in question was a prominent one in his hometown. But he was wrong. ... The same man also spoke warmly of a prominent British Islamic organisation but was ignorant of its barely concealed links to a foreign political*

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<sup>9</sup> A A Gill review of Rev in Sunday Times on Sunday 30 March 2014

<sup>10</sup> Select Committee on BBC Charter Review Second Report (2006) para 155

*party... the fact that such an unreliable source of information was relied upon at all says something about the lack of expertise... at the highest level of government.”<sup>11</sup>*

17. Speaking about the role religion has played in recent Middle Eastern conflicts, Dr Mona Siddiqui, Professor of Islamic and Inter-Religious Studies at Glasgow University has said

*“...suddenly Iraq appeared on our screens and it was assumed that the whole population knew the difference between Sunni and Shia; yet nobody knew the difference.”<sup>12</sup>*

18. We further believe that religion needs to be recognised as a powerful motivator of communal behaviour as well as of individual lifestyle and world view. In a speech on the subject of social cohesion, Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, argued strongly that religious diversity can help strengthen social harmony provided that the views of faith communities are heard. He said:

*“The notion that social unity can be secured by a policy of marginalising or ignoring communities of faith because of their irreducible diversity rests on several errors and fallacies, and its most serious and damaging effect is to give credibility to the idea of a neutral and/or self-evident set of secular principles which have authority to override the particular convictions of religious groups... this amounts to the requirement that religious believers leave their most strongly held and distinctive principles at the door when they engage in public argument: this is not a good recipe for lasting social unity”<sup>13</sup>*

19. The current Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, was quoted in the Express newspaper:

*“Some people these days firmly believe that faith and religious life should be kept behind closed doors. But if broadcasters were also to adopt the view that religion is something separate and private, then we could set off down a dangerous road. We would be cultivating ignorance where what we need is insight, and prejudice where we most badly need open minds.”<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Innes Bowen, Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam, Hurst & Company, London 2014, p. 2

<sup>12</sup> Select Committee on BBC Charter Review Second Report (2006), para 154

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Rowan Williams, Why Social Cohesion Needs Religion, Building Bridges Conference, Singapore, Thursday 6th December 2007 <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1144/why-social-cohesion-needs-religion-building-bridges-conference-singapore>

<sup>14</sup> Archbishop Justin Welby: TV needs religious ‘reality’ shows, The Express, 7 May, 2013.

<http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/397504/Archbishop-Justin-Welby-TV-needs-religious-reality-shows>

20. The 2011 census indicated that the population of the United Kingdom, particularly with regard to different belief systems, is becoming increasingly diverse. David Voas, Professor of Population Studies at the University of Essex was quoted in *The Times* (9 February, 2015) as saying that the future of religion in Britain will be “black and brown” as Islam and newer forms of Christianity overhaul the Church of England. The 2011 census recorded that there were 2.8 million Muslims in Britain, or 4.4% of the population; 59.3% of respondents identified themselves as Christians.

21. We note Ofcom’s findings that “younger adults”, in particular, said it was important for PSB channels to represent diversity at the level of the different groups and communities present throughout the UK, such as specific ethnicities, religions, socio-economic groups and sexual orientations.”<sup>15</sup>

22. Apart from anything else, the Trust believes that faith and religion provide a wealth of good stories for broadcasters. One of our award winners, Ian Hislop, wrote in *Radio Times*:

*“All programme-makers are ultimately looking for good stories to tell, and audiences are looking for good stories to watch. There are few richer repositories of stories than the world’s faiths and the extraordinary ways that human beings have attempted to find meaning through them.”*<sup>16</sup>

His article was headed "Broadcasters must have faith in religious TV".

## **B. The need for religious programming to be included in definitions of public service broadcasting and the market failure in religious coverage on commercial TV channels**

23. The Sandford St Martin Trust believes that knowledge and understanding of religious and ethical issues is an essential part of the communication needs, rights and interests of UK citizens in the global information society. The changing nature of the UK’s own population, the role of religion in conflicts around the world, as well as the ethical issues raised by developments in medical science have all increased the public need for well-researched and well-made religious and ethical programming from trustworthy sources.

24. We believe that the inclusion of religious programming as a PSB requirement is further necessitated by a widespread editorial prejudice against religious broadcasting and ignorance of key issues among editors and commissioners, resulting in a gap between what audiences value and what broadcasters offer. While difficult to prove empirically, it is commonly accepted that there is a lack of diversity among programme-makers. It is noted in the 2006 Report of the Select Committee on BBC Charter Review that the Bishop of

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<sup>15</sup> Ofcom Public Service Content in a Connected Society (2014), Section 1.25.2

<sup>16</sup> Ian Hislop, Broadcasters must have faith in religious TV, RadioTimes, 18 March 2014

<http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2014-03-18/ian-hislop-broadcasters-must-have-faith-in-religious-tv>

Southwark described *“the standard mindset of the media, and particularly the broadcasting services”* as *“the mindset of metropolitan secular humanism”*.<sup>17</sup>

25. Many senior broadcasters grew up in an era when religion was seen as irrelevant. As the then-BBC Director General Mark Thompson noted in a 2008 speech, 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.”*<sup>18</sup> 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.”*<sup>19</sup> We believe there is a need, therefore, to inform and educate not only the viewing and listening public but also - with a few exceptions - the broadcasters themselves and their commissioners, editors and senior executives.

26. Until recently, religious programming was generally regarded as a core element of public service broadcasting. Section 264(6) of the Communications Act 2003 sets down that programming about religion and other beliefs fulfils the purposes of public service broadcasting if it is in one of the following categories:

“(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)”.

27. The Sandford St Martin Trust welcomed Ofcom’s qualitative research into religious broadcasting (2004) which found that, in addition to Christian worship programmes, participants identified other output which they felt could usefully be included in a more modern “religious programmes” category. These included documentaries about specific moral issues; programmes about religious and ethnic minorities; history programmes with a faith or belief based focus; and news and current affairs programmes.

28. However, Ofcom’s own commissioned research reports, *How Online Media Services Have Fulfilled the Public Service Objectives*<sup>20</sup> and *Investment in TV Genres*,<sup>21</sup> conclude that

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<sup>17</sup> Ofcom Public Service Content in a Connected Society (2014), Section 1.25.2

<sup>18</sup> Mark Thompson, 2008 Theos lecture as cited by Sean Oliver-Dee, Religion and Identity: Divided Loyalties?, Theos p.13 <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/files/files/Reports/TheosFaithandIdentity.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> 'UK is getting MORE religious, says Schama: Historian says religion is becoming part of mainstream life again' in Daily Mail, 24 June 2014

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

<sup>20</sup> A report for Ofcom by Enders, September 2014

[http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/1.\\_Ofcom\\_report.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/1._Ofcom_report.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Ofcom PSB review by Mediatique, December 2014

[http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/Investment\\_in\\_TV\\_Genres.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/Investment_in_TV_Genres.pdf)



without there being a strong and enforceable public service requirement, the market is unlikely to provide trustworthy religious programming of a good standard.

29. The Trust notes with concern the Ofcom findings that recent changes to the PSB regime, including the removal of output requirements for religious programming, have resulted in their marginalisation or removal from the schedules of the commercial PSBs.”<sup>22</sup>

30. Of particular concern is the state of religious broadcasting at ITV, where Ofcom’s report indicates that spending on religious programme commissions dropped from £40 million in 2008 to £2 million in 2013; and that in 2012, ITV broadcast only 2 hours of religious programming.

31. The Trust also notes Ofcom’s findings that spending at Channel 4 on religious broadcasting dropped from £49m million to £20 million between 2008 and 2013.<sup>23</sup> This period coincided with Channel 4’s decision to dispense with the role of a Commissioning Editor for Religion and the elimination of any religious programming quota.

32. The same Ofcom-commissioned research suggests that the decline in religious programming is the result of the economics,

“further challenged by market transition with limited availability to derive compensating revenues in on-demand windows” and “smaller audiences unable to offset production costs”.<sup>24</sup>

33. The Trust’s own evidence reflects this. Of the 24 TV entries for the 2015 Sandford St Martin Trust Awards (for programmes broadcast between February 1, 2014 and January 31, 2015) there were no entries from ITV (Channel 3) or Channel 5, and only three entries from Channel 4. There were 23 entries for the new Sandford St Martin Children’s Broadcasting Award, but no entries were made by Channels 3, 4 or 5. We believe that this is a reflection of the trend on commercial mainstream channels of marginalising both the commissioning and the transmission of religious programmes.

34. The Sandford St Martin Trust is deeply concerned that declining investment has affected the quality of religious programming. While dismayed by the findings, we have no call to dispute Ofcom’s assessment of the practically negligible existence of religious programming on channels such as ITV and Channel 5.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mediatique 2014, p. 10

<sup>23</sup> Ofcom, PSB Output and Spend PSB Report 2013 – Information pack, August 2013, Figure 5, p. 7

<sup>24</sup> Mediatique 2014, p. 10

<sup>25</sup> Ofcom, Annex 7 – Key genre analysis, PSB Annual Report, Fig 28: ‘Religion and ethics: Programming: output hours’, December 2014, p. 37

[http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/Annex\\_7\\_-\\_Key\\_Genre\\_Analysis.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/Annex_7_-_Key_Genre_Analysis.pdf)

35. In this context, the decline in BBC programming spend on TV services seems to us particularly significant – particularly for religious programmes, which as a PSB genre is now so heavily reliant on the BBC for its continued existence.

**36. 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; to make good the deficiency as far as possible; and certainly not to reduce its own religious programming output.**

37. The Sandford St Martin Trust believes that all public broadcasters in the digital age – and particularly the BBC - should have explicit online policies supporting their public service goals and priorities, including religious content. The Trust agrees with Ofcom's own assessment that without there being a public service requirement, the market is unlikely to provide

“high-quality religious material that is original to online services, especially dealing with multiple faiths and when compared to television and radio content.”<sup>26</sup>

38. The Trust further notes the on-going proliferation of online “narrow-casting” to particular, sometimes extreme, religious interest groups. We believe that the need to balance such biased media is best done by a strong PSB network funded independently of any religious or political interest – with the onus, again, falling mainly on the BBC.

### **C. The BBC's own statements and aspects of its record in covering religion.**

**39. The Trust welcomes the BBC's prominent acknowledgment, on page 49 of its September 2015 Charter Review report, 'British Bold Creative: The BBC's programmes and services in the next Charter', that Ofcom regards religious programming as one of several “immediate issues”. The Trust also notes that, in the next sentence of its report, the BBC says: “We have designed our proposals to address these needs”.<sup>27</sup>**

**40. However we observe with regret that the BBC makes no other reference to religious programming in this 99-page report – and we think it is significant that this is the only programme genre on the list of “immediate issues” which is not addressed in the BBC's proposals for the next Charter period.**

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<sup>26</sup> Enders 2014 Case Study: Faithology p. 5

<sup>27</sup> BBC 'British Bold Creative' September 2015, page 49

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

41. The Trust applauds much of what the BBC has achieved in religious broadcasting. In recent years, BBC programmes and programme-makers have won many of our awards and commendations. We think it important that the winning programmes were not all made by the BBC's Religion and Ethics department. 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.

42. These award-winning TV and radio programmes include 'The Story of the Jews', 'In the Footsteps of St Paul', 'Rev', 'Marvellous', 'Children of the Holocaust', 'Children of Kabul – An Uncertain Future', 'No Destination' and 'I Have A Dream', among others. Broadcasters who have been recognised for their BBC work include Melvyn Bragg, Simon Schama, Rabbi Lionel Blue, David Suchet, Ian Hislop, Rageh Omar, Lyse Doucet, Sally Magnusson, Tom Hollander and Mark Tully.<sup>28</sup>

43. This year 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.

44. 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."*<sup>30</sup>

45. We welcome the BBC's efforts to modernise its religious coverage and reflect the impact of religion on society. Ambitious broadcast events such as BBC3's Manchester Passion or Liverpool Nativity imaginatively used popular culture to engage huge live and broadcast audiences in religious programming.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, we applaud the BBC's decision to broadcast Songs of Praise from the migrant camp at Calais earlier this year in the face of pressure from some politicians and some parts of the media to cancel the broadcast.

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<sup>28</sup> [sandfordawards.org.uk/the-awards/](http://sandfordawards.org.uk/the-awards/)

<sup>29</sup> <http://sandfordawards.org.uk/news/press-releases/>

<sup>30</sup> <http://sandfordawards.org.uk/news/press-releases/>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/nov/06/bbc.christmas2006>

46. The Sandford St Martin Trust believes that the audience demand for religious programming on the BBC remains high. Confidential internal BBC audience figures for its factual series genre during 2014 indicate that the average audience for religious programmes was 1,512,341. This constitutes 10.2% of the available audience share and, in this aspect, religious programmes have outperformed BBC flagship programmes such as BBC 1's Imagine arts series and its investigative current affairs programme Panorama.

47. We were pleased to hear assurances from the BBC's Director of Radio, Helen Boaden, speaking at the Church and Media Conference in October this year, about the BBC's commitment to religious programming particularly on its various radio networks.

48. But – as we explained in letters to the BBC, copied to the BBC Trust, earlier this year - we are very concerned at the effective downgrading of the post of BBC head of religion as a result of budgetary cuts. BBC TV's Factual Commissioning division announced in January 2015 plans to merge the role of Commissioning Head of Religion with those of Science, Business and History. We were not reassured by the short responses we received.

49. Our chairman, the Rt Revd Nicholas Baines, Bishop of Leeds, wrote to Emma Swain, Controller, Factual Commissioning on January 29<sup>th</sup> 2015:

*"In light of the restructure, I am particularly interested in how these changes will affect the BBC's commissioning of religious programmes.*

*1. Who will take overall responsibility in the BBC for the range, quantity and quality of religious programming? And can you give assurances that your division will retain the specialist knowledge and expertise necessary for religion to be given adequate priority?*

*2. Will your division be issuing the new Head of Commissioning for Science, Business, History and Religion specific objectives and goals that will help ensure informed coverage of the range of religious beliefs and practices in the UK?*

*3. How much, and what sort of, religious programming does the BBC expect of each of its TV networks? And can you assure that there will continue to be religious output in peak or near."*

50. After a second letter, Ms Swain gave the following answers:

*"I can confirm that the Television Division will retain the specific knowledge necessary for religion to be given adequate priority.*

*The new Head of Commissioning for Science, Business, History and Religion will be given specific objectives and goals that will help ensure informed coverage across a range of religious beliefs and practices in the UK.*

*As per my last letter, our commitment to religious output in peak or near times on BBC1 and BBC2 remains unchanged. Our transmissions of original programming in religion and ethics on BBC1 and BBC2 have remained stable since 2008. Indeed almost all viewing to religion and ethics programming on PSBs in the UK is to programmes on BBC television. This is against a backdrop of significant efficiencies and reduction in many other areas of our output."*

51. We note that Ms Swain did not answer our first question: "Who will take overall responsibility in the BBC for the range, quantity and quality of religious programming?" We hope that someone in a more senior position may be able to answer now.

52. We also fear that future cuts outlined in the BBC Charter Review document of September 2015 will put further strain on the BBC's religious output. **In particular, we seek assurances that the proposal to set up a new BBC Studios production centre will not reduce the level of knowledge and expertise in the BBC's Religion and Ethics department.**

53. 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.

54. We reiterate our belief that – for all the reasons outlined above - the status of the role of 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.

55. But we are pleased that the BBC's Charter proposals give new reasons and opportunities for the BBC to give wider exposure to programme-makers with expertise in religious and spiritual matters. In its September 2015 Charter Renewal report it says:

"We want to take all the opportunities the internet creates to inform, educate and entertain in new ways... We're committing to work with like-minded organisations, large and small, on a new 'Ideas Service' that brings together what the BBC does across arts, culture, science, history and ideas with the work done by the country's most respected arts, cultural, scientific and intellectual institutions."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> BBC 'British Bold Creative' September 2015  
<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/pdf/futureofthebbc2015.pdf> p. 6

“Who will invest in high-quality British programming for radio, television and online? Ofcom is clear in its review of public service broadcasting that... audiences are ever more committed to the purposes of public service broadcasting. Ofcom found that the BBC remains the cornerstone of the PSB system.”<sup>33</sup>

“Another advantage of the BBC to the country’s sense of itself and community life is that it reflects, and reports on, the whole of the United Kingdom... Our services help connect audiences with their culture and heritage.”<sup>34</sup>

“What is the best mix of market-based and public solutions? What is the best way to fund services with different purposes? The choices made will vary by area and will, critically, depend on the weight society attaches to social, cultural and moral criteria, as well as to growth and efficiency.”<sup>35</sup>

“Across the Nations and regions of the UK we know that the public want us to do more to portray the full diversity of life throughout our programmes and services.”<sup>36</sup>

“Ofcom found some immediate issues emerging from their analysis: 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. We have designed our proposals to address these needs.”<sup>37</sup>

“The BBC’s most important task is to inform and explain, to contribute to a better-informed society, a more engaged citizenship and a world of greater understanding. Our mission must be to explain the complexity of the world we live in – to report the news that matters and provide the context and analysis that makes sense of it... The licence fee... supports the journalistic expertise and specialisms required to help sort the truth from the noise.”<sup>38</sup>

**These are the standards and the objectives which the BBC is setting for itself. To achieve these, it must give greater attention, priority and resources to religious programming across its networks. We urge the Trust to ask BBC management to submit proposals for the better coverage of religion and ethics.**

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid* p. 7

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* p.18

<sup>35</sup> *ibid* p. 21

<sup>36</sup> *ibid* p. 46

<sup>37</sup> *ibid* p. 49

<sup>38</sup> *ibid* p. 62

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## **About the Sandford St Martin Trust**

The Sandford St Martin Trust is a non-profit organisation, registered as a charitable trust in the UK.

The Trust is best known for making annual awards for the best television and radio programmes about religion, ethics and spirituality. The Sandford St Martin Awards are the most prestigious in their field, and have been won by some of the best-known names in broadcasting and journalism.

As well as making awards, the Trust acts as an advocate for excellence in broadcast coverage of religion, stimulating debate about the value of this kind of broadcasting and promoting religion, ethics and spirituality as important and rewarding subjects for programme makers to engage with.

In the past 15 months, the Trust has organised debates about religious broadcasting at the Edinburgh International Television Festival, the Media Society and the Sheffield Documentaries Festival. For details see [www.sandfordawards.org.uk](http://www.sandfordawards.org.uk)

The Trust takes a broad view of what religious broadcasting is and who it is for. It works to challenge limited and limiting perceptions of the genre and to highlight and encourage the innovative, thought-provoking and inspiring coverage of religion to be found throughout the broadcast schedules and, increasingly, online.

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.

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**Confidentiality statement**

Name: Rt Rev Nicholas Baines, Bishop of Leeds (Chair)

Name of organisation: Sandford St Martin Trust

**DECLARATION**

I confirm that the information I have submitted is a formal consultation response. It can be published in full on the BBC Trust's website, unless otherwise specified, and I authorise the BBC Trust to make use of the information in this response to meet its legal requirements. If I have sent my response by email, the BBC can disregard any standard e-mail text about not disclosing email contents and attachments.