



Submission to APPG on Religion in the Media

# Call for evidence: Inquiry into religious literacy in print and broadcast media

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Submitted by

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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 and Sandford St Martin Award winner.

## About the Sandford St Martin Trust

- i. The Sandford St Martin Trust promotes thought-provoking, distinctive broadcasting that engages with belief, ethics or morality and enhances the public understanding of religion. We believe a) that the media have an increasingly important and challenging role to play in interpreting world events, b) this cannot be done without acknowledging the complex roles religions play in both contemporary and historical human experience and c) a religiously literate media can promote greater understanding, increase tolerance and foster stronger communities at local, national and global levels.
- ii. Since 1978 the Trust has made annual awards for the best broadcast content about belief, religion, ethics and spirituality. The Sandford St Martin Awards are the UK's most prestigious prize for religious broadcasting and are open to a wide range of genres – news, current affairs factual, arts, music, drama and comedy - as well as to 'traditional' religious broadcasting. Winners are decided by panels of media professionals. Radio Times readers also vote in their thousands for their favourite TV or radio programme exploring religion from a list published in that magazine.
- iii. In addition to its awards, the Trust advocates at industry, regulatory and government levels for the place of broadcasting about religion in a healthy and diverse media ecosystem. Our outreach work promotes religion as an important and rewarding subject for content-makers and audiences to engage with. In recent years, we have produced events in partnership with the Commission for Belief in Public Life, the Edinburgh International Television Festival, Full Fact, House of St Barnabas, the Media Society, NUJ Training, Sheffield Doc/Fest and many more. More details can be found on our website: [www.sandfordawards.org.uk](http://www.sandfordawards.org.uk)
- iv. 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. Our Trustees include people with many years' experience of broadcasting and representing a wide variety of perspectives and faith backgrounds.

## What do you understand by the term 'religious literacy'?

- v. At its most basic level, religious literacy is the ability to discern and interpret how religion impacts on individual identity, society, politics and culture across time or place. A religiously literate journalist will be familiar with the history, beliefs and practices of the world's major faith traditions, how these have evolved in response to particular social, historical or cultural contexts, and how they manifest in a contemporary human context.

## What effect does a lack of religious literacy have on broadcast and/or print media?

- vi. Our definition of religious literacy highlights the inadequacy of understanding religions simply through learning about ritual practices, or exploring what religious texts or scriptures say.

However this is what many media professionals (and many audiences) understand when one talks about “religious broadcasting” or even “broadcasting about religion”.

- vii. It is our contention that, un-supplemented, such a limited interpretation of the genre leads to simplistic and inaccurate representations of religions as unchanging monoliths separate from what motivates people or informs how they interact with the world. This leads to prejudice and bigotry undermining relations between individuals and communities at local, national and global levels.
- viii. Religiously literate media reflect that
  - a) religions are internally diverse: e.g. there is huge variation around attitudes towards gender and gender roles within many religions<sup>1</sup>;
  - b) religions evolve and change over time: e.g. the American Southern Baptist convention went from supporting the moral legitimacy of abortion in the 1970s to reversing those resolutions and adopting its pro-life stance for which it is now widely known, in 2013 <sup>2</sup>;
  - c) and, religions are embedded in culture: politics, economics and society all intersect with religion<sup>3</sup>.
- ix. For those working in the media or broadcasting, religious literacy is only one dimension of overall cultural and professional competence. Lyse Doucet, BBC News’ chief international correspondent and a Sandford Award winner, said: “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”. <sup>4</sup>
- x. Journalists and broadcasters who ignore religion risk alienating audiences. According to a 2017 study, 84% of the world’s population identify with a religious group.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, the world is becoming more religious not less. To quote the late Sunday Times journalist AA Gill “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>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As an example of good practice we’d like to refer you to Hibjab & Me, (CTVC for Truetube.co.uk) shortlisted for the Sandford St Martin 2020 Children’s Award: <https://www.truetube.co.uk/film/hijab-me>

<sup>2</sup> An example of good practice: How a conference call sparked America’s abortion obsession, (Guardian video explainer) shortlisted for the SSM 2020 Journalism Award: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2019/aug/01/how-a-conference-call-sparked-americas-abortion-obsession-video-explainer>

<sup>3</sup> Example of good practice: Witness: The Feeling of Being Watched: Surveillance in a US-Arab Community (Al Jazeera English) shortlisted for the SSM 2020 Journalism Award: <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2019/11/feeling-watched-surveillance-arab-community-191124131307470.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ariel/32901415>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/a-holy-splendid-work-of-religious-comedy-q8gsz7hlccm>

## What effect does religious illiteracy have on decisions journalists make when assigning, researching, and reporting news stories?

- xi. When he was the BBC Director General, Mark Thompson noted that within the organisation he joined in 1979 there was an assumption “that the decline and marginalisation of religion was a straightforward corollary of modernism and was inevitable.”<sup>7</sup> This assumption persists in many parts of the industry today, where an active antipathy towards religion is possibly the last acceptable form of prejudice. The effect this has on the decisions journalists and content-producers make is huge.
- xii. **The ghettoisation of religious themes or content:** Religion is often treated by commissioners and editors as a marginalised or “specialist” concern. Translated into practice this means religion becomes the sole remit of one journalist or of a small department within an organisation, thereby absolving their colleagues from having to reflect how religion impacts on their own stories. Further, while these “experts” are often heavily over-used for “soft” coverage of religious holidays or for interviews with religious leaders, they are rarely asked to examine the big news stories through a religious lens which would lead to more nuanced and often a more accurate interpretation of events.
- xiii. To be clear: we believe there is a place for religion editors, specialist reporters or journalists at the heart of the media in the same way there are economics, political, sports and arts editors, but it needs to be recognised that:
  - a) expertise is not finite: religions and their impacts evolve and change, religious coverage must do the same;
  - b) religious journalism should be treated with the same seriousness and be subject to the same editorial scrutiny and standards as any other journalism, and editors and commissioners must be religiously literate and engaged enough to do so;
  - c) having a faith does not make one an expert in all aspects of any religion including one’s own; nor must a religiously literate journalist be religious;
  - d) most stories are complex - true understanding requires digging below the surface story to uncover the layers of motivation and meaning, including the religious dimension, below.
- xiv. **The misrepresentation of individuals and communities:** When the media fails to address unconscious bias in journalists and lack of diversity in newsrooms, reporting standards and the ability to tell stories about minority or non-mainstream groups suffer.
- xv. Michael Gerson, the Washington Post columnist noted how, during the 2000 US election, then-Governor of Texas George W Bush made the off-the-cuff remark that “we ought to take the log out of our own eye before calling attention to the speck in the eye of our neighbour”. His turn of phrase was reported by a number of news agencies as yet another example of the Governor’s curious use of language and general lack of literacy. What many reporters and their editors missed was the biblical reference to the Sermon on the Mount – an allusion that was not so obscure to Evangelical voters.<sup>8</sup>
- xvi. It can be argued that this sort of condescension and lack of religious literacy did much to widen the gap between religious constituencies and the mainly secular media – an effect which is still being felt in US politics today.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/bbc.boss.defends.track.record.on.religious.programming/21662.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2004/12/06/religion-rhetoric-and-the-presidency-a-conversation-with-michael-gerson/>

- xvii. Gerson wrote “It is often believed that public expressions of religion are themselves offensive – a violation of the truth of tolerance. Religious belief in this view, is protected by the Constitution, but for the sake of pluralism must be confined to the private sphere... This kind of secularism can lead to indifference – and when religion becomes an unavoidable topic, suspicion”.<sup>9</sup>
- xviii. Suspicion is further exacerbated when journalists become overly dependent on the same “religious” spokespeople and commentators. The journalist Barney Zwartz, a former religion editor for The Age, wrote that in the wake of 9/11 “The (Australian) media went constantly to Sheikh Hilali, the head of the Lakemba mosque in Sydney. They did this from laziness, ignorance of alternative voices and, by far the most important, the likelihood that he would say something embarrassing. Melbourne Muslims constantly told me he represented only Lakemba – that is, not even all Sydney Muslims, let alone Melbourne’s.”<sup>10</sup>
- xix. Journalistic overdependence on a small set of religious spokespeople is not unknown in the UK. The journalist Innes Bowen was prompted to write a guide to the main Islamic movements in Britain today and the religious trends which inform their ideologies, when, as a BBC news producer, she was shocked by the lack of curiosity and ignorance exhibited by “politicians, interfaith groups, police and journalists who interact with these Islamic groups” about the religion thinking that informed their feelings and actions<sup>11</sup>.
- d) It can be argued this tendency to “latch on to presentable Muslim interlocutors, or solicit from them the right public messages, and reward them with ‘representative’ status”<sup>12</sup> has been deleterious for the wider British Muslim community. During the early 2000s, the Muslim Council of Britain was much cited in both the media and by politicians as the quasi-official representative of all British Islam. Later, when members of the organisation were “exposed” as supporters of Hamas or of transnational caliphate, Bowen writes, the MCB and its component groups were damaged because these revelations were “so starkly at odds with their public image.”<sup>13</sup> The lesson for journalists is that no religious group or individual should ever enjoy sole spokesman status.
- xx. **Distrust in the media and the growth of ‘fake news’:** It is generally acknowledged that we are living in a time of increasing political disenfranchisement and hardening cultural divides; but if there is one thing that unites consumers from across political, geographic and social strata, it is the belief that the news and media are biased.<sup>14</sup>
- xxi. When people rarely see themselves, their stories or their values depicted in the media they are offered, their trust is eroded. To rebuild it, the media must begin by including the voices of a broader range of contributors. This means both better representation within the industry, but also the respectful engagement and inclusion of people with different beliefs on air.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/blind-spot-9780195374377?cc=au?lang=en?&lang=en&>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/religion-in-the-media-how-has-it-changed-where-is-it-going-why-d/10096622>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cmcsoxford.org.uk/resources/book-reviews/bowen-inness-2014-medina-in-birmingham-najaf-in-brent>

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/23/medina-in-birmingham-najaf-brend-british-islam-innes-bowen-review>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.edelman.com/news-awards/2020-edelman-trust-barometer> and <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/16/do-britons-trust-press>

- xxii. This need is particularly acute in an ecosystem increasingly dominated by social media where religious stereotypes or misreporting can lead to social unrest or even endanger lives.<sup>15</sup>
- xxiii. Speaking of social media, the writer Frank Cottrell-Boyce said “If our cultural arbiters vacate the field on which our young people wrestle with the great questions, then other forces will step in. And if we don’t help young people grapple with the complexity of those questions, then there are other people who will cheerfully come along with murderously simple answers.”<sup>16</sup>

### What steps should be taken to better equip journalists when engaging with issues relating to faith?

- xxiv. We believe this is a critical moment for the future of religious broadcasting in the UK: the rapid evolution of media markets, shaped by the growth of the internet, declining spend and output by public service broadcasters, and, market developments, either individually or in combination, have affected core religious output. And yet at the same time, there is significant consumer demand for good religious content.<sup>17</sup>
- xxv. Any efforts to better equip journalists and content makers to engage with issues relating to faith must begin with a more widespread acknowledgement within the industry that religion matters.
- xxvi. We congratulate the BBC for its 2017 internal Religion and Ethics Review<sup>18</sup>. This was a valuable exercise and an opportunity for people working at all levels of the organisation to step back and examine their prejudices and limitations when it comes to religion. We believe, at the very least, it has resulted in a greater understanding about the complex and crucial role religion plays in understanding complex stories. This sort of exercise now needs to be adopted by all public service broadcasters (PSBs) and strategies need to be devised to extend this ethos to the wider media.
- xxvii. We would particularly like to call upon Channel 4 to publicly engage with the importance of good content around belief and religion. The channel describes its public service mission as follows: “To champion unheard voices. To innovate and take bold creative risks. To inspire change in the way we lead our lives. To stand up for diversity across the UK.”<sup>19</sup> As much as ethnicity or race, sexuality or gender, physical ability or disability, religion should be at the heart of what the channel does and how it expresses itself.

Over the last decade, has religious literacy in the media improved, remained the same or deteriorated? If it has changed for the better or worse, please explain how?

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/opinion/coronavirus-india.html>,  
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/04/america-rightwing-christian-preachers-virus-hoax>  
<https://fullfact.org/news/muslims-uk-viral-poster-factchecked/>  
<http://ciris.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/TPNRD-Religion-and-Fake-News.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://sandfordawards.org.uk/4950-2/>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/42580/psbr-3.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/42580/psbr-3.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/religion\\_and\\_ethics\\_review.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/religion_and_ethics_review.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.channel4.com/corporate/about-4/what-we-do/channel-4s-remit>

- xxviii. To our knowledge there has been no quantifiable or qualifiable assessment done regarding the progress of religious literacy in the media and so any answer made here is based on observation, extrapolation and anecdote.
- xxix. We note that in 2015 Ofcom described religious programming as one of several “immediate issues” of concern: “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>20</sup>
- xxx. We note also that there has been a dramatic decline in the hours and investment in named religious content by ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 since this element of the PSB requirement was removed in 2008<sup>21</sup>.
- xxxi. Further, Channel 4 has not had a dedicated Commissioning Editor for Religion since 2009.
- xxxii. We believe the above two factors point to a general decline in religious literacy within commercial PSBs. The award-winning American documentary filmmaker Abigail Disney has spoken about how it is the practice of some of her colleagues to censor religion in their work: “There’s an allergy to religion and spirituality in general and when they find a character who refers a lot to their faith, they judiciously snip the references to Jesus and to God and to prayer and to the Bible with the conscientiousness they would use if the character’s digestive tract had made a terrible sound... I believe this is a terrible weakness and it undermines the reach of the films we make.”<sup>22</sup>
- xxxiii. We have argued through this submission that to ignore religion is to leave a gaping silence at the heart of broadcasting. We would contend further that the antipathy expressed by some content makers to religion is both an indication of their own lack of religious literacy, and, because of the media’s reach, an active proponent for religious illiteracy among consumers.
- xxxiv. It is also our observation that the withdrawal of the commercial TV channels from a core element of public service broadcasting has increased the BBC’s obligation to provide such coverage and to make good the deficiency as far as possible – however we believe, like politics, economics or culture, religion is too important to be left to the guardianship of one organisation alone.

### What steps can a) universities, b) journalists, c) publishers, d) broadcasters and e) regulators take to improve religious literacy in media?

- xxxv. We will answer with regard to what steps b) journalists, c) publishers, d) broadcasters and e) regulators can take as this falls within our area of work:

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<sup>20</sup> (emphasis ours) Para 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>21</sup> 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](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb2013/output_and_spend.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://tfrl.org/business-media/>

- xxxvi. **Commitment at regulatory, commissioning and editorial levels to the assertion that religion matters:** Re-instate religion as a key element in the PSB requirement. Re-introduce religion editors at commissioning and departmental levels. Re-write remits so the commitment to the representation and exploration of religion and how religion impacts on the world around us is understood by all journalists and content-makers.
- xxxvii. **Diversity:** Lack of diversity and representation in the media has a direct impact on what stories get told and how they are told. This is as true about religion as it is about race, culture or class and media organisations should actively seek to broaden both the religious profiles of those working for their organisations as well as the contributors who feature in their work.
- xxxviii. **Training:** Organisational commitment to religious literacy needs to be built from the ground up and religion should be a core part of journalism training, but also, because religions are not static, organisations need to provide opportunities for continued professional development and education.
- xxxix. **Resources:** If religious literacy matters then we need to invest greater resources in furthering it – both in terms of training and employing religiously literate people throughout the industry.

#### What public policy changes could improve religious literacy in the media?

- xl. The requirement to promote religious literacy should be introduced to the remits or public purposes of all PSBs.
- xli. We suggest that this could be drafted as follows: “Promoting Religious Literacy: consumers and users can rely on the PSBs 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”.