



Submission to:

Communications Committee: The future of Channel 4 inquiry

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Submitted by the Rt Rev Nicholas Baines, Bishop of Leeds
Chair of the Sandford St Martin Trust

E-mail: bishop.nick@westyorkshiredales.anglican.org

"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 Chief Executive of the Radio Authority Tony Stoller; and the former BBC media correspondent Torin Douglas. Other trustees add wide 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 Channel 4 and ITV 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

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/ldbhc/128/12811.htm#note51>

³ Select Committee on BBC Charter Review Second Report (2006), para 141 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbhc/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/psbreview/psb2013/output_and_spend.pdf

religions and systems of belief, to be able to better assess and analyse different interpretations".⁵

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 Trust believes Channel 4 plays an essential part in the UK's broadcasting ecology – with a cross-subsidy model which provides output which reflects a diverse range of alternative voices, representing faiths and belief systems from around the world.

8. 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 overtake 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.⁷

Remit

9. As part of its current PSB remit, Channel 4 has a responsibility to provide high-quality programming reflecting the cultural diversity of the UK. We believe this obligation is ever more important in the modern world. In particular, there is need for greater understanding of religious issues, in order to deliver proper coverage of world affairs and community issues in the UK and the clear market failure in religious programming as a result of changes to the PSB regime in commercial broadcasting. We believe that Channel 4's assumption of "diversity" has focused on ethnicity, sexuality and regional difference and that religious diversity needs to be properly acknowledged and recognised in this mix.

10. There is clear evidence that commercial broadcasters are failing to meet the demand for religious broadcasting, despite its appeal to potential audiences. Ofcom-commissioned research in 2014, *How Online Media Services Have Fulfilled the Public Service Objectives*⁸ and *Investment in TV Genres*⁹, concluded that without there being a strong and enforceable public

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

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

⁷ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/fullstorywhatdoesthecensustellusaboutreligionin2011/2013-05-16>

⁸ http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/1_Ofcom_report.pdf

⁹ http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/Investment_in_TV_Genres.pdf

service requirement, the market is unlikely to provide trustworthy religious programming of a good standard.

11. The same Ofcom-commissioned research suggested that the decline in religious programming is the result of 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”.¹⁰

12. An example of the decline in religious broadcasting due to commercial pressures is ITV, where Ofcom reported that spending on religious programme commissions dropped from £40 million in 2008 to £2 million in 2013.¹¹

13. The Trust recognises that the environment in which public service broadcasters operate has changed radically in recent years, but we still believe the PSB system remains as relevant as ever. While new forms of digital content and services can make valuable public and social contributions to the audiences’ lives, their reach is fragmented and no platform or other media matches the ability of the main PSB channels to reach mass audiences every single day. In this world where digital media creates tailored content for “bubble audiences”, PSBs – including Channel 4 – play an important role in exposing audiences to alternative views and beliefs than those espoused by their own social networks.

14. The Trust believes that all public broadcasters in the digital age 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 specific public service requirement, the market is unlikely to provide “high-quality religious material that is original to online services, especially dealing with multiple faiths.”¹²

15. The Trust further notes the current 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 commercial, religious or political interest. 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

¹⁰ Ofcom PSB Mediatique, December 2014
http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/Investment_in_TV_Genres.pdf

¹¹ 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

¹² Enders 2014 Case Study: Faithology p. 5
<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb3/5. Faithology.pdf>

ethnic minorities; history programmes with faith or belief based focus; and news and current affairs programmes.¹³

16. 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 Channel 4's and the BBC's obligation to provide such coverage and to make good the deficiency as far as possible. Certainly neither should reduce its religious programming output.

17. The Trust has also noted Ofcom's findings that spending at Channel 4 on religious broadcasting dropped from £49 million to £20 million between 2008 and 2013.¹⁴ 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.

18. Research from the independent production sector suggests that an increasing number of content providers are responding to commercial gain and global investment. That encourages production in "profitable formats" leaving gaps in other areas of provision. According to a recent study, UK independent TV producers are shying away from riskier programming and documentaries to focus on factual entertainment formats.¹⁵ In this atmosphere the platforms that non-commercial broadcasters such as Channel 4 provide for original content – including religious and ethical content – are vital for the overall creative sector.

Ownership

19. Of particular concern to the Trust is the effect that privatisation would have on the state of religious broadcasting at Channel 4.

20. The Trust has noted 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.¹⁶

21. We note also Ofcom's research on the Importance and delivery of PSB purposes (2008-2014) which found that audiences are placing increased importance on many of the PSB purposes, and particularly on the importance that PSB programmes "show different kinds of cultures within the UK" (66%) and

¹³ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.gov.uk/binaries/research/radio-research/rpandbc.pdf>

¹⁴ Ofcom, PSB Output and Spend PSB Report 2013 – Information pack, August 2013, Figure 5 p. 7

¹⁵ The Economic and Cultural Role of UK Digital and TV Independents, Arts and Humanities Research Council, <http://cowboyorindies.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/bennett-strange-kerr-medrado-2012-multiplatforming-psb-industry-report.pdf>

¹⁶ *Ibid*, Mediatique 2014, p. 10

that PSB programmes should help audiences “understand what’s going on in the world today” (80%).¹⁷

22. We agree with Channel 4’s chief executive David Abraham’s warning that privatisation would severely impact the channel’s remit to produce “programmes of great value” British public¹⁸ and Lord David Puttnam’s assertion that it is “utterly illusory” that a privatised Channel 4 would continue to invest in high quality news programming and documentaries.¹⁹ The notion that privatisation would not have the direct impact of lessening Channel 4’s already small religious and ethical output is even more far-fetched.

23. The Trust believes that plurality of ownership is essential to guarantee diversity of content and that Channel 4 plays an important role in the UK’s Public Service Broadcasting ecology as a publicly-owned, commercially-funded, public service broadcaster with a track-record for reinvesting its profits back into programmes with comparatively high audience satisfaction levels.

24. Ofcom’s record in encouraging the consolidation of ownership among broadcasters (ITV plc, Global, Bauer) means that we have no confidence that a privatised Channel 4 company would remain independent even if it started out that way.

Recommendations

25. The Trust favours Channel 4 remaining in non-commercial ownership – and our preferred model would be for a revised ownership pattern providing inclusivity of owners with a clear remit to provide diverse output.

26. That remit should include informing and educating viewers about the place and nature of religion in the modern world – both at home and abroad.

¹⁷ Ofcom PSB Annual Report 2015, July 2015, Figure 8, p. 18
http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb2015/PSB_Annual_Report_summary.pdf

¹⁸ David Abraham, Enders Analysis speech, <http://mediatel.co.uk/newsline/2016/03/08/david-abraham-makes-case-against-privatisation-of-channel-4/>

¹⁹ The Guardian 31/3/2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/mar/31/new-press-regulation-regime-is-business-as-usual-says-labour-peer>