

# Impartiality review of BBC coverage of religion and belief

Submission by the British Humanist Association

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. We promote Humanism, support and represent the non-religious, and promote a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief. Founded in 1896, we have around 30,000 members and supporters, and over 70 local and special interest affiliates.

## 1. 'Religion Or Belief'

The BBC persistently fails to understand and take seriously its obligation to deal impartially with matters concerning 'religion or belief'.

Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (and hence the Human Rights Act) is cast in terms of 'religion or belief'. Accumulated case law under the Convention makes it plain that 'belief' includes humanist views.

In common with other public authorities, the BBC is bound by sn.6 of the Human Rights Act 1998 ("It is unlawful for a public authority to act in a way which is incompatible with a Convention right"), by the Equality Act 2006 sn.52 ("It is unlawful for a public authority exercising a function to do any act which constitutes discrimination") and by the Equality Act 2010 sn.149 (public authorities must "have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination" on grounds of religion or belief).

More specifically, the Communications Act 2003 sn.264 defined public service television broadcasting as requiring that output include "a suitable quantity and range of programmes dealing with . . . religion and other beliefs". The definition of 'beliefs' in the Act ('a collective belief in, or other adherence to, a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles or of mystical or transcendental doctrines') plainly includes Humanism, and anyway in the House of Lords debate when the Government introduced the amendment including these words, the Minister made explicit that Humanism was included.<sup>1</sup>

The Agreement between the BBC and the Government that complements the current BBC Charter makes clear the obligation on the BBC that it "reflects and strengthens cultural identities through original content at local, regional and national level . . ." and that it has regard to "the importance of reflecting different religious and other beliefs".

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<sup>1</sup> Lord McIntosh for the Government said that the aim was to "add a reference to other beliefs, which would include ethical systems or philosophies such as humanism" (House of Lords, 1 July 2003, col 784). The BBC ignored this legislation: despite two debates in the Lords that had made plain that the amendment was intended to produce a change of practice, "there were no BBC papers produced on Section 264(6) . . . insofar as they referred to programmes about religion and other beliefs" (BBC response to Freedom of Information request April 2005).

All this is very clear, and the obligation to recognise non-religious beliefs alongside religions is entirely in harmony with the general development of the law in employment and delivery of services over the last fifteen years. These laws apply to other “strands” also, including disability, race, sex and sexual orientation. The BBC would not dream of adopting policies that routinely disregarded the law against discrimination on these other grounds, and yet in its policies and guidelines it persistently discriminates in favour of religion and against non-religious beliefs - principally by entirely ignoring the latter.

The BBC seems to devalue Humanism as a lifescape for not following the model of the Abrahamic religions – for its lack of rituals and doctrine, founding figures and authoritative source books comparable to the sacred books of a religion. Such criticism betrays thinking cramped entirely within a religious frame. Humanism is an approach to life based on personal responsibility for one’s life, not on reliance on authority. It is defined by its approach to moral problems, not by specific doctrines. It is based on a consistent philosophy that can be traced as a (broken but always resumed) line throughout human history, and the humanist tradition includes many of the key figures of civilisation.

The BBC’s blinkered bias against non-religious beliefs shows in many ways, not least their absence from the title of its Religion and Ethics department, suggesting that ethics are inevitably linked to religion, and from the same title being used for the relevant website, where a page on Humanism is subordinated to a section on Atheism within a group of pages called simply “Religions”. This is not a quirk of the website: the BBC’s stance is consistently one of seeing religion as an exhaustive categorisation, while non-religious people are sufficiently seen as those who reject and criticise religion. There is no admission by the BBC - now almost uniquely among public bodies and wider society - that non-religious lifescapes can have any independent existence and that for their followers religion may be a total irrelevance.

Key examples of this lie in the so-called Purpose Remits and the BBC Executive’s plans to implement them (on which see the Annex) and in the Editorial Guidelines<sup>2</sup>. These display their bias not just incidentally (e.g. in sections 4.4.5, 9.4.3) but throughout section 12 on “Religion” (*sic*). The section starts badly: it refers to the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 “forbid[ding] a person from using threatening words or behaviour . . . *‘if he intends thereby to stir up religious hatred’* without making clear that the Act defines religious hatred as “hatred against a group of persons defined by reference to religious belief *or lack of religious belief*” (emphasis added).

Far more extraordinarily, it goes on to define “religious output . . . as output dealing with the religious views and/or beliefs of a religion or religious denomination. . .” It requires that “the beliefs and practices of religions and denominations must be described with due accuracy” and that “contributors to religious output should not be allowed to undermine or denigrate the religious beliefs of others.” There is no suggestion anywhere that people without religious beliefs should be dealt with fairly - not even any acknowledgement that they exist.

This blindness applies even to the present review, in announcing which the BBC referred only to religion<sup>3</sup>. It was very welcome, therefore, that when representatives of the present review attended a meeting of the BBC’s Standing Conference on Religion or Belief they made it clear that they understood their remit to include the full spectrum of religions and beliefs.

**Our first recommendation to the Review is therefore that it makes clear to the BBC that it must recognise that its duties of fairness, impartiality and non-discrimination refer not just to religion**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/>

<sup>3</sup> See [www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press\\_releases/2012/breadth\\_of\\_opinion.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2012/breadth_of_opinion.html)

**but to the full range of 'religion or belief', that this includes positive lifestyles that are not religious and are not merely reactions to religion, and that it amend its editorial guidelines and other policies accordingly. We would be happy to advise further.**

## **2. Measuring 'religion or belief'**

Underlying the premise of the present review is the idea that due weight should be given to different 'religions or beliefs' in a way that is fair or reasonable. The Editorial Guidelines make the point that the BBC is: "committed to reflecting a wide range of opinion across...output as a whole and over an appropriate timeframe so that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under-represented".

The assumption must be that it is possible to divide up the British population in religious terms and then, subject perhaps to some test of the significance of their contribution, to apportion due weight to each segment of the population and to reflect and represent their opinions accordingly in programming.

We would like to suggest that serious thought is given at the outset of your report to the question of the segmentation of the British public by religion and belief. There are three principal ways in which religion and belief can be defined and they yield very different results. They are: (i) practice, (ii) belief, (iii) religious identity and (iv) cultural affiliation. Each may have its place in the BBC's policy decisions.

### **(i) Practice**

By religious practice we mean attendance at a religious service by religious people - i.e. not including attendance by non-religious people for religious weddings, funerals etc. In these terms a headline breakdown would be as follows<sup>4</sup>:

- 78.5% never attend a religious service
- 2.5% attend less than annually
- 7.5% attend annually
- 4.5% attend monthly
- 7.0% attend weekly

The total of those who ever attend a religious service other than for social reasons is no more than 21.5%.

### **(ii) Belief**

Belief is more complicated to measure than practice, identity or affiliation, all three of which, while difficult enough, are more or less objective facts of behaviour or self-labelling, whereas belief may be fairly slippery even in an individual's own mind. Nonetheless, there are plenty of indicative surveys, of which we quote two.

(a) In 2006, when asked which of two or three possible answers approximated most closely to their own views, 36% of the population chose only the answers that were broadly humanist, rejecting those that involved any reference to religion<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Data from the 28th Report of the British Social Attitudes Survey, published in 2011

<sup>5</sup> Ipsos MORI poll, published in January 2007. Answers rejected by the 36% included that "Religious beliefs are needed for a complete understanding of the universe" and that "People need religious teachings in order to understand what is right and wrong".

(b) In 2011, when asked the Census question 'What is your religion?' 61% named a religion (including 53% Christianity) and 39% replied 'No religion'. (The variation from the actual Census results, for which see below, may perhaps be attributed to a greater propensity to defer to received opinion in an official Census than with a pollster.) However, *only 29% of the total* replied Yes to the question 'Are you religious?' (65% said No); and *only 48% of those who called themselves Christians* said they believed that Jesus Christ was a real person who died and came back to life and was the son of God.<sup>6</sup>

These results seem to indicate a figure for belief that is moderately meaningful of something like 30%.

### **(iii) Religious identity**

By identity we refer to the labels or descriptions people adopt for themselves. In these terms a headline breakdown would be as follows<sup>7</sup>:

- 50% non-religious
- 23% non-Anglican Christian
- 20% Church of England
- 5% other religions.

The total who identify with a religious identity seems to be about 50%.

### **(iv) Cultural affiliation**

The 2001 Census was often taken to indicate religious identity and doubtless the new figures from the 2011 Census will be similarly misused. Those figures (excluding the seven per cent who chose not to answer the census question) are:

- 59% Christian
- 25% non-religious
- 5% Muslim
- 1.5% Hindu
- 2.5% other religions.

In fact, as academic work on the way people answer the census question has demonstrated and as the Office for National Statistics itself has acknowledged in a paper to Parliament about their draft Census questions, Census data – because of the leading wording of the question – actually indicate not religious identity but cultural affiliation, which may be as weak (to use examples given by the ONS in the run-up to the 2011 Census) as having been baptised or having got married in church.

Even so, these 2011 figures show a huge shift away from Christianity even in cultural terms and a near doubling of the non-religious population.

We would suggest that identity and belief are the most relevant measures for the BBC to take into account in its policy making. Plainly there are more people who are in some meaningful sense religious than the small number who regularly go to places of worship. Equally, it is absolutely clear that the figures for religious affiliation are indicative of little more (so far as so-called Christians are concerned) than a fairly thoughtless cultural conformity.

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<sup>6</sup> YouGov poll, published in March 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Data from the 28th Report of the British Social Attitudes Survey, published in 2011.

On these measures we would therefore suggest that those with beliefs, either religious (mainly Christian) or broadly humanist, each account for about 30-35% of the population, while in terms of identity about half the population are religious (mainly Christian<sup>8</sup>) and half non-religious.

It is also relevant to the BBC that Christian proportion is declining rapidly (both identity and belief have roughly halved over the last fifty years) while the non-religious proportion is increasing rapidly over time, with non-Christian religions also showing modest increases.

**It is immediately apparent that the BBC's output is radically out of alignment with the beliefs and identity of the British public as indicated by all these surveys.** We return to this below.

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<sup>8</sup> The figures in the Census for non-Christian religious affiliation are probably not as "soft" as those for Christians but a considerable proportion of both ethnic Sikhs and ethnic Jews are entirely secular, as the Office for National Statistics has acknowledged: the need to "capture" these Sikhs was one reason they gave for persisting in 2011 with what they admitted was a leading question.

### 3. Humanism and non-religious lifestyles

Throughout recorded history non-religious people across the world have held naturalistic, rational, ethical beliefs. They have (increasingly in recent centuries) trusted to the scientific method, evidence and reason to discover truths about the universe and placed human welfare and happiness at the centre of their ethical decision-making.

Today, people who share these beliefs and values are generally called humanists and this combination of attitudes is called Humanism. Roughly speaking, the word humanist in this context now means someone who:

- trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works (and as a consequence rejects the idea of the supernatural and is therefore an atheist or agnostic)
- makes ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

For many people who hold them (as we have indicated, perhaps about 30% to 40% of the British population) **these beliefs are implicit rather than explicit**. The word ‘humanist’, differently from other religions or beliefs, is a descriptive post-hoc label denoting actual beliefs rather than a self-assumed label of identity. That said, these beliefs form a coherent whole and have recurred in the same combination throughout history.

Many millions of people in Britain share this way of living and of looking at the world. Humanism is in effect the default position of the great majority of those in this country who do not have a religious belief. But millions of these non-religious people have not heard the word or do not understand ‘humanist’ and so do not realise that it applies to them<sup>9</sup>. As a consequence they do not know that, far from being somehow deficient in their values – as is so often implied or stated by religious spokespersons, not least in BBC broadcasts – they have an outlook on life that is coherent and widely-shared, that has inspired some of the world’s greatest artists, writers, scientists, philosophers and social reformers, and that has a millennia-long tradition in both the western and eastern worlds.

This non-religious outlook on life, Humanism, is a lifestyle of self-reliance and self-determination but, so far from being solipsistic, is based on shared ethical reasoning and social responsibility. It has no liturgy, no holy day, no routine ceremonies. Since this is the case, there is little incentive for people to join the organised humanist movement unless they are seeking to find out more about Humanism or are committed to promoting it or the movement’s campaigns. Some of them reject the idea of putting any label on themselves or joining any organisation while still sharing most or all of the organised humanist movement’s beliefs. Nevertheless, the British Humanist Association has over 30,000 members and supporters and over 42,000 followers through our social media channels. We perform many thousands of humanist funerals and other ceremonies to the public each year. A separate Humanist Society of Scotland has about 10,000 members and supporters and as a provider of legally recognised marriages (unlike the BHA) it conducts more weddings than the Catholic Church

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one of the commonest expressions by people joining the BHA is to the effect that they realise they have been humanists all their lives but never knew there was a name for their beliefs or an organisation for people like them.

in Scotland – almost 3,000 per annum. Both our organisations are growing year on year in line with demographic shifts.

Figures given for the non-religious in section two above are significant enough to indicate that broadly humanist ideas and ethics are of importance to a large part of the population. The British Humanist Association is, moreover, an important participant in the life of the nation, providing non-religious ceremonies, contributing very significantly to the evolution of religious education, contributing to public debate on matters of ethical importance from assisted dying to law and religion, and affiliated to growing international humanist organisations that are active in the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union and elsewhere on matters of human rights.

**We have therefore been perplexed and gravely disappointed by the failure of the BBC to reflect and strengthen humanist cultural identity or to give Humanism as a coherent lifestance its due recognition in its output.** It is to that output that we now turn.

#### 4. BBC output relating to religion or belief - types and critique

We suggest that religion or belief output can be seen as falling into three categories, all of which we see as falling within the scope of your review:

- (a) Programmes by believers about religion and belief, sometimes for fellow-believers - e.g. Prayer for the Day (R4) or Songs of Praise (BBC1) - but sometimes directed at the population at large - e.g. Thought for the Day (R4).
- (b) Documentary and discussion programmes about religion and belief designed to educate, entertain and inform - e.g. The Moral Maze (R4), Beyond Belief (R4), Sunday Morning Live (BBC1) or Sunday (R4).
- (c) News coverage or current affairs programmes related to religion or belief – e.g. a BBC News Channel report on cases of alleged Christian persecution or an episode of a current affairs series on a religion or belief subject.

In summary, we believe that the BBC is institutionally biased towards religion, as we shall illustrate below. This was in effect admitted by the former director-general Mark Thompson when he said in a speech to the Christian think-tank Theos on 14 October 2008:

the BBC has maintained the daily and weekly presence of religion on its services with more consistency and commitment over decades than any other British media organization, and also more than most of the rest of what you could call public Britain. This engagement with religion not as story or controversy but as faith and lived experience is, I accept, unusual in the rest of the media. . . [and it includes] liturgical or contemplative religious content.

We have since the passage of the Communications Act made various attempts to persuade the BBC to pay attention to Humanism, without any result. Typically the BBC defends its output on the grounds that:

- (a) most programmes are secular (in the sense that football and cooking are 'secular')
- (b) many humanists take part in programmes (in the sense that scientists and other public figures contribute on science and other topics, but without any indication that they are humanists)
- (c) sometimes humanists are invited as such to take part in religious programmes (but always as a foil for religious ideas rather than to explain their own beliefs).

These arguments ignore both the demographic facts on the ground and the inclusive nature of the BBC's obligations in relation to 'religion or belief'. The non-religious population deserves to have its ethical, existential, philosophical ideas and its lived experience taken seriously, explored, examined and tested.

We have from time to time had meetings with BBC officials up to director-general level. In December 2008 the then director-general Mark Thompson told a BHA group (including Lord Macdonald and Baroness Whitaker) that he agreed with our analysis and intended that there should in future be programmes on Humanism: at the meeting he himself suggested a television series on the history of humanist ideas and Humanism.



He subsequently failed to send us a promised letter commenting on a position statement we left with him (at the meeting he said that he found nothing to disagree with in it). When we sought to pursue the matter we were referred to the head of religion and ethics who told us he knew nothing of our meeting and that our only recourse was to persuade an independent production company to propose programmes about Humanism to the BBC.

**We note that your terms of reference say that your review will not “draw conclusions from the quantity of coverage except where it is considered to have been a contributory factor affecting impartiality”. It is decidedly our view that the quantity of sympathetic coverage of religion affects the impartiality of the BBC’s output.**

We now review the current lack of impartiality in the three types of output identified above.

### **(a) Programmes by believers about belief**

This sort of output is totally religious, disproportionately Christian, and disproportionately Anglican. Every week Radio 4 alone devotes well over three hours to broadcasting by (almost always Christian) believers about their beliefs.<sup>10</sup> By contrast there has never to our knowledge been any broadcast presented by humanists on the subject of Humanism. Occasionally humanists have been allowed to broadcast on local radio in slots similar to Thought for the Day.

#### Thought for the Day

Thought for the Day itself is a perpetual irritation to a large proportion of the non-religious population. It is the most prominent radio programme dealing with religion or belief because of its positioning within the Today programme. Yet it is explicitly discriminatory against atheists and humanists, being as a matter of policy reserved for religious figures who from time to time use it to disparage non-religious views and to interfere in matters of current political controversy without there being any right of reply or balance.

The BBC has consistently rejected complaints by saying that there is room for a religious reflection in the midst of the quotidian secular concerns of the rest of the Today programme<sup>11</sup>, an argument that is totally incompatible with the legal equivalence of religious and non-religious beliefs and which, in its misapplication of the word ‘secular’ as if it had any relevance to the exclusion of non-religious beliefs, could as well be applied to the ten o’clock news or to a cricket commentary.

The disproportionate amount of time devoted to Christian broadcasting is an inheritance from days when religion was almost universal and the Church of England was far more representative of the

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This calculation is based on a typical week as follows:

Saturday: Prayer for the Day (2 mins)  
Thought for the Day (3 mins)  
Sunday: Something Understood (30 mins) - twice  
Sunday Worship (38 mins)  
Weekdays: Prayer for the Day (2 mins)  
Thought for the Day (3 mins)  
Daily Service (15 mins)

This excludes all religious magazine or discussion programmes, on which see below.

<sup>11</sup>

For example: “In the midst of the three-hour ‘Today’ programme devoted to overwhelmingly secular concerns . . . the BBC judges it appropriate to offer a brief, uninterrupted interlude of spiritual reflection . . . The BBC believes that all licence fee payers have the right to hear their reasonable views and beliefs reflected on its output. Within ‘Thought for the Day’ a careful balance is maintained of voices from different Christian denominations and other religions with significant membership in the UK. . . Non-religious voices are also heard extensively across the general output. . . The vast swathe of general programmes makes little reference to religion . . .” - BBC letter to a correspondent, January 2007.

nation than it is today. But the BBC's Reithian Christianising mission has been sustained by the institutional entrenchment of the Church in the corridors of power. The former director-general Lord Birt<sup>12</sup> said in the House of Lords (4 November 2009 : col. GC102):

Soon after arriving at the BBC, I shared my convictions about "Thought for the Day", with a wise old BBC stager—and there were a lot of them. I suggested to her that the programme was anomalous for two reasons.

First, from a purely broadcasting perspective, it was an earnest sermonette placed bang-slap in the middle of the liveliest and most engaging political bazaar anywhere—the "Today" programme. The transition from one to the other always jarred, and still does.

Secondly, the whole notion of imposing established religion in the heart of radio peak time seemed to me out of tune with the growing emergence of a predominately secular society. The wise old stager patiently admonished me. "You have many battles to fight", she said. "Fight the ones that you can win. This isn't one of them. You will never prevail against the embedded power of the established churches". I confess that I accepted her counsel, for she was certainly right at the time. Perhaps one day she will no longer be.

It is time to put an end to this "embedded power of the established churches" which no longer "reflect[s] the different religious and other beliefs in the UK". The overprovision of Christian broadcasting should be corrected over time, minority beliefs should gain proportionate recognition and in particular Humanism should be accorded attention that recognises its position as the explicit lifestance of a growing number of people and the default lifestance of a considerable part of the population. Otherwise the BBC will be seen as having no serious intention of behaving impartially.

### **(b) Documentary and discussion programmes about religion and belief**

Overall, despite considerable variation between programme strands, the themes explored in this sort of output are disproportionately religious, as are the guests invited to take part. For example, the Sunday programme on Radio 4 describes itself as "Religious News - Christianity to Islam, Hinduism to Judaism" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/sunday>) and the content of the programmes reflects this bias with appearances by representatives of Humanism rare and items about Humanism even rarer.

The first and last time the BBC broadcast any programmes devoted to Humanism as a belief/lifestance was a series of six 15-minutes interviews on the Home Service in 1965. An episode of In Our Time in February 2001 (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00547bk>) and an Analysis programme on Radio 4 in March 2006 presented a critique of the broad humanist intellectual tradition but not of the personal lifestance. (The former ended by linking Humanism to Nazism.) Otherwise non-religious lifestances have been ignored as a subject for the BBC's programming.

Humanist guests are occasionally invited to take part in discussion programmes such as Beyond Belief or the Moral Maze<sup>13</sup>. These appearances in contested contexts are of course welcome but are rare and inadequate.

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<sup>12</sup> Lord Birt has also said that as director-general he was told that a Roman Catholic could never chair the Central Religious Advisory Council: that position was reserved for the Church of England (*private conversation with BHA board member*).

The BBC has said from time to time that such aspects of Humanism as human rights, numbers of ethical questions, evolution and other scientific topics, etc., along with occasional critiques of religion, are covered in its output. All this is true: but what is missing is the idea of an intellectually and emotionally satisfying non-religious lifestance. The BBC's assumption seems to be that if people do not believe in God they have no wish or need to examine such "ultimate questions" as the roots of their morality or the meaning that their lives can have.

This is how we formulated our wishes in our evidence to the House of Lords select committee on the renewal of the BBC charter in 2005:

32. We want the BBC to cease discriminating against non-religious beliefs by recognising that they are part of the same spectrum as religion and should be treated on equal terms.

33. We therefore want programmes specifically for the non-religious, so flagged, recognising that much of the public will (owing to the prevailing religious bias of the school system and the media) have a confused and unarticulated world-view at best. After all, for several generations both religious education and broadcasting have set up religion as the preferred basis for life and implied that morality depends on it: when millions have rejected religion and but neither schools nor the mass media have provided any coherent alternative, many end up confused and unsure about the basis of morality.

34. The programmes we seek would not be attacks on religion (any more than Christian programmes are attacks on Islam, for example) but reflections on the basis of secular morality and on particular moral issues, on a secular spirituality and living a non-religious life, drawing on the tradition of non-religious lifestances (Confucianism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, the philosophy of the Locke, Hume, Mill, Russell, etc etc) from ancient times down to present day.

35. Such programmes would help the large number of people who do not hold religious beliefs to explore what they do believe, and how those beliefs affect the way they lead their lives. They could be expected in a small way to yield a social dividend - to help social cohesion and commitment, to combat the moral anomie, cynicism and selfishness that some commentators perceive in modern society.<sup>14</sup>

In correspondence the BBC has occasionally suggested that it is not its business to promote Humanism. Leaving aside that the effect of many of its programmes is to promote Christianity, we agree: but what we are suggesting here is not promotion but exposition, exploration and examination. It seems to us that such programmes would fall squarely within the BBC's informal remit to educate, inform and entertain.

**The BBC should increase its exploration of explicitly humanist themes and its use of humanist contributors named as humanists.**

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<sup>13</sup> We have identified four instances in the last three years where someone associated with the BHA has taken part in Beyond Belief - a member of the Humanist Philosophers' Group, a psychologist who is a BHA distinguished supporter and twice our chief executive - and two editions in the last four years of The Moral Maze in which members of the Humanist Philosophers' Group have taken part.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbhc/128/5110209.htm>. The Select Committee's report was broadly sympathetic to our views, underlining in its recommendations that the BBC should "ensure that it complies with the Communications Act 2003 by providing services of a suitable quality and range dealing with religion and other beliefs." - see <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbhc/128/12811.htm#a27>

### **(c) News coverage and current affairs related to religion or belief**

Our concerns with news and current affairs are mainly that it is frequently far from impartial, being uncritical of religious claims and representatives, reporting many developments from an implicitly religious point of view, and being partial towards religious points of view

When covering religious issues in its news reports, the BBC frequently portrays religious figures and religious institutions in an uncritical way. Over the past few years, there have been several prominent examples of this, such as the reporting on the previous Pope's death and funeral, and the current Pope's state visit to the UK and retirement announcement, all of which have been excessively deferential.

Another recent example was the reporting of the 'persecuted Christian' cases at the ECHR. The BBC's coverage of this story focused mainly on the case of Nadia Eweida, who had for a short time been forbidden by BA to wear a necklace with a cross at work. She won her case, which she persisted in taking to Strasbourg despite BA having long ago conceded, something that the BBC's reporting ignored. More importantly the BBC gave the impression that the outcome of these cases represented a victory for those who claimed that Christians were being persecuted at work, despite the fact that the other three claimants all lost. The significant judgements were that employers were entitled to insist on employees providing an equal service to lesbians and gays despite any religious misgivings and that health and safety considerations could properly supervene over the right to wear a religious symbol. This aspect of the verdicts was downplayed in the BBC's reporting, as was the way that these litigants had been used shamelessly by the extremist and incompetent Christian Legal Centre (though this was covered in one edition of the Sunday programme).

The BBC also frequently fails to question the extremist links of religious spokespeople who appear in its news coverage. For example, the BBC has several times asked Colin Hart, the co-founder of the Coalition for Marriage which opposes same-sex marriage for his views on the subject, without mentioning that his own organisation the Christian Institute [opposed the lowering of the age of consent](#) for gay sex from 21 to 16 and [believes that gay people should not serve in the armed forces](#). A worse example came in December 2010 when in reporting the birth of Elton John and David Furnish's son, the BBC invited extremist Christian Stephen Green, who has called for the death penalty for homosexuality, [to give his opinions on gay parenting](#). The BBC offers as a defence the need for "balance" but balance should take some account of the balance of opinion in the country and not be used as an excuse for spicing up a story by overemphasising marginal controversies. The phoniness of this balance argument can be seen, of course, from the BBC's failure to balance stories favourable to Christianity - for example, about faith schools or the contracting out of public services to religious organisations - with comments from humanist or other critics.

It is not only Christianity that receives unduly partial coverage. For example, the television report on the Kumbh Mela festival at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21002713> was not just uncritical: it ranges from an orientalist celebration of exoticism to near-reverence, making no reference to (for example) the serious health concerns (which were admittedly given a very brief mention at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-21017217>).

We are also concerned that when from time to time we should have expected some coverage of humanist matters it has not been forthcoming. An example was our report *Quality and Equality* on the risks arising from the contracting out of public services to religious organisations.<sup>15</sup> More generally, although our criticisms of religious schools have occasionally been noticed, our

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See [humanism.org.uk/campaigns/secularism/public-service-reform/quality-and-equality-report/](http://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/secularism/public-service-reform/quality-and-equality-report/)

constructive policy for reform of religious education, which commands wide support in the education world, has been largely ignored.

## 5. Conclusion

The fourth guiding principle from the 2007 Bridcut report<sup>16</sup> is

Impartiality involves breadth of view, and can be breached by omission. It is not necessarily to be found on the centre ground.

**We look forward to your review concluding that the BBC's omission to give due coverage to non-religious lifestances such as Humanism amounts to just such a breach of impartiality.**

The Bridcut report also said in its tenth guiding principle:

Impartiality requires the BBC to examine its own institutional values, and to assess the effect they have on its audiences.

**We believe that the BBC's bias on matters of religion and belief is so deeply entrenched that it calls for a thoroughgoing re-examination of its institutional values.**

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive  
British Humanist Association  
25 February 2013

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<sup>16</sup>

See [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press\\_releases/2007/impartiality.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2007/impartiality.html)

## BBC FORMAL POLICY - PURPOSE REMITS ETC

The BHA commented at length and in detail on the draft Purpose Remits and Service Licences, suggesting changes to non-discriminatory language. No changes were made in response: the 'purpose remits' continued to refer to 'religious and other beliefs' and the BBC refused to change this to refer explicitly to non-religious beliefs, saying the 'other beliefs' wording 'adequately incorporated non-religious belief systems'. This ignores the reality that such an interpretation by BBC staff concerned is highly unlikely in the light of history and current practice.

The resulting plans for implementation of the Purpose Remits from the Executive used exclusively religious language bar one sop to 'secular beliefs'.

The 'service licences' for each of the BBC's radio and TV channels refer exclusively to religion with never a mention of non-religious beliefs<sup>17</sup>.

The details are as follows:

### **(a) Sir Michael Lyons (BBC Trust chairman) letter to BHA 9/1/08:**

The consultation [on 'purpose remits'] highlighted some concern . . .that the [proposed] priority did not adequately reflect non-religious beliefs. The Trust considered this feedback, but concluded that the inclusion of the wording 'other beliefs' adequately incorporated non-religious belief systems. . .

[T]o deliver on this priority, the BBC must reflect . . . the views and interests of many different faith groups as well as those of no faith or non-religious lifestyles. The Trust is committed to measuring and reporting against the remits on an annual basis. This will include how well audiences perceive the BBC in raising their awareness and understanding of different religious and other beliefs.

Now the Remits are finalised and in place, the BBC Executive must respond to the Trust with plans that describe the BBC's broad approach to delivering each of the priorities, highlighting the contribution of individual services and no-service activities. . . . [These plans] once approved . . . will be published . . . *[as follows:]*

### **(b) BBC Executive's Plans**

([http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/purpose/public\\_purposes/communities.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/purpose/public_purposes/communities.shtml))

**Purpose plan:** Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities

**BBC Trust definition of purpose remit:** BBC viewers, listeners and users can rely on the BBC to reflect the many communities that exist in the UK. These communities may be based on geography, on faith, on language, or on a shared interest such as sport. The BBC will stimulate debate within and between the communities of the UK, and encourage people to get involved with their local communities.

### **Purpose priorities**

The BBC Trust, after public consultation, has divided this remit into six specific priorities:

<sup>17</sup>

See [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/framework/bbc\\_service\\_licences/index.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/framework/bbc_service_licences/index.html)

. . . Reflect the different religious and other beliefs in the UK. . . .

Although licence fee payers do not rate the priority to reflect different religious and other beliefs on the UK (priority 5) as highly important, they do see a fairly wide performance gap.

. . . Develop new ways of reflecting religious and other beliefs

The BBC will better reflect the religious and other beliefs of its audiences by building communities online, pioneering new ways of presenting religion **[sic]** to audiences in its network television output and through network and local radio's commitment to religion **[sic]**. Religious **[sic]** affairs will also be featured across news and current affairs output.

. . .

## 5 Reflect the different religious and other beliefs in the UK

BBC Trust: "The BBC should give people opportunities to understand the beliefs of others and to examine their own beliefs critically."

In addition to specific religious **[sic]** output on television and radio, BBC news and current affairs output will provide an opportunity for audiences to understand the beliefs of others and highlight the key role played by religion **[sic]** in world affairs.

The BBC's radio services will play an important role in connecting with those interested in faith, worship and related issues. Radio 2, for example, will reflect the diversity of UK belief in its regular religious **[sic]** output, while Radio 3 will broadcast religious services with a strong musical element. Radio 4 will provide worship programming and in-depth reporting of religious **[sic]** affairs across the major faiths **[sic]**, using its output to explore different faiths **[sic]** and their practices, and illuminating the varieties of belief between and within faith **[sic]** communities. The BBC will consistently encourage and support people to examine their own beliefs critically. Ethical and moral issues will be debated across its speech output.

BBC One will cover religion **[sic]** , including some high-impact religious **[sic]** programming in peak time. Significant Christian festivals such as Easter and Christmas and nationally important anniversaries such as Remembrance Day **[NB: seen as religious]** will be marked on BBC One. Through its television output, the BBC will seek to cover Christianity beyond the major festivals. Across the television portfolio, regular coverage of musical performance will reflect how audiences participate in the expression of their faith.

BBC local and nations radio stations will carry religious **[sic]** output reflecting the faiths **[sic]** followed in their respective communities and will continue to provide religious **[sic]** output on Sundays.

bbc.co.uk will be a place where people of different faiths and beliefs can build communities online. There are faith **[sic]** sections on all of the BBC's local internet sites.

Minority religions in the UK (and including the major belief systems of Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam and Buddhism) as well as **secular beliefs will receive mainstream coverage**. While the Asian Network will provide coverage of religion **[sic]** and festivals relevant to its audiences, coverage of minority religions **[sic]** will also find expression on other services, such as Radio 4, BBC One and BBC Two.