

Complaint to the BBC, 24th February 2009

I am writing to complain about today's reporting of a BBC poll on religion and public life in the UK. There are three aspects to this complaint.

1: the news story reporting the poll at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7906595.stm>.

Firstly, the reporting of this poll is unbalanced, with no quote from a non-religious spokesperson to balance the quotes and attributed views of religious representatives. Even the headline 'Public "favour religious values"' is misleading – favour them over what, for example? Such a headline cannot be extracted from the limited polling that was done.

Secondly, I am concerned about how the data has been interpreted in the news report. The poll asked only four questions – whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the following statements: 'The media reports my religion fairly and accurately', 'The media reports other religions fairly and accurately', 'Our laws should respect and be influenced by UK religious values', and 'Religion has an important role to play in public life.' It did not explain what 'religious values' or 'public life' or 'important role' were supposed to mean. Yet, in the news report it is claimed that:

The findings support other evidence of an alliance between people of different faith groups in resisting secularism. Many Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and members of other minority religious groups would rather have a Christian-based framework to national life, than one that is entirely secular.

There is nothing in the questions which lead to this conclusion – not one of the questions asked refers to 'a Christian-based framework to national life' or indeed to Christianity at all.

Thirdly, it is wrong and demonstrates a lack of objectivity for the BBC to use an inflammatory term such as 'militant atheists' to describe those who do not believe in a god or gods and who campaign for state neutrality in matters of religion. The BBC do not use such an adjective to describe mainstream religious people who express their opinions publicly, nor should they for the non-religious. Why has this term, clearly used in a derogatory sense, been approved for publication in a BBC news report?

Finally, I would like to complain about the negative light in which secularists (and atheist secularists in particular) are cast in the report, with no counterbalance. For example, the setting up of a national federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secularist student associations and atheist advertising is described as stepping up the campaign 'to "free" the public from what they see as the burden of a lingering attachment to religious belief.' This is not justified by any quotes from non-religious people, nor is it attributed to any particular person or organisation. In response to the setting up of umbrella organisations for religious student groups such as the Christian Union or Jewish or Islamic Societies, or the vast advertising of religions across all media, the BBC has never alleged that it is part of a campaign to free the country of atheism, humanism, apostasy or whatever.

2: the poll itself

The poll, commissioned by the BBC, was recklessly worded and subjective in a number of ways. Four of the most obvious:

(a) one question referred only to reporting of 'my religion', ignoring the non-religious beliefs of respondents. Hence the huge 33% 'Don't Knows' among those of no religion, as against 12% of the rest. (NB that even so a majority of those of no religion found unfair reporting, unlike all the major religious groups – a fact not picked up in the coverage of the poll!)

(b) The questions about religion and the law and about its role in public life made statements and invited agreement or disagreement. This raises the 'agree' score as most people are inclined always to agree rather than disagree.

(c) the question about the law introduced bias by using the word 'respect' - disagreeing implied wanting disrespect.

(d) contentious phrases used in the questions such as 'religious values' or 'public life' or 'important role' were totally undefined in the poll.

3: Robert Pigott's diary piece at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7783563.stm>

This piece is presumably intended as comment rather than news reporting, but that fact is not made plain, and it is not balanced by any comment from another perspective.

(i) The article leads with the same dubious and alarmist claims from religious leaders that so-called aggressive secularists are seeking to marginalise Christianity without any suggestion that another viewpoint is possible (that secularists are suggesting that, with the decline in Christian observance, the traditional privileges enjoyed by religion are open to question).

(ii) The article claims again that 'precepts - such as "do as you would be done by", and upholding the sanctity of human life' are peculiarly Christian, which is plainly false.

(iii) The article claims that such 'Christian' precepts 'once underpinned British laws' - suggesting that the standards upheld by the law have fallen and no longer protect life, fairness or reciprocity - whereas the laws most complained about by the religious are those against discrimination and in favour of human rights. As a historical claim, the claim that Christianity once underpinned our laws is dubious in any case.

(iv) The article ignores the fact that the Christian precepts actually upheld by the law have been and still sometimes are those against divorce, cohabitation, abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, equality for women and so on.

(v) The article reports without noticing the irony that 'that recent legislation . . . seek [sic] to control people's morals as well as their behaviour' - which is exactly what Christian-inspired laws have always done and still do.

(vi) The article refers to "a secularist wipeout of religion" - extraordinarily inflammatory language that bears no relation to what secularists want, which is a separation of church and state. There is also no acknowledgement that many Christians and other religious believers are secularists.

(vii) The article refers of "newly-assertive atheists" "snapping at [the] heels" of traditional believers with the so-called 'atheist bus' advertisements - a hostile way of reporting a small-scale, gentle and overdue riposte to the hellfire preaching of previous (and new) Christian adverts on buses and from church noticeboards and from posters at railway stations and elsewhere.

(viii) The article says that "the proportion of people identifying themselves as atheists has not grown from its low base" without saying that that alleged low base is 30% in the ComRes poll - double that in the 2001 Census.