



The
Sandford
St Martin
Trust

PROMOTING EXCELLENCE IN
RELIGIOUS PROGRAMMES

Submission to:

Ofcom 'Holding the BBC to account for the delivery of its mission and public purposes' consultation

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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.

About the Sandford St Martin Trust

1. In this submission, the Sandford St Martin Trust will deal with a key element of the BBC's output, 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 broadcaster and director of the Insight Film Festival Abdul-Rehman Malik; Tom Loxley, Executive Editor of the 'Radio Times' magazine; 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 representing a variety of beliefs.

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 Danny Boyle, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Melvyn Bragg, Rabbi Lionel Blue, Lyse Doucet, Ian Hislop, Tom Hollander, Howard Jacobson, Sally Magnusson, Rageh

Omar, Sally Phillips, Simon Schama, David Suchet 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 works to stimulate 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 three years, it has produced events in partnership with the Edinburgh International Television Festival, the Media Society, Sheffield Doc/Fest, PolicyUK 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), the Puttnam Inquiry (March 2016), the House of Lords Communications Committee Inquiry into the Sustainability of Channel 4 (April 2016) and other inquiries. There are details about these events and submissions, and more information about the Trust on our website.

4. 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.

Response

Consultation Question 3: Do you agree with the approach we have proposed for public purpose 2, including the high-level objectives and regulatory conditions we are proposing?

5. The Trust welcomes Ofcom's acknowledgement that religious programming is in decline across all public service channels, its recognition of the key role the BBC's provision plays, and Ofcom's proposal to increase existing targets on TV for the BBC in this genre and its proposal for some new peak-time obligations for religious programming on BBC One and Two.¹

6. However, we are disappointed that "(Ofcom) would expect the impact of the conditions under this purpose to have (*only*) a modest effect on the BBC" as "In relation to peak time obligations for ... religious programming on BBC One and Two, (Ofcom) expect(s) these targets to be achievable as they reflect the current provision of (the genre) in peak-time slots."²

7. The Trust believes there should be a significant – if gradual – increase in the current provision of religious programming in order to reverse the decline of the genre acknowledged by Ofcom earlier. While the current proposal may arrest the decline, it

¹ Ofcom 'Holding the BBC to account for the delivery of its mission and public purposes: Section 1.19.4' (2017) https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0033/99519/bbc-performance-consultation.pdf

² Ibid, Section 4.60 (emphasis ours)

will not lead to increased provision which is Ofcom's stated aim.³ To wit, we believe the "high-level objectives" being proposed by Ofcom are not high enough.

8. Further, the Trust proposes that the BBC should provide a working definition of what it considers "religious programming". In its Annual Plan for 2017/18, regarding its Religion and Ethics offering, the BBC says "Creating content that reflects the complexity and nuance of faith – both for individuals and for institutions of which their faith forms a part – has therefore never been more important to the BBC."⁴ However it goes no further to say what constitutes religious programming or what strategy it will adopt to support the creation of this important content.

9. The Trust notes that in the past the BBC has provided greater clarity regarding what it considers religious programming. In its Annual Report and Handbook for 1985, under the heading 'Religious Broadcasting' the BBC says "In practice, the religious departments deal with religious faith in three ways, according to a division which is crude but serviceable: what it is – programmes of exposition, apologetic and argument; how it is awakened, celebrated and sustained – programmes of worship, meditation and reflection; and what its personal and social consequences are – documentaries, testimonies and drama..."⁵

10. The Trust believes the definition cited above needs to be updated and would urge Ofcom to require the BBC to provide a religious and ethical programming definition and strategy that will reflect the diversity of faith and belief across the UK and the world, and, the role of faith in the 21st century. The Trust submits that it is impossible to understand the contemporary world without an understanding of religion. Contrary to the assumptions of a largely secular media, religion is not a private matter for individuals; rather, it 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 religions and systems of belief, to be able to better assess and analyse different interpretations".⁶

Consultation Question 5: Do you agree with the approach we have proposed for public purpose 4, including the high-level objectives and regulatory conditions we are proposing?

11. The Trust recognises Ofcom's 2015 research that identified different religious groups as feeling under-represented and poorly portrayed by PSB broadcasters, and so welcomes its expectation that the BBC should work to improve audience

³ Ibid, Section 1.19.4

⁴ BBC Annual Plan for 2017/18, p 15.

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/BBC_Annual_Plan_2017-18.pdf

⁵ BBC (1985) Annual Report and Handbook 1985, published by the BBC, London, 1984, p 23.

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ariel/32901415>

satisfaction among this group over the next charter delivery and its commitment to monitor the BBC's delivery in this area.⁷

12. At a time when religion is seen as such a powerful influence on world events (for good or ill), The Trust believes 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”.⁸

13. The Trust notes that the BBC is currently reviewing how it covers Religion and Ethics and is “listening to groups and people across the UK to understand the issues that matter most to them and the role that the BBC can play in helping engage with them and relate to viewpoints that are different from their own”⁹ and welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the same. However, the Trust was dismayed to learn that, even while the BBC review was in progress, the Corporation has effectively dismantled its in-house religious TV department following its decision to award the contract to make ‘Songs of Praise’ – its flagship religious programme series – to an outside, independent company. While having no view on whether this was, in principle, the right or wrong decision, the Trust is very much concerned that the demise of the Religion and Ethics TV department, all while a review was ongoing, demonstrates a huge gap between ambition and strategy at the BBC when it comes to religious programming and a lack of commitment to “understanding the issues that matter most” to the diverse audience it has been consulting with.

14. In its original submission to the BBC Charter Review consultation, the Trust posed a key question which it believes is pertinent to the corporation's ability and commitment to properly meet the needs of all the diverse communities of the UK and not just the audience groups highlighted in their diversity targets: **Who at the BBC will take overall responsibility for the range, quantity and quality of religious programming?**

15. While the Trust does not have a view on what proportion of the BBC's religious output should be produced in-house or by independent studios, it believes that if the BBC is to properly understand and reflect the UK's diverse belief communities, then it is necessary that those who are leading the BBC's religious programme strategy and who are commissioning programmes are experts in their field and have the same authority and respect as those commissioning in other areas of the BBC's output.

16. Similarly, the Trust is concerned that while BBC News has editors for many other subject areas – from economics, to finance, sport and the arts – there is no editor for religion. 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 and would urge for the appointment of a Religion Editor on these grounds.

⁷ Ofcom, 2017, Section 4.126.

⁹ BBC Annual Plan for 2017/18, p 15.