



British Humanist Association response to the Public Consultation on BBC Radio 4, August 2010

About the British Humanist Association (BHA)

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned non-religious people living in the UK.

It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good and responsible lives without religious or superstitious beliefs.

The BHA is deeply committed to human rights, equality, democracy, and an end to irrelevant discrimination, and has a long history of active engagement in work for an open and inclusive society. In such a society people of all beliefs would have equal treatment before the law, and the rights of those with all beliefs to hold and live by them would be reasonably accommodated within a legal framework setting minimum common legal standards.

In today's large and complex society, broadcasting - especially public service broadcasting - is one of the main ways in which citizens and communities can learn about and from each other; it is also one of the main sources of information for large numbers of people. The BHA campaigns for an end to the privileged position of religion in broadcasting and for inclusion of programmes about Humanism.

BHA Response:

Statement of position of the British Humanist Association

In the view of the BHA, the BBC almost totally fails to reflect the number of people with non-religious beliefs that are broadly humanist in its broadcasting output. The BBC has hitherto consistently refused to acknowledge that such non-religious beliefs are worthy of attention in their own right.

As a consequence it fails to reflect back to the nation the belief of Humanism in an adequate and fair manner. This fails to give humanists the opportunity to hear their beliefs expertly discussed and so examine their own beliefs critically. It also fails to give others the opportunity to understand the beliefs of a significant section of the population. It is symptomatic of the BBC's failure in these regards that we feel compelled to add that Humanism is a positive lifestance and not mere atheism.

The BBC is obliged by legislation to recognise the full diversity of religion or belief.

For example, the BBC as a public authority is covered by the Human Rights Act 1998.

Section 6 of that Act says:-

6. - (1) It is unlawful for a public authority to act in a way which is incompatible with a Convention right. . .

(6) "An act" includes a failure to act . . .

It is incompatible with Convention rights guaranteed under Article 9 read in conjunction with Article 14 to discriminate on grounds of religion or belief. In this phrase the word "belief" includes non-religious beliefs. This interpretation has been confirmed both in commentary on international human rights instruments and in legal cases under the European Convention. The interpretation is now beyond doubt.

Section 52(1) of the Equality Act 2006 reads:

It is unlawful for a public authority exercising a function to do any act which constitutes discrimination.

The BHA would like to directly address the issues raised in the Radio 4 Service consultation rather than the questions posed in the organisational response as the questions stated vary considerably.

Questions:

1: How do you listen to Radio 4 and how often?

Not applicable

2: How long have you been a Radio 4 listener?

Not applicable

3: Radio 4's news output is at the heart of its schedule and includes a range of daily news bulletins and current affairs programmes. What do you think about this programming?

The British Humanist Association (BHA) does not wish to directly comment on the quality or volume of news output produced by Radio 4, however, we believe the accuracy and impartiality of the BBC's reporting is compromised with the existence of the *Thought for the Day* slot aired at 07.45 each Monday to Saturday morning.

Thought for the Day provides an unchallenged platform reserved explicitly for religious individuals during the peak listening period of the BBC's most influential news and discussion programmes.

This programme has been used by sitting Parliamentarians to express political arguments that are unchallenged, in comparison to the often rigorous questioning of any other contributor, and is entirely out of-step with the programmes firm-but-fair reputation.

A clear and recent example of this imbalance may be found during the House of Lords debates concerning the Coroners and Justice Bill, where the then Bishop of Southwark, Tom Butler, spoke against an amendment proposed by the Rt Lord Falconer removing the threat of prosecution against those who assist a loved-one to end their life abroad. On the 9th of June, Bishop Butler used *Thought for the Day* to express his opposition to any amendments in the law¹.

Although the Rev Butler did not cast a vote on Amendment 163, the Church of England's attending representatives voted as a block against the proposals².

In any other circumstance, arguments such as these would have been balanced by contributions with a contrary opinion or there would have been an opportunity for a right of reply.

If *Thought for the Day* is to remain, and to continue in its current slot then, as argued in Lizzie Clifford's paper produced for the Christian Think-Tank Ekklesia '*Thought for the Day*': *Beyond the*

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/thought/documents/t20090609.shtml>

² <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200809/ldhansrd/text/90707-0011.htm> The following are listed as voting 'Not content': Dr John Hind, the Bishop of Chichester. Dr Michael Langrish, the Bishop of Exeter. James Jones, the Bishop of Liverpool. Martin Wahrton, the Bishop of Newcastle. George Cassidy, the Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham (since retired).

*god-of-the-slots*³, the arguments raised have to be distinctive. It therefore follows that a broader range of opinions, including non-theistic perspectives should be included in the interests of balanced coverage. We recommend that BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* programme include humanist perspectives.

Q4: Through its documentaries and factual programming, Radio 4 should deepen and broaden audience understanding of a range of subjects such as business, finance, education, food, travel, religion and science. How well do you think it does this?

The Radio 4 Service Licence, issued May 2010 states:

“5.4 Reflecting the UK's nations, regions and communities

Radio 4 should make an important contribution to this purpose amongst its audience. Its journalism should reflect the diversity of the UK. Through its documentaries and features, Radio 4 should explore ethnic, cultural and religious groups within the UK, enabling the wider community to understand their customs, convictions and concerns. The station should also provide worship, celebration and in-depth reporting of religious affairs across all the major faiths.

Radio 4 should facilitate and support the growth of communities of interest around its output and enable them to interact with programmes and with each other online.”

Key condition of the licence is:

“Radio 4 should:

Broadcast at least 200 hours of original religious programming each year”

The BHA are of the view that the BBC Radio 4 is failing to meet the conditions of its service license requirements in its failure to provide adequate levels of coverage covering Humanism and humanist issues.

Merely including atheists in response to religious believers or events does not constitute a sufficient level of coverage. For example, Professor Susan Blackmore's appearance on *Beyond Belief* on 23.08.10 typifies the non-theistic contributions permitted on BBC coverage, as a reaction to a religious contention or justifying the legitimacy of their views in a manner not expected of contributors with a religious background.

Humanism is a legally recognised belief system, and recognised in the Communications Act 2003⁴. We believe, therefore, that a broadly humanist perspective warrants specific coverage to reflect the number of individuals who make moral and ethical decisions on the basis of reason and evidence.

³ http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/thought_for_the_day/main_report

⁴ Subsections 264(6) (f) and (g) and 264(13) of the Communications Act 2003, make it clear that public service broadcasting should include: “a suitable quantity and range of programmes dealing with . . . religion and other beliefs, where ‘belief’ means a collective belief in, or other adherence to, a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles . . .”

By providing some form of coverage, Radio 4 would meet its obligations to “enable[e] the wider community to understand their customs, convictions and concerns”.

5: Through its news, current affairs and factual output, Radio 4 should feature extensive and wide ranging coverage of international issues. How well do you think the station does this?

No comment

6: Radio 4 should offer a wide range of drama and readings including plays, serials and adaptations. How well do you think it does this?

No comment

7: Radio 4 should be the home of BBC radio comedy and help develop new writing and performing talent. What do you think of the comedy programmes on Radio 4?

No comment

8: Radio 4 should provide a wide range of programmes that inform educate and entertain. What do you think about the variety and balance of programming on Radio 4?

The BHA believe that the commitment to broadcast 200 hours of original religious broadcasting on BBC Radio 4 represents a significant proportion of the stations output and, in relation to the size of the United Kingdom’s religious population, these levels appear disproportionate.

In the UK, those who describe themselves as non-religious have risen from 31% to 43% between 1983 and 2008 according to the British Social Attitudes Survey’s 26th report issued in 2010.⁵

An Ipsos MORI poll published in January 2007 for the BHA indicated that 36% of people – equivalent to around 17 million adults – are in fact humanist in their basic outlook⁶. Only 27% said ‘People need religious teachings in order to understand what is right and wrong’.

In the 2007-08 Citizenship Survey⁷, participants were requested to select factors that they regarded as important to their identity from thirteen options. Whilst family was top with 97%, followed by interests (87%), religion ranked bottom at 48%. Religion ranked bottom consistently with all age groups up to 65+, where it only moves up to eleventh. Christians ranked religion as thirteenth as a factor important to their identity.

A number of similar respected surveys and polls⁸ indicate the diminishing level of religious belief. Increasing the amount of religious coverage would not reflect trends within society as a whole.

Q9: What do you think of Radio 4’s website?

No Comment

Q10: What do you think of Radio 4’s podcasts?

⁵ <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/study/british-social-attitudes-26th-report>

⁶ <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemid=190>

⁷ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/863680.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/religion-and-belief-surveys-statistics>

No Comment

Q11: Is there anything else you want to say about Radio 4?

The BHA believe that in all references to religion, religious output/programming, or faith in the service licence should be changed to 'religion and non-religious beliefs'. (Please see the enclosed document British Humanist Association response to BBC trust's consultation on service licences Annex II for full details.)

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