Michael Grade CBE
Chairman
BBC
Broadcasting House
London
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17 November 2004

Dear Mr Grade

Review of Religion on BBC Television

The British Humanist Association welcomes the BBC Governors’ decision to review religious broadcasting on television. While we recognise that the review is principally aimed at improving the quality and impact of such programmes and is focussed largely on BBC1, we wish to urge you to take the opportunity to consider also some wider obligations of the BBC which we believe are not at present being adequately fulfilled.

Our case is set out in the evidence we submitted earlier this year to the DCMS in relation to the review of the BBC Charter, of which I attach a copy. In brief, it is our view that:

a) **A large number of people in the UK do not have a religion.** In the 2001 census over 15% stated they had no religion. A poll commissioned by the BBC for their Heaven and Earth Show in 2003 found 26% of atheists or agnostics and another 24% who were “spiritually inclined but don’t really belong to an organised religion”. Among young people the position is even clearer: in 1995 61% of 14-16 year olds described themselves as atheist or agnostic\(^1\), and in a DfES research report this year 65% of 12-19 year-olds said they had no religion\(^2\).

b) **For a similarly large number their commitment to (especially) Christianity is at best nominal or ‘cultural’**. While the census showed over 70% of people choosing to call themselves Christian, only 7.4% of adults in England and Wales now go to church on an average Sunday and total church membership is only 12.2%\(^3\); only

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\(^1\) Survey of 13,000 young people by Revd Professor Leslie Francis and Revd Dr William Kay, Trinity College Carmarthen: Teenage Religion and Values, Gracewing, 1995.


\(^3\) Religious Trends, 2002-2003
31% believe in a personal God and only 44% believe in life after death; and in a recent Home Office survey Christians ranked religion seventh in importance to their identity after family, work, age/life-stage, interests, education and nationality (members of minority religions generally placed it in their top three factors). Besides, the ignorance of many nominal Christians of their faith is notorious - a survey in 2000 found that only 38% of 18-34 year olds could say what happened on Good Friday and only 45% knew what happened on Easter Day.

Many - probably the majority - of people without a religion and many of those with only a cultural adherence to one have an approach to life that is broadly humanist in its outlook and morality. It is plain that for very many people, including many people with religious beliefs, purely religious arguments have ceased in the course of the 20th century to have any substantial bearing on moral questions. Our very common experience is that when people discover Humanism they say that they must have been humanists all their life without knowing it; moreover, they feel great relief when they realise that their beliefs are shared by others and are backed up by a recognised and respected philosophy. Even our new President, Linda Smith, the comedian and broadcaster, who articulated her personal beliefs very clearly but did not present them as a recognised philosophy when she took part in Radio 4’s Devout Sceptics series, told us that “I only found out that the beliefs I hold are humanistic when the BHA kindly invited me to be its president! I am sure that I’m typical of many ‘unconscious’ humanists.”

Humanism is a lifestance that large numbers of people find coherent and satisfying, and find that it provides answers to the so-called ultimate questions about life. It draws on an ancient tradition older than most if not all the main world religions and its recent adherents have been major contributors to scientific advance, the arts, philosophy, the promotion of international understanding and peace and other causes. The new National Framework for Religious Education includes the recommendation that children are taught about Humanism.

Humanism is recognised in human rights law as a belief with equal standing with religions. It is a world-view (Weltanschauung is the equivalent word in the German version of the European Convention on Human Rights) in its own right and does not consist solely or even principally of a rejection of religion: indeed, for most humanists religion is an irrelevance. Case law under the ECHR (some of which is cited in our Charter renewal memorandum at footnote 5) establishes the equal application of article 9 to non-religious beliefs. This is recognised in the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations and in the Communications Act 2003 (see below). The parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights has firmly backed our case that this standing should be recognised also in the laws on charity and on subsidised school transport. The Home Office Faith Communities Unit recognises Humanism as the equivalent of a faith and its website states: “The Government has an obligation to ensure that those who do not hold any religious belief are not

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4 Robin Gill: Churchgoing and Christian Ethics, CUP, 1999
6 MORI for the Mail on Sunday, 14 April 2000.
disadvantaged in any way.” Such non-discrimination between religions or beliefs is in fact mandated for public authorities - including the BBC - by section 6 of the Human Rights Act.

f) The Communications Act 2003 requires that public service broadcasters provide “what appears to OFCOM to be a suitable quantity and range of programmes dealing with . . . religion and other beliefs”. The Act defines belief for this purpose as “a collective belief in, or other adherence to, a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles or of mystical or transcendental doctrines”. This definition clearly encompasses Humanism. Lord McIntosh, speaking for the Government, said that its purpose was “to add a reference to other beliefs, which would include ethical systems or philosophies such as humanism or secularism”. The Act gives examples of the sort of programmes that might be provided:

“(i) programmes providing news and other information about different religions and other beliefs;

“(ii) programmes about the history of different religions and other beliefs; and

“(iii) programmes showing acts of worship and other ceremonies and practices (including some showing acts of worship and other ceremonies in their entirety).”

g) The BBC is so far failing to meet this requirement of the Act - or indeed its general obligation to reflect society back to itself (“faithfully reflect modern Britain’s diversity” in the words of Building Public Value). This failure is reflected in the restriction to religion of the terms of reference of your present review, in the recent ‘impartiality review’ referred to in the review’s terms of reference which was plainly conducted with faith leaders without any reference to us as the principal organisation representing the large and growing population of ethically concerned but non-religious people living in the UK.

The most basic requirement of the Act is providing information about beliefs. This must, in our view, include at least some programmes in which humanists present humanist beliefs without any third party - religious or sceptical - providing a commentary and without the provision of internal ‘balance’, since balance is already overwhelmingly present in the weight of religious programming in the current schedules. Such programmes that helped develop awareness and understanding of Humanism would be a genuine public service to a very large number of people who at present are (as our repeated experience shows) left struggling to sort out their own ideas with little or no help from the BBC of the kind so abundantly offered to religious believers. For while the BBC provides discussion of particular moral questions (e.g., in The Moral Maze) it offers no help with an overall framework of answers to “ultimate questions” on a non-religious foundation. This conveys the strong but completely unjustified impression to the ordinary listener or viewer that any non-religious morality or lifestance is incoherent and second-best.
Far from accepting this argument, in correspondence with us and our members on these matters, BBC Directors-General and Heads of Religion and Ethics have in fact shown no sign that they understand it. They have over a long period responded variously:

i) that the great majority of BBC programming is “secular” - as if programmes on makeovers, sport or cooking should satisfy us;

ii) that large numbers of humanists and other non-believers already appear on programmes - which is unsurprising given the number of eminent people in many fields to be found among our distinguished supporters: but they do so as experts in their own fields, not as humanists;

iii) that sometimes humanists and other non-believers appear on religious magazine programmes - but this is almost invariably as part of a discussion about religion, and not to convey any information central to Humanism;

iv) that BBC4 has recently shown Jonathan Miller’s series on atheism - but this was focussed on disbelief in (especially) Christianity and while Miller made clear his own attitude that religion was an irrelevance in his life he had no scope or remit to explore or expound the basis of humanist beliefs and morality.

We regret that your present review does not extend to radio, since we recognise that this medium may be better suited to conveying abstract ideas - although our ideas for programmes are by no means confined to abstractions. Yet on Radio 4, the obvious channel for the BBC to fulfil its legal and moral responsibilities to the non-religious section of the community, the position is if anything more stark than on television. Well over 3 hours is devoted every week to Christians broadcasting about Christianity explicitly to a Christian audience. There is some small provision also for non-Christian religions, but no equivalent of any kind for the exposition of a non-religious outlook such as Humanism despite the huge number of unbelievers in the population.

We are not seeking anything unreasonable. We are looking for the schedules to include some programmes, whether on radio or television, that look directly at life on humanist assumptions - and we have made many suggestions for such programmes to the BBC.

We believe the BBC is failing to recognise that its obligations in a multi-belief society stretch not just beyond Christianity to the minority religions but beyond religion to non-religious beliefs such as Humanism - and that, even in the census, the non-religious community is two-and-a-half times as large as the total of all the non-Christian religions put together.

It has been suggested to us that the BBC may be reluctant to consider programmes about Humanism because it is felt that this would amount to promoting the British Humanist Association, and that this would not be appropriate. I would emphasise that we are not asking the BBC to promote this Association, but simply to make programmes that present Humanist beliefs and assist people with humanist beliefs (whether or not they put a name to these beliefs) to explore and develop their understanding of the philosophical basis of their beliefs and their morality, and perhaps also to feel a little less alone and insecure in their beliefs. Making programmes about Humanism no more promotes this Association than making programmes about Christianity promotes the Church.
I am copying this letter to your colleagues on the Board and to the Secretary of the BBC and would request that you draw it to the attention of those who are conducting your present review.

Yours sincerely,

Hanne Stinson
Executive Director

cc:
Simon Milner, BBC Secretary
Mr Anthony Salz, Vice-Chairman
Ms Deborah Bull CBE
Dame Ruth Deech
Mr Dermot Gleeson
Professor Merfyn Jones
Professor Fabian Monds CBE
Ms Angela Sarkis CBE
Sir Robert Smith
Mr Ranjit Sondhi CBE
Mr Richard Tait