

TAKING BELIEF SERIOUSLY: SUMMARY OF THE BBC GOVERNORS' SEMINAR ON RELIGION - 13th MAY 2005

BACKGROUND

On Friday 13th May 2005 the Board of Governors held a seminar, Taking Belief Seriously. Chaired by the Rev Dr Colin Morris, former BBC Head of Religious Broadcasting and Controller of BBC Northern Ireland, the seminar explored how the BBC could better reflect the increasing impact of religion and belief on the modern world, with compelling and popular programmes.

The focus of the seminar was not on broadcasting for religious audiences, but on how mainstream programmes, from news and factual to drama and entertainment, can directly or indirectly reflect the experience of belief. Its aim was not to critique current output or decide editorial policy, but to debate issues and through that debate help generate creative ideas for future programmes.

The panel included: Karen Armstrong, author of *A History of God and The Holy War*; Professor Ian Linden of the School of Oriental and African Studies; Inayat Bunglawala of the Muslim Council; Graham James, Bishop of Norwich and Chairman of CRAC; Dr Tristram Hunt, historian, author and broadcaster; Mark Dowd, writer, TV producer and presenter; Tony Marchant, writer of *Holding On* and *Passer By*; Armando Iannucci, writer and broadcaster; and Omid Djalili, actor and comedian.

This paper captures the key points and arguments expressed at the seminar. The debate and the issues raised will inform BBC management as they develop their Creative Future programme strategy. With the exception of selected quotes, comments have not been attributed to individuals; rather the paper is a summary of the broad range of themes discussed.

The Board of Governors is grateful to the panel for their thoughtful and considered ideas about how the BBC might improve this area of its output.

The opinions expressed by individuals at the seminar and summarised in this paper are their own and should not be attributed to the BBC.

Session 1: DOES BELIEF REALLY MATTER TO OUR LISTENERS AND VIEWERS?

Panel: Professor Ian Linden, Karen Armstrong

There's no hard evidence that audiences are asking for more "programmes about religion". But if belief is re-emerging as a potent force in the world, are there strong public-service arguments for the BBC to "take belief more seriously" in its output? Does belief really matter to the lives of listeners and viewers?

1A AUDIENCE REACTION TO THE PROGRAMME LABEL OF "RELIGION"

Ofcom's 2004 survey puts "programmes on religion" at the bottom of the audience's priority list. But the position is shared by politics and business – both key drivers of public affairs, and subjects which the BBC has made huge efforts to popularise.

In contrast, audience figures show a substantial interest in programmes about belief – 2.5 million for The Monastery on BBC2 against strong competition, and large and appreciative audiences for series on faith in action, like Country and Seaside Parish. Traditional worship programmes more than hold their own in the schedules.

1B 4 IN 5 PEOPLE IN THE UK AND WORLDWIDE CLAIM A RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Only 1.1 billion of the world's 6 billion inhabitants describe themselves as non-believers. And a surprising 77% of people in the 2001 UK census identified themselves with a faith-group (23% didn't answer or said they had no religion).

So though active involvement in religion is still declining in Britain, a strong sense of religious identity persists.

And levels of participation mustn't be underestimated: in the UK's football-obsessed culture more people attend Anglican service on a Sunday than a football match on a Saturday.

"In the 60s, radical theologians predicted that from the ruins of organised religion, a maturely secular world would emerge. Chance would be a fine thing. What emerged was a society riven by every conceivable form of religiosity." - Dr Colin Morris

1C THE RELIGIOUS INSTINCT SURVIVED THE 20th CENTURY

In the middle of the 20th century, many commentators were confident that secularism was the coming ideology, and that religion would never again play a major role in world events. Now we see that didn't happen. Is homo sapiens perhaps irredeemably homo religious?

If so, in the words of Professor Linden, human beings may be "hard-wired for goodness, truth and beauty". The software packages on offer include sport, philosophy, drugs, institutional religion or spirituality. In Britain the religion package isn't doing well, but spirituality's market share is growing.

People can no longer assume that the young are less religious than their parents. This is true in Muslim communities, but also of a growing Protestant youth culture in Britain.

"All I can say is that religion is alive and well in my in-tray. No subject – politics, history or education – creates hotter debates or calls for more difficult decisions." - Mark Thompson, BBC Director General

1D SPIRITUALITY VERSUS ORGANISED RELIGION

There's a paradox: on the one hand statistics show established religion continues to decline. At the same time other forms of spirituality are increasing, largely bypassing the churches.

The new spirituality hasn't a central headquarters, formal system of beliefs or membership. But that doesn't mean it's unimportant to the BBC's audiences. Cathedral visitor numbers are rapidly increasing, with candles lit and prayers requested by people, in Bishop James's words, "who want us to have faith for them". Responding to this new phenomenon is a challenge for programme-makers.

1F THE NEW RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

In the 20th Century for first time in history people have been able to understand the very wide range of faiths in the world, and experience perspectives beyond their own communities.

This dimension of globalisation may be liberating but to many it feels very threatening. Fundamentalism and religious conservatism are important reactions to this modern sensibility.

1G BELIEF AND THE EMERGING POLITICS OF IDENTITY

A dominant secular elite largely determines the nation's affairs. Small, seriously religious elites are starting to challenge that dominance in a series of key battles over issues like abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage, stem cell research.

These are crucial drivers of the new politics of identity. They help society to understand the difference between the politics of the US (where the religious elite is strong) and the UK (where it is currently weak). But that position may be changing in the UK, with arguments based on belief moving much more into the political mainstream.

1I POLITICIANS ARE NOW "TAKING BELIEF SERIOUSLY"

Across the world since 9/11 the interaction of politics and religion has become a major preoccupation of governments and international bodies like the UN. The global human rights agenda is seen to depend on a successful dialogue between religious and secular institutions.

The British government is now building partnerships with faith organisations to deliver social policy, and in foreign affairs and international development.

30 civil servants work in the "Faith and Cohesion" unit of the Home Office, many more in the FCO's "Engaging with Islam" programme. Grassroots religious organisations are central to DfID's approach to development in many countries of the South.

1J 911 CAN DISTORT UNDERSTANDING OF THE RE-EMERGANCE OF BELIEF

9/11 forced secular-minded politicians and journalists to recognise the force of belief in the 21st century. But there is a serious danger that it will also distort perceptions, by suggesting that the impact of belief is always divisive.

Worldwide this is also the great age of religious pluralism...of dialogue between beliefs. Fundamentalism is only one or many responses.

The growing social and economic role of faith institutions in developing countries, and the phenomenal growth of Christianity in the Far East have nothing to do with fundamentalism. Nor has the "new spirituality" emerging in countries like Britain.

In particular, several speakers regretted the widespread misunderstanding of the nature of Islam in Britain. There was praise for Rageh Omaar's recent BBC4 series, which helped to redress this by showing its tolerant, pluralist history.

"We assume that because something has been around for hundreds of years, people know everything about it. There's a great hunger for information about religion which co-exists with a deep mistrust of religious institutions." - Armando Iannucci

. It is important to explain the human motivation behind these stories.

2C THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF BELIEF ON UK POLITICS

Critics have suggested BBC News was slow to recognise the decisive impact of organised religion on the 2004 US presidential election campaign.

Faith-groups are also central in debate on some of the hottest subjects facing politicians from stem-cell therapy, euthanasia and other "life" issues to trade reform and global poverty.

"Just remember that the combined membership of political parties in this country is less than the number of people who take communion in the Church of England on a wet Sunday in February." - Bishop Graham James

2D THE IMPACT OF NEWS MEDIA ON THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

There is a particular responsibility on BBC News to give fair and balanced portrayal of religious minorities.

For most of the majority population, the image of Islam, Hinduism or Sikhism carried by the news is their only window into those faith communities. Their perception of those faiths might be distorted if portrayal is dominated by news-making voices from the extremes.

This ideal of "fair and balanced portrayal" is difficult to achieve, since the hard news agenda is inevitably dominated by crisis and conflict.

As a counterbalance, it's important for religious minorities to be seen in a wide variety of stories as part of the normal fabric of life in multicultural Britain.

"Growing up, I knew that sectarian killings in Northern Ireland weren't the truth about Christianity, because I was at school with Christians in a majority Christian country. When it comes to Islam, all most people know is what they see on TV News. They have no other reference points." - Inayat Bunglawala

2H NEWS COVERAGE OF BELIEF MAY HAVE INEVITABLE LIMITATIONS

News programmes on their own may not be able to provide depth in portrayal of the religious context of controversial news events. Time-constraints are tight, and the editorial agenda is inevitably driven by the pressure of breaking news stories.

So it's vital that audiences can find out more through accessing online background material and listening to radio sequence programmes and phone-ins which have the space to explore these issues in greater depth.

Above all the BBC is fortunate that its output includes many other broadcasting genres. **Programme strands like factual, drama and even comedy might help audiences put news stories in context.**

SESSION 3: CAN BELIEF JOIN HISTORY IN THE PROGRAMMING MAINSTREAM?

Panel: Dr Tristram Hunt, Mark Dowd

20 years ago, history programmes were widely seen as worthy TV for a minority audience. Inspired producers and presenters changed all that. Could the same happen with the story of evolving beliefs, values and ideas? Is the definition of the scope of BBC "religion and ethics" output too narrow?

3A DEFINING THE SCOPE OF RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING

The seminar discussed whether the current definition of religious broadcasting was perhaps too narrow to realise the full creative potential of the areas of experience discussed in the first part of the seminar.

The Ofcom analysis pushes programme-makers towards a genre approach to belief. But this is not a genre area like sport.

Programmes about belief in 2005 may have nothing to do with the great faiths of the world. Equally those religions may be their core subject-matter.

The BBC should be encouraged to open up the creative space in which great talents and authorial voices can explore these issues.

"Go back to the word religion – from ligare, to connect or bind. Religion is about reconnecting to something. It can be about God or simply about the instinct to belong to something bigger than oneself. So binge drinking, drug culture, sex in saunas – these to my mind are cries for communion with oblivion." - Mark Dowd

3B SHOWING CONFIDENCE THAT THESE ISSUES MATTER

The revitalisation of history broadcasting in the 1990s took the subject out of its ghetto and into the mainstream. Difficult or painful subjects can now attract large audiences in prime time.

Something similar could happen for programmes exploring belief. Shared commitment of creative staff, commissioners, and schedulers is crucial.

Audiences will take on the challenge of unfamiliar material if they sense from promotion and scheduling that it really matters.

3C TELLING HUMAN STORIES

One key to history's revival was that broadcasters learned to tell stories again.

From Simon Schama's *Citizens* to David Starkey's *Six Wives of Henry VIII*, programmes won broad audiences with accessible human narratives which had meaning and relevance for them.

Stories of the impact of belief on human lives – both in the past and today's world – are equally compelling programme material.

"Try to find epic individuals whose lives are caught up in great moments of belief, conflict or tension in the past or today. We're fascinated by people facing dilemmas and choices." - Mark Dowd

3E COURAGEOUS SCHEDULING AND PROMOTION

The intellectual ambition of the audience mustn't be underestimated. Programmes about belief can win substantial prime-time audiences.

During development, Simon Schama's history of Britain was often referred to by sceptics as "the Albatross". But it was vigorously promoted and given prime-time scheduling, and the result was a ratings and critical success.

3F A WIDE RANGE OF GENRES AND CREATIVE FORMATS

History TV stayed popular through constant re-invention. Techniques ranged from Schama and Starkey's "lantern-lectures" to drama-documentaries and even hybrid "reality history" series. Each can engage audiences in ways which inform, educate and entertain.

The same spirit of cross-genre experimentation can make belief accessible. "The Monastery" is a pioneering example of "reality religion".

There's also potential for programmes which explore the interweaving of history and belief. This can help audiences better understand the nature of religion today, and give a richer insight into historical events.

"Programmes like Seaside Parish and Monastery are breakthroughs because they show ordinary people undergoing transformation through the power of religion. It's a very, very new experience for people who don't see religion in their lives." - Jana Bennett, BBC Director Television

3J MAKING SENSE OF A DANGEROUS WORLD

As a public service broadcaster, the BBC has a responsibility to help audiences find the knowledge they need to make sense of a dangerous world.

Rigorous, sensitive programmes about belief should not be seen as optional extras in 2005, but essential tools for understanding the world our children will inherit.

" Rageh Omaar's Islam series had a wonderful reception in our community because it showed how different religious communities co-existed positively in the past, and proved that the default position isn't always conflict." - Inayat Bunglawala

SESSION 4: IS THERE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL FOR COVERAGE OF BELIEF IN DRAMA AND COMEDY?

Panel: Tony Marchant, Armando Iannucci, Omid Djalili

Drama and comedy have always been powerful ways of exploring changing values in the world of its audience. In 2005 belief is re-emerging as a key factor shaping world affairs and a multicultural UK. Yet it's largely forbidden territory for comedy, and rarely impacts on the storylines of TV drama. Are programme-makers missing a trick?

4A BELIEF IS ABOUT THE "FIRST ORDER QUESTIONS" : AND SO IS GREAT DRAMA

Great drama deals with the first order questions. Why am I here? What happens when I die? Why do I do things I don't intend to do? These are also the great religious questions, though they may have no direct connection with institutional religion.

BBC Drama should have the courage to go with these big questions, and into the depths. They're part of a writer's remit to explore what it is to be fully human.

There may not be many dramas which are overtly about religion. But they do deal with issues of morality and faith – because that's the heart of all serious drama.

"Drama and comedy began as art-forms in Athens as part of religious festivals. They existed to give people transcendence and compassion. They can help us today to learn to grow together as a multi-cultural world community. But you must expect clashes over what people feel is sacred – between freedom of speech and fixed religious attitudes." - Karen Armstrong

There may be wariness in British television about commissioning and scheduling dramas which are overtly religious, and contain characters who have religious

motives. This contrasts with a much more accepting attitude to strong political beliefs.

4E INSIDE KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Writers of drama and comedy agree that knowledge of faith communities from the inside is essential for fair and rounded portrayal. So a Catholic or a lapsed Catholic, can write about Catholicism with authority. Conversely *Goodness Gracious Me* would have been unthinkable as the product of a white programme team.

Broadcasters need to be particularly sensitive in the way they portray a religion about which there is general public ignorance.

Islam is the crucial current example. Broadcasters must avoid sensational storylines or two-dimensional characters which convey a caricatured view of the complexities of Muslim community life.

The recent rise of fundamentalisms (Christian and non-Christian) is a very rich ground for broadcast drama. But also very difficult – writers tend to come from secular, liberal, "modern" backgrounds, so the mindset of fundamentalists may be impossible to empathise with.

"We invited a Sikh comedian to write a satirical piece about his own upbringing. The community reaction was fantastic: 'We've arrived – now we can laugh at ourselves.' What made the difference was that the Sikh faith was an important element in the writer's own life." - Christine Morgan, BBC Executive Producer Religion and Ethics

4F PORTRAYAL OF RELIGIOUS CHARACTERS IN TV DRAMA AND COMEDY

"Normal" characters in popular drama are almost exclusively secular. In comedy programmes, religious characters are rarely credited with a sense of humour: they're targets of humour, not its source. Geraldine in the Vicar of Dibley is a rare exception.

In the past there's been a tendency in British mainstream comedy and broadcast drama to treat a religious world-view as eccentric and a secular approach as normative.

Following on from the success of the BBC's *Hawking* film, it is felt that there's potential for dramas which explore issues of belief through telling the stories of key transitions or turning-points in the lives of historical figures or individuals caught up in dramatic situations of belief today.

"The best way to avoid committing offence is always to create characters which are three-dimensional. There have been dramas ... where fundamentalist characters were two-dimensional and everyone else three-dimensional. Emotionally and morally that approach wasn't even-handed. I believe you must never create straw people." - Tony Marchant

4G COMEDY AND BELIEF

The purpose of comedy is to make people laugh, not to convey a message or explain a belief. But it can also help an audience understand someone else's point of view or change a prejudice.

But the concept of "responsible comedy" is fraught with contradiction. "Responsible journalism" is all about balance, providing evidence, searching for the truth. Comedy is about twisting logic, being unfair, making up amusing lies. The essence of comedy is distortion and exaggeration.

This makes religion a very difficult subject for comedy, since it involves dealing with beliefs which may hold certain things sacred and beyond discussion. Fear of causing serious offence can turn religion into a no-go area for comedy.

"At the highest level in comedy, as in any art-form, you try to be entertaining and educating and elevating. Comedians who pause to reflect on the seriousness of a point often get a bigger laugh because they've really connected with their audience."
- Omid Djalili

4H CAN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE BE A COMIC TARGET, BUT NOT THE CORE OF BELIEF?

The concept of religious comedy is neither new nor revolutionary. There's a long tradition of satire in Christianity and other faiths going back to medieval times.

But there are implicit limits. Speakers felt there was a crucial difference between making fun of religious people, practices and institutions, and ridiculing the central figures of a faith.

Writers agree the most effective comedy comes from an inside knowledge of a faith – not from the perspective of a total outsider.

4I COMEDY HELPS US UNDERSTAND EACH OTHERS' LIVES AND BELIEFS

As Hilary Salmon, BBC Senior Executive Producer for Drama, said at the seminar, "If comedy isn't about looking for meaning in chaos, I don't know what it is about."

Comedy's purpose is laughter, and laughter breaks down psychological barriers, bringing the unfamiliar or alien within our imaginative grasp. An obvious example was *Goodness Gracious Me*. **Another was Richard Curtis's determination in creating *The Vicar of Dibley* to confront the furore over women priests and show how normal a woman's ministry would be in the real world.**

More generally as Jon Plowman, Head of BBC Comedy, suggests great comedy and drama share a common concern with exploring the human condition in all its complexity and richness – and that includes the enduring impact of belief.

4J HANDLING CONTROVERSY

It may be tempting to play safe and declare religion a no-go area for drama and comedy. Coverage of belief in drama and comedy is more dangerous than in news and factual programmes. If it's to be part of the mainstream of broadcasting across genres in Britain, both programme-makers and faith leaders need to be robust.

Broadcasters should be encouraged to find better ways to share information with religious leaders and be more open about the inherent difficulties faith programming involves.

Director-General Mark Thompson said: "In the past religious programming has been associated with duty and caution rather than energy and life.

"In broadcasting, religion and faith is not just a genre. Instead issues of belief and non-belief inspire programme-makers from many genres.

Appendix

Panel Members

DR COLIN MORRIS

After National Service and Oxford, Colin Morris worked as a Methodist missionary in Africa, becoming president first of the United Church of Central Africa, then of the United Church of Zambia. Back in the UK, Colin became President of the Methodist Conference, before moving to the BBC in 1978 as Head of TV Religious Programmes, then Head of Religious Broadcasting. After a period as Special Advisor to the Director-General, in 1987 he took over as Controller BBC Northern Ireland. Since then he has presented many religious programmes for the BBC, including Radio 4's Sunday. He has lectured widely in Britain and overseas on religion and broadcasting, and has written many books on faith and media issues. He was Director of the Centre for Religious Communication in Oxford from 1991-96, and is a frequent contributor to Radio 4's Thought for the Day..

KAREN ARMSTRONG

Karen Armstrong spent seven years as a Roman Catholic nun in the 1960s, but left her teaching order in 1969. She studied English Literature at the University of Oxford, and then taught modern literature at the University of London. In 1982, she became a full time broadcaster and writer. Her books include the autobiographical *Through the Narrow Gate*, *The Gospel According to Woman*, *Holy War*, *The Crusades and their Impact on Today's World*, *A History of God* (which became an international bestseller) and *The Battle for God, A History of Fundamentalism*. Since September 11th Karen has become best known for her work on Islam and fundamentalism. She has twice addressed members of the US Congress on this subject, and was one of three scholars to speak in the United Nations in its first session devoted to religion. She is currently involved in a major project to develop a pluralistic American Islam.

PROFESSOR IAN LINDEN

Ian Linden is a writer on politics and development with a particular focus on religion and conflict in Africa – and an advisor to the UK Government on the role of religions in development (a key emphasis of the Commission for Africa). He is an associate professor at the School of Oriental & African Studies in London, and a director of the Catholic Institute for International Relations, a respected think-tank linked with radical Church groups in Southern Africa, Central America and Philippines. Ian was awarded a CMG for his work for human rights in 2000. His last book *A New Map of the World* investigates the impact of globalisation on the world religions and the growth of a global civil society.

INAYAT BUNGLAWALA

Inayat Bunglawala is the Media Secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain – the UK's main Muslim umbrella body. He has studied Islam under some of the most senior British Muslim scholars, including Khurram Murad, Professor Khurshid Ahmad and Dr Basil Mustafa, and has been actively involved in the affairs of the Muslim community for over 17 years, and particularly with reaching out to Muslim young people. As the Council's Media Secretary, Inayat makes regular appearances on radio and television, and writes articles for all areas of the national press, from the Sun to the Observer.

BISHOP GRAHAM JAMES

Graham James is Bishop of Norwich and chairman of the Central Religious Advisory Committee of the BBC (CRAC). His roots are in Cornwall where many members of his family worked in the tin mines. After reading history at the University of Lancaster, he trained for the ministry at Cuddesdon College in Oxford. He worked as a team vicar in Welwyn Garden City, and then moved to Church House, Westminster to oversee selection procedures for candidates for ordination. In 1987 he was appointed as chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Returning to his native Cornwall, Bishop Graham was consecrated Bishop of St Germans in 1993, and finally in 2000 enthroned as Bishop of Norwich.

DR TRISTRAM HUNT

Historian, journalist and broadcaster Dr Tristram Hunt lectures in modern British history at Queen Mary, University of London and is visiting professor at Arizona State University. Previously, he was an associate fellow at the Centre for History and Economics, King's College, Cambridge. He read history at Trinity College, Cambridge and the University of Chicago. He has worked for the Labour Party on two general election campaigns, as special adviser to the Science Minister, and as research fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research. He writes regularly for UK and US newspapers and magazines, and is a leading British history broadcaster. He is also a trustee of the Heritage Lottery Fund.

MARK DOWD

A former monk, Mark is a writer, presenter and television producer. After graduating with first class honours in political science, he trained for priesthood in the Dominican order at Blackfriars Priory in Oxford. He gained an M Phil in international relations at St Antony's College, Oxford, then joined the Times as a journalist. He later worked for LWT and the BBC as a current affairs producer, including six highly successful years as producer/director on Panorama. Recently Mark has written extensively about religion and presented a number of innovative television programmes on issues of belief, including Hallowed be thy Game and Children of Abraham.

TONY MARCHANT

Tony Marchant's outstanding contribution to television drama was recognised by the 1999 Dennis Potter Award at BAFTA. Best known for his ground-breaking 8-part television drama Holding On, Tony has a unique reputation as the great moralist of TV drama in Britain. In plays and TV drama series like Passer By, Kid in the Corner, Swallow, Take Me Home, Bad Blood and Goodbye, Cruel World, he brings to life some of the key moral dilemmas of modern life. He is currently working on Birthright, a 3-part drama for the BBC and a Channel 4 film, Iraqi Prisoners.

ARMANDO IANNUCCI

Scottish-born Armando Iannucci is a comic writer, performer, director and producer, responsible for some of the most original comedy on radio and television, including The Day Today, I'm Alan Partridge, Knowing Me, Knowing You and The Saturday Night Armistice. He started in BBC Radio launching shows like The Mary Whitehouse Experience, Girls will be Girls and On the Hour before diversifying into television. Armando has won two Sony Radio Awards and three British Comedy Awards, one a special award for his contribution to television comedy. His own topical show, Armando Iannucci's Charm Offensive, started this week on BBC Radio 4, and a satirical TV drama series, The Thick of It begins next week.

OMID DJALILI

Iranian-born Omid Djalili is one of Britain's most successful stand-up comedians, as well as a prolific TV and film actor. His stand-up career took off at the 1995 Edinburgh Festival with Short Fat Kebab Shop Owner's Son, followed in 1996 with The Arab & The Jew and Omid Djalili Is Ethnic in 1997. Omid's comedy is unafraid of controversy, prepared (in shows like the post-9/11 Behind Enemy Lines) to confront sensitive issues of belief and identity. He has won a number of comedy awards, as well as the One World Media Award for his TV documentary, Bloody Foreigners. He performs across Europe and in North America.