

# The Production of Religious Broadcasting: The Case of the BBC

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# Abstract

This thesis examines the way in which media professionals negotiate the occupational challenges related to television and radio production. It has used the subject of religion and its treatment within the BBC as a microcosm to unpack some of the dilemmas of contemporary broadcasting. In recent years religious programmes have evolved in both form and content leading to what some observers claim is a “renaissance” in religious broadcasting. However, any claims of a renaissance have to be balanced against the complex institutional and commercial constraints that challenge its long-term viability.

This research finds that despite the BBC’s public commitment to covering a religious brief, producers in this style of programming are subject to many of the same competitive forces as those in other areas of production. Furthermore those producers who work in-house within the BBC’s Department of Religion and Ethics believe that in practice they are being increasingly undermined through the internal culture of the Corporation and the strategic decisions it has adopted. This is not an intentional snub by the BBC but a product of the pressure the Corporation finds itself under in an increasingly competitive broadcasting ecology, hence the removal of the protection once afforded to both the department and the output.

Those who informed this study have responded to these challenges in a number of different ways. Of these, the two most important are the adoption of a discourse of ‘professionalism’ designed to underscore their creativity, knowledge and value to the BBC and overcome the ghettoisation of religious broadcasting and second, in the opening up of religion to a range of new formats and conventions which are designed to make the programming more audience, and thus commissioner, friendly. However, despite both these responses the long-term future of religious broadcasting and its suppliers is still far from clear. Therefore, using historical analysis, interviews with media professionals and a period of observational research this thesis offers critical insights into the private world of religious broadcasting at the BBC.

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## **Author's Declaration**

This thesis represents the original work of Caitriona Noonan unless otherwise stated in the text. The research upon which it is based was carried out at the University of Stirling and the University of Glasgow under the supervision of Professor Philip Schlesinger and Dr. Raymond Boyle during the period October 2005 to December 2008.

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# Introduction

This research is motivated by two areas of interest. The first relates to the current working conditions and practices of media professionals in today's competitive broadcasting environment. Understanding the values they carry is important if the role of the media in contemporary society is to be fully understood. Their products dominate much of the communicative landscape shaping the knowledge, behaviour and beliefs of modern society. However, their power is relative and they function under the influence of a complex range of factors many of which have been hidden from academic view. These factors include the organisation's culture, professional agency, and public service commitments. Today, greater access, resources and transparency have allowed researchers to see inside the world of media production and so the voice of the practitioner has been given greater attention by researchers as they uncover more about the relationship between production, output and reception.

The second interest which motivated this research was that when deciding the parameters of this study a large number of articles appeared in the press citing an apparent "renaissance" in religious broadcasting, specifically on terrestrial television (Brown, 2006; Conlan, 2005(a); Hudson, 2006; McDonnell, 2006(a); Thomas, 2007; Turner, 2006; Watts, 2007). These articles concluded that the whole of religious broadcasting was experiencing growth and this was characterised by new formats with wider appeal. Undoubtedly there had been a change on the terrestrial broadcasters of the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Five. Channel 4 (C4) had altered its approach to the topic of religion commissioning more controversial single programmes about extremism and fundamentalist religious practice. This narrow range of programmes dominated its schedule of faith programmes feeding into much of the multicultural debate which was ongoing at the time and which had grown in volume with the 9/11 attacks, the London bombings and the protests surrounding the publication of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in Denmark, both in 2005. On the other hand, the BBC (the British Broadcasting Corporation) seemed less interested in controversial subjects. *Songs of Praise* (BBC 1, 1961 - ) based around hymn singing and the best known of the Corporation's religious offerings continued to be there, complemented by one-off programmes like the reality-based format *The Monastery* (BBC 2, 2005) which had been a well-publicised success. Yet it seemed that an absolute renaissance was, in some cases, inconsistent with what was actually appearing (or not appearing) on screen. ITV had announced it was to transmit even less programmes about religion. Channel Five had little in the way of regular religious programmes and beyond terrestrial television there was little of this programming outside of the dedicated religious channels such as God TV and the few US outlets available via satellite. If one of the benefits of a



renaissance is that it makes a genre more sustainable, then one-off programmes and historical nostalgia do not really achieve this and regularly scheduled programming covering a wider array of themes would seem a more stable proposition to feed a revival.

This thesis, therefore, reconciles both of these interests and has examined how media professionals negotiate the occupational challenges they face daily. It has used the theme of religion and its treatment within the BBC as a microcosm to unpack some of the dilemmas of contemporary broadcasting. It has considered the work of the specialist Department of Religion and Ethics in the BBC and the few companies in the independent production sector involved in this style of programming uncovering the institutional, cultural, commercial and professional constraints that shape their final output.

This thesis will show that any claims of a renaissance in the programming have to be balanced against the complex factors that challenge its long-term viability. This research finds that, despite the BBC's public commitment to covering a religious brief, producers of this style of programming are subject to many of the same competitive forces as those in other areas of production. Furthermore those producers who work in-house believe that in practice they are being increasingly undermined through the internal culture of the Corporation and the strategic decisions it has adopted. This is not a vendetta against the output or its suppliers but is the product of an increasingly competitive broadcasting ecology which the BBC occupies; one in which broadcasting's public duties are being reconsidered in light of even greater commercial pressures. As a result of this shift those who informed this study have responded to the challenges in a number of different ways. First, the interviewees have adopted a discourse of 'professionalism' designed to overcome the ghettoisation of the output and underscore the value of their creativity, experience and knowledge to the BBC. Second, their approach has and is changing in response to the more crowded and less protected programme schedules. The effect has been that religion has adopted a range of new formats and conventions (for example from reality television), which it is hoped will make the programmes more appealing to audiences and commissioners. However, despite both these responses the long-term future of the genre and its suppliers is still far from clear.

**Religion: “it’s a different sort of genre” (Series Editor *Songs of Praise*, 2007)**

This research deals with religious broadcasting, which is programming created with particular faith-based aims in mind (these aims will be discussed throughout this work). Programmes of this style are self-consciously religious and contain many overt references to conventional religion including its values, practices and institutions.<sup>1</sup> It has specific elements which distinguish it from other styles of output such as the use of religious iconography, the inclusion of religious leaders, and the discussion of belief and personal faith. However, in recent years it has also become more amenable to less conventional representations of faith and increasingly includes moral and ethical themes.

However, religious programmes do not have a typical mode of delivery straddling fact and fiction, at times using discussion, debate or drama as a vehicle for their message. This means they have less in common with news, current affairs or drama than with history, arts and music programming. These styles of specialist programmes all draw on different resources when communicating with audiences. Later, this thesis will argue that specific sub-styles can be discerned from the overall religious output (i.e. worship, factual and landmark programmes) within which further shared conventions are discernable. This thesis will show that, although religious programmes are more diverse and potentially harder to categorise (Johnson, 2007), religious broadcasting exhibits a specific programming identity.

Another way in which the concept of religious broadcasting is mobilised is in assertions about value and public interest and the formulation of broadcasting policy to underpin this. According to Jason Mittell (2001) media production can be situated within larger systems of power and becomes imbued with a range of political implications. This means that media products cannot be considered neutral entities. In the case of religious broadcasting, its political links are clearly visible in the way the regulator intervenes in the supply of programmes and the policies that it forms to support it. Ofcom, the telecommunications regulator, recognises religion as a distinct genre that meets the needs of specific minority audiences. However, in discussions of value its reports note that religion is repeatedly perceived as of lesser social value compared to other genres by the majority audience and thus Ofcom argue it needs to be protected (Ofcom, 2005). For this reason it has imposed programme quotas on broadcasters in

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<sup>1</sup> This research differentiates between ‘religious broadcasting’ as a distinct style of programming and ‘religion in broadcasting’ which includes for instance religious characters in fictional output or references to religion in news reporting.

order to deliver this style of programming and prevent it from disappearing in a more commercial broadcasting ecology. Here, religion becomes a protected style of programme and this opens the debate about the purpose and meaning of public service broadcasting and its role in an industry increasingly responsive to consumer demands.

A further definition of religious broadcasting relates to an institutional understanding of it as an occupation; in other words as a way to organise production within increasingly complex broadcasting institutions. This is seen clearly in the creation of specialist departments or commissioning editors that decide output, exercise editorial control and contribute to programme production. In this definition religion has been recognised as a distinct style of programming since the inception of the BBC in the 1920s. This in turn has meant that it has developed within a specific institutional culture fashioning its own “professional subculture” (Bloor & Dawson, 1994: 280).<sup>2</sup>

With these different approaches to religious broadcasting in mind, this research takes a comprehensive view of the concept and the way different definitions merge and collide. By recognising the aesthetic codes which are present in the output, the value judgements which condition its inclusion in the broadcasting diet and the clear division of labour within the broadcasters to produce these programmes, it is clear that religious broadcasting can be seen as an distinct style of output within the UK broadcasting system. To combine these different cultural, political and organisational approaches, this study draws on what Tunstall describes as the “private world” (Tunstall, 1993: 2) where each style of output has its own distinct ecology that stretches across all channels and providers.<sup>3</sup> This world is shaped by its “own system of status and prestige, its own values and its own world-views” (ibid.: 3). By looking at religious broadcasting in this way, it allows the complexities of occupational conditions to come through recognising that the production context is shaped by external political interference and established aesthetic judgments. By doing this, a richer understanding of the relatively small world of religious broadcasting is possible.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bloor & Dawson (1994: 280) use the term “professional subculture” to show how some groups within an organisation are arranged around a specific role and through the history, values and practices they share, form their own subculture (pp. 281-283).

<sup>3</sup> This concept of “private world” draws heavily on Tom Burns (1977) work *The BBC: Public Institution and Private World* where he discussed the private world of the BBC. Tunstall (1993) acknowledges these origins and extends this concept to include other broadcasting institutions beyond the BBC, and focuses on the genre as the private world as opposed to the institution.

<sup>4</sup> In the past many of those interviewed for this study have produced religious output for other broadcasters, yet the BBC was described as “probably the last feeding ground for religious programmes” (Former Head of DRE, 2007) and so this ‘private world’ has largely retracted to the BBC and its other main suppliers (be they freelancers or independents).

## Choosing the BBC

This Temple of the Arts and Muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first Governors of Broadcasting in the year 1931, Sir John Reith being the Director General. It is their prayer that good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest, that all things hostile to peace or purity may be abolished from this house and that the people, inclining their ear to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the path of wisdom and uprightness. (Cited in Bailey, 2007: 5)

This inscription appears in Latin above the sculpture of The Sower at Broadcasting House, the headquarters of the BBC in London. It is a reminder to staff and visitors of the responsibilities afforded by broadcasting and also the BBC's original vision of its contribution to society. Furthermore, for the purposes of this research it features as one of the most overt artefacts of the BBC's relationship with religion which has been part of the organisation's output since its earliest history. It is testament to the unashamed religiosity and initial primacy of the Christian faith in the early work of the BBC. However, for many such a proclamation of religious duty will seem out of step with the professional ethos of the BBC today in which staff must balance the forces of financial competition and those of social purpose.

The BBC, specifically its television and radio output, was chosen as the site to view the issues relating to religious production for three reasons. The Corporation has had a long, albeit tumultuous relationship with religion as a style of production. This history allows the researcher to chart the way in which some of the taken for granted assumptions about production have emerged and conditioned the current output. In later chapters it will be clear that debates about its religious output have not been confined internally to the Corporation but have at times spilled over into public debate. This has meant that there is a wide range of voices and perspectives over the last eighty years which have enriched the material for this study.

Furthermore, the BBC is one of only two national media institutions in Britain to dedicate resources specifically to faith-based output. Although the focus of this research has been on experiences within the BBC, Channel 4 also has a department which commissions religious programmes for transmission on its channels. As described in the opening section it has taken a very different approach to its religious programmes, opting for what it describes as "riskier" commissions (Ahmed, 2008). However, while the BBC has a number of producers (in-house and in the independent sector) working directly for it to produce content in this area, Channel 4 is staffed by a single commissioning editor and his team who commission ideas from independent production companies. This means that Channel 4 does not have the same depth of

experience that the BBC brings to this research. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity to see the Corporation's culture operate in a wider setting and to compare the way it influences suppliers (both internally and externally) operating within a specific style of programming.

The third reason stems from the limits of media research to date. Initially this research intended to look only at television production. However, there is a lack of bi-media research, which covers both television and radio comparing and contrasting them, and this was an opportunity to examine the experiences of one topic across two media outlets. It was clear from early in the research process that radio has a different relationship to religious broadcasting than television. While religion's relationship with television is problematic, radio continues to be an important vehicle for this style of programming. Therefore, the findings of this research make an important contribution to radio studies and uncover some significant occupational differences.

Having chosen the BBC as the site in which to anchor the research, the next decision was what level of the organisation the study should focus on. According to Paterson (2001: 205) "Creative work in television varies between genres but there is an accentuated emphasis on the central role of the producers" and so through the interviews carried out it was the perspective of producers both in television and radio which mainly informed this study. However, although the producer is key to understanding the issues, it is important to acknowledge that the production of television is also a collective action. It is crucial to balance the producer perspective with alternatives and so other central roles such as heads of department and commissioning editors were also included in the study. The research, therefore, examines religious broadcasting as a private world from the perspective of many of those working in this area and investigates how they respond to internal and external factors.

At different times in the thesis the focus is specifically on the BBC's own in-house production unit for religion, the Department of Religion and Ethics (DRE).<sup>5</sup> This focus allows readers to view the challenges and opportunities which its position as a small department in the BBC affords. The Department of Religion and Ethics is a relatively autonomous programme-making unit within the BBC's Vision directorate (the programme-making end of the Corporation). It has its own budget and permanent staff

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<sup>5</sup> Until significant restructuring in 2000, the Department of Religion and Ethics was referred to as the Religious Broadcasting Department.

but as this research will show it is increasingly under pressure from senior management. Following the major restructuring of the BBC which began in the 1990s and continues today, DRE was relocated to Manchester in the Northwest of England (over 200 miles from London and one of a number of ancillary hubs for content production in the UK). There followed a number of tumultuous years for the department from 1994, which included the resignation of two heads of department within a short period, public criticism from the churches and press regarding the department's output and a significant cut in budget. Today, they also find themselves under pressure from the independent production sector which has its own issues relating to financial stability and capacity. These experiences combine to provide a unique backdrop against which to view the current religious output and hear the experiences of those involved in production at a very tumultuous time for UK broadcasting.

### **Organisation of this thesis**

To summarise, this research has examined the professional context within which religious programmes are commissioned, produced and transmitted by the Corporation thus it has reviewed the current place of religious broadcasting in the BBC's internal culture. This thesis is laid out in three parts as follows:

This first section outlines the context of this study. It will identify the relevant fields of research which this thesis will draw on and will introduce the main factors which impact broadcasting institutions and their work. It locates this thesis in the intersect between other studies of religious output and audience reception, debates about public service broadcasting (PSB), the BBC's shifting organisational culture and previous ethnographic studies of broadcast production. The various methods used to conduct this research will also feature in this section and includes historical analysis, semi-structured interviews and observational research. These two chapters provide the frame on which this thesis stands.

The second section will track the historical evolution of religious content on both terrestrial television and radio in Britain from its inception in the early days of the BBC to its role in today's mediated multi-faith society. Doing analysis of this style allows the reader to see how the output has developed making clear the issues which have remained the same and those which have changed. This section is divided before and after the introduction of television and the subsequent decline in radio's resources and prestige. It is broken down into specific eras in which the output and its staff

experienced significant change and is considered against the social and political climate of the time. This section further outlines many of the issues which informed the interviews and analysis reported in the final section of this research.

The final part of this thesis contains the bulk of the findings from the interviews conducted. It explores three areas of interest. The first section focuses on the Department of Religion and Ethics as a semi-autonomous unit within the changing BBC culture using specific sites of tension as a way to understand the politics and hierarchy that exists inside the Corporation. The next chapter examines some of the ways in which religious producers have responded to these tensions, in particular their use of a discourse of professionalism. In order to see how this has a practical bearing on the actual output, Chapter Seven examines the content and form of output today and how these sit within the wider aesthetics of broadcasting. The concluding chapter pulls together many of the themes discussed in the previous chapters. It specifically examines the evolving bond between public service broadcasting and religious output, the challenges and opportunities for religious broadcasting in an increasingly digital landscape and the prospects for in-house production at the Corporation.

To conclude this introduction, this research is timely as media institutions and practitioners become more reflexive about their work practices partly due to the current debates surrounding trust in broadcasting (Plunkett, 2007). Furthermore, religion is continuing to be a source of controversy in the public sphere, something that has taken many by surprise. Therefore, this study makes an important contribution to a number of contemporary debates. These include:

- the occupational values of producers and their everyday responses to changes in the broadcasting ecology;
- the continuing debates on public service broadcasting (PSB) and how it is delivered in practice;
- the organisational culture of the BBC and its evolving relationship with internal and external programme-making units; and
- the context of producing specialist programmes, such as religion, in the UK broadcasting system.

The next chapter will introduce and explore a number of these debates in order to contextualise this research.

# Part I: The Research Framework

Part One of this thesis outlines the framework for the study. Chapter One will identify the relevant fields of research that inform this work. These include other studies of religious output and audience reception, debates about public service broadcasting (PSB), the BBC's shifting organisational culture and previous ethnographic studies of media production. This chapter concludes by arguing that media professionals are subject to a complex interplay of professional, ideological, institutional and commercial forces, but equally, production as an activity has a complex and powerful influence on the reconstitution of broadcasting's social and commercial role.

Chapter Two introduces the methods used to achieve the aim of this research, which is to understand the occupational challenges faced by those in religious broadcasting. The methods used include analysing the history of religious broadcasting, conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with media professionals in this area and carrying out a brief period of observational research. Together these approaches allow for a detailed and robust analysis.



# Chapter One: Research Context

As previously outlined, this study analyses the professional context of producing religious output for television and radio and will centre on the work of the BBC. It draws on a number of debates from existing research which will inform the historical narrative and contextualise later analysis. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research on religious broadcasting focusing first on work done within the British context and then on the American phenomenon of televangelism. The development of religious broadcasting in the UK can only be understood within the context of the overall broadcasting provision and its framing within public service broadcasting (PSB) commitments. Therefore, the history of public service broadcasting, as a paternalistic approach to the creation of cultural products, is described and the current debates explored. The chapter then looks at one particular media institution at work, the BBC. The BBC is used as a site in which many of the debates will be anchored and so its organisational culture deserves greater attention. This chapter concludes by mapping the work done on media production and highlights some of the gaps which this research will fill.

## Research on religious broadcasting

Religious broadcasting in Britain has been subject to a number of official reviews by regulators and broadcasters. The focus of these was initially on the audience's perspective but eventually this was combined with a professional view of the genre adding further to our appreciation of production conditions. For this reason, these reports are important to understanding audience profile, the type of content they demand, and the challenges facing suppliers.

One of the first reports on religious broadcasting in Britain in relation to the audience came from the work done in conjunction with the regulator at that time, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), entitled *Godwatching: Viewers, Religion and Television* (Svennevig et al, 1988). The research compared in-depth surveys from the 1960s and 1980s on religiosity and attitudes to religious programmes. It found that the numbers professing a Christian faith had declined (though the extent of the decline differed between gender and age group); however, in terms of religious television the number still represented a large potential audience for broadcasters. The majority of respondents (including committed believers and secularists) still felt that religious broadcasting had a definite role to play but an increasing proportion perceived it as "preaching to the converted" (Svennevig et al, 1988: 59) suggesting that producers had

difficulty in making programmes which were appreciated and accessible to the wider secular audience.

Six years later Gunter and Viney (1994) followed up on the IBA report with *Seeing is Believing: Religion and Television in the 1990s* commissioned by the Independent Television Commission (ITC). This research again provided a comprehensive investigation of public opinion and audience attitudes towards religious broadcasting. Crucially, it combined the perceptions of both the majority Christian community and of minority groups to religion on television, pointing to the growing concern with pluralism and multiculturalism which emerged at that time. A number of key findings emerged from this study. The report began by detailing the audience profile for religious programmes. More than one in four (28 per cent) agreed that religion was very important in their own life and contributed significantly to how they defined their identity (ibid.: 28) which the authors believed showed that at that time British society may not have been as secularised as was generally thought. Despite respondents agreement that “television should give greater access to all religions and indeed had a responsibility to do so” (ibid.: 106), religious broadcasting was characterised as “Church of England broadcasting” by the majority of respondents, pointing to an overall narrow view of religious programmes by audiences. This meant that viewing figures for overtly religious programmes, such as *Songs of Praise*, were erratic, indicating that it is a challenge to have these religious programmes watched by non-Christians and non-believers.<sup>6</sup> This echoes the IBA’s earlier findings showing that in the intervening years producers and broadcasters had not adequately resolved the issue of how to achieve mass appeal.

These works continue to be of relevance in understanding British broadcasting’s relationship with religion. They show that religious television programmes are viewed in very narrow terms by audiences (Church of England, traditional and “boring” were some of the ways they were described in the studies) and that a small sample of programmes is used as indicative of the genre as a whole (*Songs of Praise* being the most prominent). However, religious broadcasting is also seen as an important part of television’s social function. Therefore, the central message of these audience reports is that in order to widen the appeal of such programmes, suppliers must overcome significant negative preconceptions but with the appropriate approach they could find a potentially large and appreciative audience.

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<sup>6</sup> *Songs of Praise* was one of the first religious programmes to make the transition from radio to television in the 1960s. Even today the programme is broadcast most Sunday evenings on the BBC’s main channel, BBC 1. The format, which has been subject to some change over the years, is a mix of hymn singing and factual pieces on religious themes making it one of the most overtly religious programmes broadcast by the BBC.

More recent studies of religious programming have emerged from other bodies such as Ofcom, the Lords Committee on Charter Review and the BBC itself. In May 2005 as part of the Communications Act (2003) Ofcom redrafted its code on religious programming. Again, it carried out research on the perception of religious programmes amongst audiences but was predominantly concerned with how they should be regulated.<sup>7</sup> Its research yielded similar responses to those above. Respondents to this survey favoured a broader definition of religious programming which could be delivered through a wide range of channels. They called for programmes to take a more “modern” and challenging approach criticising traditional programming, such as *Songs of Praise*, as “insular and uninformative” (Ofcom, 2005: 2). They were mindful that religious programmes were different from other mainstream broadcasts and that grey areas were inevitable but felt that the regulator had a duty to ensure programmes adhered to the principles of ‘due responsibility’. Overall, the audience concluded they were poorly served at that time.

This research by Ofcom also included the views of suppliers. In this study industry professionals agreed that current audiences were poorly served in relation to religious programmes (the report notes that failure was argued in much stronger terms by the professionals than by the audience). While they criticised the poor scheduling afforded to religious programmes:

Religious programmes were primarily criticised for not being sufficiently entertaining, which they largely linked to the lack of resources and talent invested. (Ofcom, 2005: 45)

In many situations scheduling and resources are largely outside the control of producers and so this points to a wider institutional failing with regards to religious output. Hollinshead’s (2002) PhD work on religion in fictional programming further supports this argument. In her interviews with producers, viewing figures are their number one consideration, something her interviewees argue are not synonymous with religious programmes. Furthermore, non-specialist entertainment departments, such as drama, have neither the financial or time resources to do the level of research needed to include religious characters or themes in their output and so these are either omitted or largely based on stereotypes. This has led to a relatively narrow approach to the subject of religion emerging from the broadcasting institutions.

Another significant study examining the role of religious broadcasting in Britain centred on the BBC’s Charter Renewal in 2006 by a Select Committee of the House of Lords.

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<sup>7</sup> This focus may be in recognition of what at that time some felt was the threat of the televangelist which would be realised as a result of Ofcom’s light-touch approach to regulation (Quicke & Quicke: 1992).

Here, consultation with religious leaders and industry professionals looked at religion in terms of the BBC's traditional public service broadcasting (PSB) remit and commented that religious broadcasting itself had become "a sensitive and divisive issue" (House of Lords, 2006(b): para. 143). The report supported Ofcom's implementation of a broad definition of religious programming believing that it allowed broadcasters:

[M]ore freedom to explore innovative ways of incorporating topics relating not just to religion and other belief systems but to spirituality, ethics and values into their programmes. (House of Lords, 2006(b): para. 148)

This broadening of religious broadcasting to include moral, ethical and spiritual themes is something which has been accepted unconditionally by suppliers and the broadcasting institutions and was in line with Ofcom's (2005) research into the type of programmes audiences wished to view. However, this move was not wholly appreciated by some of those in the religious community who saw this as a dissolving of religious broadcasting and favoured a more overt expression of traditional religious faith. Tensions developed over the styles of programmes used and this debate continues to play out as will be clear in the public discord detailed in Chapter Four.

The House of Lords' report also specifically criticised the work of some non-specialists producers in areas such as news production for their handling of religious stories. They recommended that the BBC endeavour to provide greater context to stories related to religion and that the BBC ensured "its correspondents are competent to report in a knowledgeable way" (House of Lords, 2006(b): para. 156).

The BBC has also reviewed its own religious output and produced a report to the Governors (now BBC Trust) on the genre. In April 2005 there was a review of religious output across the television channels and it reported a reduction in hours (including peak-time hours) on BBC 1 though a small increase in BBC 2. It also specifically pointed to the BBC's new strategy of big budget landmark programmes in this area; however, it ominously reported that these were not working in terms of impact and reach despite greater spend in this area. Overall it concluded that religion was not performing well on BBC 1 and that BBC 2 would now house the majority of religious programmes apart from landmarks which would remain part of the output for BBC 1.

In the following month the BBC Governors held a seminar entitled *Taking Belief Seriously* "to debate issues and through that debate help generate creative ideas for future programmes" (BBC Governance Unit, 2005(b): 1). The aim was not to develop concrete actions but to "inform" (ibid.) management of the potential of religious

programmes and to bring attention to issues which needed to be addressed. Across the four themed sessions a number of issues were debated. First, despite the recognition that there was “no hard evidence” (BBC Governance Unit, 2005(b): 2) that audiences wanted religion the panel agreed that census data relating to religiosity and global developments pointed to a market for religion; though added to this was the assertion that traditional Christian faith was out of fashion while pluralism and spirituality were in. The next panel debated the relationship between BBC News and religious stories and again the value of specialized religious knowledge and context was reiterated. However, the panel acknowledged that constraints on news production (e.g. time pressures, editorial agenda and lack of expertise) made relying on news coverage as the sole source of information on religion problematic. All agreed that BBC Online was an appropriate supplement. “Can belief join history in the programming mainstream” was the question posed by the next panel, as many felt there were lessons to be learnt from the popularising of history. Elements endorsed by the panellists included drawing on some of the conventions of drama and using celebrity fronted programmes, particularly on BBC 1. Here the nature and scope of religious content was debated along with how the genre could re-invent itself. At this point the panels drew on many of the concepts of PSB (to educate, inform and entertain) as the basis of their discussion and whether these were compatible with the reality based formats currently favoured by broadcasters. The final panel looked at drama and comedy as potential vehicles for religious broadcasting and the challenges these styles of programming come across when dealing with religious themes.

Taken together these various reports point to the occupational difficulties of getting effective religious programmes commissioned, produced and transmitted. The research alludes to the complexities of this area and the competing forces at play, some of which are in response to social pressures and others which are market driven. In terms of content delivery, although the reports criticise religious output and question whether audiences are well served, a number of observers have suggested a recent “renaissance” in religious broadcasting discussed mainly in terms of new formats, original subject matter and fresh interest from the independent production sector (Brown, 2006; Watts, 2007). However, as discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis the idea of a revival of all of religious broadcasting may be overly optimistic, as this research will later conclude.

Moving away from the British experience of religious broadcasting to consider the international context, one of the most comprehensive areas of research has been on the American phenomenon of televangelism. Televangelism, also referred to as “the

electronic church” (Fore, 1987 cited Biernatzki, 1991), is a form of religious broadcasting which uses television and radio to preach a largely evangelical message to its audience (Swatos, 1998). The number of outlets for this distinctive form of broadcasting grew following the deregulation of the US television networks in the 1970s after which entire religious channels appeared; the biggest of which was the Christian Broadcast Network (CBN). This deregulation heralded a change in the production techniques used and the objectives of the programmes overall. There was an increase in the use of new technology allowing programme makers to initiate and maintain contact with audiences. Sophisticated sets and presenting techniques allowed a greater sense of professionalism and purpose for televangelists such as Pat Robertson and many began soliciting money to help spread the ‘good’ word. According to Hoover (1997) these practices caused concern amongst observers as the programmes were no longer about extolling “proven values [through] emotional as well as rational appeal” (Biernatzki, 1991: 9) but commodified spiritual belief like any other consumer product (Horsfield, 1993: 48). However, of more immediate concern was the underlying political agenda that was being promoted through these programmes. To many, this was an unacceptable promotion of the views of the religious right, masked as wholesome “American social values” (Biernatzki, 1991: 10):

[T]he electronic church politicises (usually conservative) causes, thereby dragging it down from the level of principle and ultimate values to that of political wrangling and expediency. (Schultz, 1985 cited Biernatzki, 1991: 10)

These concerns regarding the marketing and politicisation of religion coupled with a number of high profile financial and sexual scandals involving several well known presenters, led many to accuse televangelists of “moral hypocrisy” (Soukup, 1997: 224), seriously damaging the credibility of this genre of programmes. This has meant that American televangelism has often been cited as an example of bad practice in the area of religious broadcasting by policy makers, church leaders and broadcasters in other countries. For instance, in Britain televangelism as described above is not part of the broadcasting landscape and the Broadcasting Act (1990) had a crucial role in limiting the proliferation of televangelism on British screens. This will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

To date, academic interest in televangelism has fixed mainly on audience studies as a means of deciding the long-term effects of such programmes. According to Biernatzki (1991) research on televangelism focused on three areas of reception:

- measuring the ratings and audience structure across networks and media;
- charting the personality profile of audiences for particular shows; and

- understanding the uses derived from such shows.

The first two of these concluded that the audiences for televangelists were a subculture within the wider audience for religious programmes and in fact comprised an extremely small audience compared with the figures produced and promoted by the channels and programmes themselves (Alexander, 1997; Schofield Clark & Hoover, 1997: 19). This subgroup was characterised by being mainly female, belonging to an older demographic, less educated and unsurprisingly more religious than regular TV audiences (Biernatzki, 2000: 88). Writers on televangelism speculated on the ultimate use and benefits taken from such programmes by audiences, which they suggested were their “personal inspiration, companionship and support” (Biernatzki, 1991: 13). Tomaselli & Shepperson (1997) add to this a socio-political dimension reinforcing the concerns outlined about the political ambush of God’s word:

These people [televangelists] offer hope for those sectors of society feeling threatened by the results of modernization, secularisation and rationalist culture. Their messages focus on ways in which the secular state and multinational economics have disconnected people from both their inherited everyday going-on and the most powerful authority that had previously underpinned that life: God’s Law. (1997: 215)

In sum, these works concluded that televangelism performed a distinct personal role in the lives of its small audience in the US.

The experiences of the UK and the US show two very different approaches to religious broadcasting. This is as a result of the differing values which characterise broadcasting in these countries. While historically the US has seen broadcasting as a commercial enterprise, in the UK addressing the public interest has been at the forefront of developing the service. Televangelism is the product of religious broadcasting without the authority of public service broadcasting (PSB). Therefore the influence of these principles of PSB was crucial in directing the development of religious broadcasting though equally from this quote it could be deduced that PSB was born out of Christian faith:

Reith [first Director General of the BBC] and the pioneers of public broadcasting attempted to build a tradition which would encapsulate a moral vision, a common idea of the good. Radio and television were organised and regulated within public service framework which, it was hoped, would help to sustain, if not actually build, a sense of national and civic identity based upon generally agreed Christian and moral principles. (McDonnell, 1991: 123)

Religion, along with other minority programmes, was given shelter under the terms of PSB (for this reason features such as the ‘closed period’ became part of broadcasting

history).<sup>8</sup> If broadcasting was to serve the public interest it had to serve all interests and this meant including programmes which might not be able to compete in the commercial world, including religion. Therefore, in order to inform this study further it is worth considering the roots of PSB and its contested role in contemporary broadcasting.

### Public Service Broadcasting (PSB)

Despite its prevalence in both academic writing and public discourse, agreeing on a definition for public service broadcasting is notoriously difficult (Thatcher, 1991: 37). This is not just the case in Britain but across Europe, where broadcasters and policy makers are attempting to come to terms with the principles of PSB in an increasingly competitive global market (Born & Prosser, 2001; Coppens & Saeys, 2006; Schlesinger, 1987: xii). Burns (1977) provides a reason why PSB may never achieved the certitude (coupled with legal status) it requires for practical strength:

[P]ublic service broadcasting in the form which Reith and his disciples had given it never became fully institutionalised. Especially after the advent of television, it becomes more understandable as a set of conventions, which is rather a different matter - different, because conventions are always liable to be embellished, amended and inverted. (1977: 122)

As Burns points to here, an established definition of PSB has been replaced by an emphasis on guiding principles or as he describes “conventions”. From the literature it is possible to elicit a number of shared principles which feature in most discussions of public service broadcasting. Although they are often “imperfectly realised in practice” (Born & Prosser, 2001: 671), they do form part of the PSB rhetoric, and they are conceptually helpful when considering the changes in the terms of debate. These concepts, elicited from a variety of writers (Blumler, 1992; Born & Prosser, 2001; Coppens & Saeys, 2006; Kung-Shankleman, 2003; Scannell, 1990; Thatcher, 1991; Whittle, 2002) include:

- quality (in programmes, schedules and entire services);
- universality (available and accessible to all);
- distinctiveness (from commercial offerings);
- diversity (multiple goals and pluralism at several levels including audience, output and production);
- a link to citizenship and “a common cultural experience” (Whittle, 2002);

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<sup>8</sup> On Sundays there was a restriction on the style of material broadcast (i.e. religious programmes to be transmitted only) and the times during which broadcasters could transmit. This was to ensure the broadcasters did not come into competition with the churches. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.



- publicly funded (at least partly, though commercial activities are also encouraged as a supplement); and
- independence from government (allowing greater impartiality).

Although these do provide a broad description of PSB, the lack of a concise and shared definition can be problematic as various stakeholders assume their own principles of PSB. For instance, as part of Ofcom's most recent review of PSB the purpose and characteristics of PSB were approached primarily in terms of the needs of audiences with production conditions secondary. They defined the purpose as to inform and stimulate audiences and reflect cultural identity with all of this achieved through "original programming at UK, national and regional level" (Ofcom, 2007: 5). On the other hand Channel 4, a key PSB provider, describes its commitment to the public interest as "a broad range of high quality and diverse programming" (Channel 4, 2008) and goes on to discuss PSB in terms of the channel, its overall identity and the process of production with little mention of audiences. In this example, each has used the ambiguous language of PSB in rather different ways to legitimate their interests. For this reason any discussion of PSB must take account of its malleable nature.

In order to appreciate the complexities of the discourses surrounding PSB and its current value, it is worth looking back. Today's understanding of PSB is still heavily dependent on its historical evolution through the various committees which decided the remit of broadcasting and the institutions which executed this (Collins, 2006; Crisell, 2002; Scannell, 1990; Schlesinger, 2004). In Britain, intervention in the early days of broadcasting in the form of a government appointed committee, the Sykes committee, was justified on the basis of a shortage of spectrum, thus broadcasting was conceived of as a 'public utility'. Although the committee made recommendations on its form and content, it would be the BBC's first managing director John Reith who would make PSB a reality and who would be associated with its principles to this day. For Reith, broadcasting was to have three central tenets. Public service broadcasting was to inform, educate and entertain its audience, principles which even today have currency. These original principles were to be supported by "the brute force of the BBC monopoly" and financed by the licence fee, the BBC's "political Achilles' heel" (Horrie & Clarke, 1994: 21). Reith envisaged that this ambition would be delivered through a diet of mixed programmes and conform to the highest standards of taste and quality. Here, PSB was envisaged as central to the betterment of a democratic and civil society. However, for critics this appeared paternalistic, conservative and elitist and could not last (Crisell, 2002). With the advent of ITV, PSB extended to both channels with each having a responsibility to uphold the principles of high standards; although over the years ITV has favoured more populist programmes, and eventually in the early 2000s its

PSB requirements were reduced to become subordinate to more commercial ambitions (Collins, 2006: 3). 1982 saw the introduction of a competitor to the BBC's second channel and a new PSB provider with the objective of providing greater pluralism and minority voices in television - Channel 4 (C4) television. Within the initial C4 system, PSB was to be central as the channel became Britain's first publisher-broadcaster, commissioning programmes from the sector's growing number of independent production companies on a range of innovative and diverse topics to a relatively mixed audience.

It seemed that PSB was to be given new lifeblood; however, it was at this point that "old certainties crumbled" (Scannell, 1990: 20). During the 1980s technological developments coupled with an ideological shift towards deregulation, consumer choice and free market rationales, saw PSB come under sustained attack. This shift was articulated in the Peacock Committee's report (1986) which, despite arguing for the preservation of the BBC's licence funding in the short term (eventually to be replaced by subscription), focused on the notion of consumer (rather than producer) sovereignty; it concluded that consumers were the best judges of their own interests (Born, 2004: 50). Therefore, there was less concern for the normative goals of PSB and more concern with delivering value for money; an ideology and discourse that continues to prevail in policy debates today. Now broadcasting was increasingly perceived as a commodity, a marketable good like any other, "undercutting the fundamentally democratic principles upon which public service broadcasting rest[ed]" (Scannell, 1990: 26). Today it is mainly private broadcasters, and recently the European Union (EU), who have taken the lead of "fault-finding and who therefore play an increasingly active role in formulating policies with regard to public broadcasting" (Coppens & Saeys, 2006: 261). However, advocates of PSB are fighting back arguing that "market failure in broadcasting is both endemic and structural" (Collins, 2006: 20) seeing broadcasting as a supplier of 'merit goods' in which the benefits accrue in the long-term though demand in the short-term is limited.

In sum, the evolution of PSB saw a clear shift away from judging public service broadcasters on the intangible soft criteria which were concerned with content (for example, to inform, educate and entertain) towards a plethora of economic and financial norms. An inherent tension developed between the view of broadcasting as an expression of cultural values and the view that it is predominantly a commercial activity; a tension which is besieging the entire broadcasting ecology today. Obviously, in an ideal system these two objectives could exist side by side but as Crisell (2006) argues:

[W]hen a commercial model co-exists with a public service model, the former will absorb the latter: the broadcasters of both kinds will have to play the game according to the former's rules, and a public service operator can only win by behaving commercially. (2006: 42)

Many of the current debates surrounding PSB are located at the point where these models overlap.

Considering its current guise in British broadcasting, it is generally accepted that although all the terrestrial stations in the UK have some PSB remit, it is the BBC and Channel 4 in particular who are seen as "the standard setters" and as having a "distinctive PSB contribution" respectively (Schlesinger, 2004: 3). In the case of the BBC the current issue is whether the Corporation still deserves a special position within the broadcasting ecology when some question its modes of accountability, governance and elitist practices leading to accusations of unfair trading (Born & Prosser, 2001; Collins, 2006; Crisell, 2002). Debates on the relationship between the BBC and PSB have been revived in the 2006 Charter Review. Here the focus has been on models for financing the BBC and the criteria used for judging whether its performance is 'value for money'. In relation to C4, although the principles of PSB still remain part of the rhetoric of the channel, commercialisation and marketability are now core C4 values as demonstrated by their recent strategic decisions (Born, 2003). In her research into the driving forces behind the channel, Born (2003) notes that "tensions are plain between the PSB commitment to universality and minority provision versus the drive for lucrative demographics" (ibid.: 790-791).

Although this general discussion on the place of public service broadcasting in British broadcasting will be helpful in contextualising the areas of interest for this work, it is also necessary to consider the impact of PSB on one of the main elements of this research: the occupational values of producers. As outlined by Tunstall (1993) production genres each have their own private world where shared norms and values circulate. Whether PSB informs these values and criteria, Schlesinger (2004) argues that although PSB values are still present in the industry, "the extent to which PSB purposes can be and are mediated to employees through their production contexts and work practices will vary considerably, depending on the organisation for which they work and the markets to which the company's output is orientated" (2004: 11). This 'orientation' is manifesting itself in the way in which a focus on the market and marketability has crept into the ethos of the producers, creating a culture of entrepreneurialism and professionalism (Born, 2004: 177). According to Crisell (2006) "programme production [is] no longer a service or even a profession, but - in the sense

that its creative aspects [are] becoming significantly constrained by the need to survive in the marketplace - a business” (2006: 44). Thatcher (1991) reiterates this:

[M]any broadcasters have taken for granted the ideal of PSB and chosen to focus on professionalism as a more measurable and attainable objective. (1991: 38)

Therefore, PSB still features in the occupational values of producers but increasingly this is expressed using a rhetoric of professionalism. These writers believe that this is at the expense of broadcasting’s creative and social principles.

As mentioned earlier in this section, individual media outlets have interpreted their PSB functions differently. To cater for this role different kinds of organisational structure and journalistic styles have emerged (Curran, 2002: 239). With this in mind it is helpful to look at the media institution in which the debate on PSB is most acute and which will be at the centre of this research, the BBC. Central to this will be how the changes discussed above relating to PSB and the wider market factors have affected the Corporation’s production culture.

### **The BBC: a media institution at work**

Due to its origins, the BBC has always had a unique role in serving the public interest. The BBC was to be (and still is) the cornerstone of public service broadcasting in the UK. The value of its services and programmes was measured using the intangible criteria of their cultural, educational, informative or artistic importance. These would be as essential as their financial value or popularity. However, the evolution in the definition of PSB has had a knock-on effect on the legitimacy of the BBC’s ‘special status’ as Born & Prosser explain:

The danger is that as a result [of the redefinition] the values of PSB become subordinated to the creation of an apparently ‘level playing field’ with commercial competitors, to the disadvantage of the distinct public service missions of the BBC which its competitors do not share. Moreover, in the BBC’s internal culture the fair trading norms appear to have prevailed over and eroded the ‘soft’ PSB norm which they are designed to support. (2001: 666)

Here they argue that the value hierarchy (outlined above) has shifted and this has eroded the unique principles of the Corporation. Later in this piece, and in her other writings (Born, 2002; Born, 2004) Born laments that this focus on the commercial nature of PSB has been at the expense of creativity within the Corporation. In an effort to ensure competition in the sector the soft PSB norms are being rapidly subsumed by financial criteria set by the market.

Like all broadcasters, the BBC's relationship with the market has evolved. For instance, the 1990s saw a huge change to the structure of the television market, particularly in relation to labour. Paterson (2001) outlines the reasons for the change as the introduction of new labour laws which among others things encouraged women to take a greater role in the workplace, the significant reduction in union power which through the Thatcher years had a strong hold on the television market, the changes in technology which made television production cheaper and thus encouraged a growth in the number of outlets, and finally the emergence of a "large, but poorly capitalised, independent production sector" (ibid.: 203). The latter was a major shift in the context of production, which began in earnest with the transmission of Channel 4 but later became part of the wider production ecology and would permanently alter the relationship between the BBC and its supply base. Independent production sat well with the Conservative and successive Labour governments who wanted to curtail the power of the major broadcasters while also encouraging a more competitive and entrepreneurial sphere of programme production. This agenda was realised in 1993 with the introduction of mandatory independent production quotas for all the terrestrial broadcasters. Now in-house and independents would compete on an increasingly level playing field to win commissions and this would radically alter the internal culture of the Corporation.

To address this and the other challenges from the market, the BBC entered an era of change which both saved and destroyed the BBC and its internal culture. These changes have been extensively documented elsewhere (Born, 2002; Born, 2004; Harris & Wegg-Prosser, 1998(a); Harris & Wegg-Prosser, 1998(b); Horrie & Clarke, 1994; Kung-Shankleman, 2003; Spangenberg, 1997); however, a brief account of this transformation will contextualise later findings.

The arrival of John Birt to the BBC, and his eventual rise to Director General (DG) in 1993 was to demonstrate acutely a new era of change within the BBC. As Spangenberg (1997) points out, the arrival of any new DG to the Corporation inevitably leads to new focus and direction. However, while previous DGs had often taken a measured approach to the changes they made with a focus on reinvention through content and output, Birt had more ambitious plans for change in an effort to appease the public and prevent the government interfering in the daily running of the BBC (Born, 2002: 78; Spangenberg, 1997: 111). It cannot be argued that change was unnecessary; the BBC had long been criticised for how it dismissed technological and social changes around it

and the way it used its resources.<sup>9</sup> All broadcasters were being forced to be lean and the BBC had the additional burden of Charter Review. Demonstrating to the public and to the government that it was 'fit for purpose' would have to be its new goal. As a result the extensive changes instigated under Birt would be the most radical the BBC had ever seen and would have some of the most profound consequences ever seen on the structure, culture and purpose of the Corporation.

If quality and professionalism in output was one goal (Burns, 1977; Cottle, 1997), another goal was management professionalism. As described above, in line with the prevailing thinking of the time, the BBC was encouraged to operate with one eye towards its social goals but a keener eye towards its strategic positioning within the market. The criteria for measuring this new style of professionalism were efficiency, accountability and transparency. Crucially management, not producers, were to be the main drivers of this change, a significant adjustment to the previous workings of the BBC:

Birt was mainly interested in creating a neat management structure that, somehow, would create better programmes by virtue of its neatness. The more traditional view was that quality came from the journalists, and the management existed to make this happen, and not the other way around. (Horrie & Clarke, 1994: 119)

As this radical change in culture was forced down the Corporation, management began to dismantle and rebuild every part of the organisation, but as critics argued (Born, 2004), in a structure which would make each unit less disposed to risk-taking. Some fundamental changes were made to the structure, the most pervasive, following extensive consultation with outside agencies, was the horizontal restructuring of the Corporation into BBC Broadcast (responsible for transmission) and BBC Production (covering in-house and outside commissioning and production). The reasons for this change were rooted in achieving greater efficiencies but also meeting the requirements of the mandatory independent quota. From these conditions Producer Choice began to take shape:

The in-house production departments would henceforth compete with independent producers on a level playing field to sell programmes to Broadcast, driving down costs and honing efficiencies. (Born, 2004: 132)

In this system producers had control of their budget and freedom to buy services from wherever they could obtain the best quality and price, thus BBC Production was to act more like an independent producer (Harris & Wegg-Prosser, 1998(a): 138). BBC Broadcast then became the central buyer (and Production's only buyer) and so assumed

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<sup>9</sup> According to Harris & Wegg-Prosser (1998: 137(b)) in 1991 the BBC's production units were over-resourced by at least 130 per cent.

greater power over the terms of trade. In association with this each channel was to have a distinct strategy for its audience profile which would be achieved through precise scheduling and planning facilitated by audience demographics. Schedulers and commissioners would agree on a pre-determined list of slots and funds with a specific type of content delivered either internally or externally at a negotiated price. Content outside of this list would have to be pitched strategically with greater focus on audience demographics and channel positioning. Performance indicators were implemented to ascertain whether “controllers, programme makers, resource providers and support services have achieved their plans on efficiency, quality and editorial standards” (Spangenberg, 1997: 115). On top of this, a strict system of financial controls was also applied across the board with each production unit having its own budget along with performance monitoring metrics. While previously shared resources such as studios could be written off, now each production resource, no matter how small, had to be valued and set against a budget centre. In-house production departments were encouraged to move from solely being a culture of creativity to becoming a culture of entrepreneurialism as they sought novel ways to work within the decreasing budgets provided. There was also a renewed focus in some genres on co-productions and overseas sales of content, merchandise and licences as BBC Worldwide grew.

Resistance to these changes existed in some areas. Many felt that notions of PSB were being overlooked by management and at different times staff articulated their resistance in what Born (2002) terms “Reactivated Reithianism”. In others words the Reithian discourse of public utility, universality, the justification of public funding and “the quality and integrity of output” (ibid.: 81) re-emerged in the rhetoric of BBC staff (particularly producers) as they voiced their opposition to the changes. However, resistance to the changes went further than the Corporation as the debates spilled into the public sphere (see Porter, 1995(a); Porter, 1995(b) and the speech by Dennis Potter (1993) at the International Television Festival in Edinburgh). They argued that the changes and the way in which they were carried out created a divide between management and production staff and this was not conducive to creating quality programmes (Porter, 1995 (b)). Staff had not been properly consulted and were only asked to provide feedback when initiatives had been devised but crucially not at idea phase. Furthermore:

[W]hat management failed to achieve was to communicate effectively and convincingly that the changes it envisaged were for the benefit of the organisation. (Spangenberg, 1997: 156)

This failure in communication was attributed to the consultancy groups brought in and “it is Birt’s faith in the theologians of management consultancy which draws most

contempt” (Porter, 1995(a)). Therefore, to many the reforms went further than needed.

Was Producer Choice successful in its attempts to improve the BBC? Success was a divisive issue. Many saw it as a way of making the BBC more competitive and therefore ‘fit for purpose’ for longer. Channel positioning and strategic scheduling had become part of the industry and it would be very difficult for the BBC to exist outside of this and retain its audience share. Producer Choice also dismantled some of the elitist nature of the BBC, exposing its producers to consumer sovereignty and appeasing some of the political pressure on it (Harris & Wegg-Prosser, 1998(a)):

From the BBC’s point of view, quality, efficiency and accountability are more easily demonstrated than before the introduction of Producer Choice, and, arguably for that reason, Producer Choice saved the BBC from privatisation. (ibid.: 142)

However, internal departments could not always sell their product as they had greater overheads so in an attempt to level the playing field the BBC had put their own departments at a disadvantage. Internals were more expensive leading to reduced demand for internal resources and producers looked to independents to fill the gap. Independents were also perceived as more creative and having a greater wealth of talent than internally (Born, 2002: 73). This meant the power of the independents went up and so as the size of the independent sector grew companies merged and power again returned to a small number of companies. Furthermore, although the previous internal administration system had been inefficient in its own way, the new system added further layers of bureaucracy which proved expensive and cumbersome to run. It also meant that while in the past producers could be agile responding to certain competitive moves:

Under Producer Choice this crucial element of flexibility was being undermined and replaced with ‘programming by prescription’. The budget was cut up into thousands of little bits and locked in for a year, making it more difficult to respond to tactical scheduling attacks by ITV. (Horrie & Clarke, 1994: 240)

Spangenberg (1997) also notes that the devolution of budgetary control associated with Producer Choice was accompanied by a greater centralisation of decision-making (Harris & Wegg-Prosser, 1998(a); Spangenberg, 1997: 117) thus management consolidated their power further in this new system. The introduction in 2006 of the Window of Creative Competition (WOCC), the replacement for Producer Choice, would further impact on the viability of internal production. This will be discussed at length in Chapter Six.



Moving to consider the overall effect of these changes on the BBC a contradictory picture emerges. Efficiency was achieved in some areas (partly through several phases of redundancies) and this pleased the government and silenced *some* of the BBC's critics at the time. However, this was achieved at the cost of a less tangible and more fundamental asset of the BBC, its creativity (Born, 2002; Born, 2004; Porter, 1995(a), Spangenberg, 1997). As change was implemented across the BBC a wave of cynicism emerged from staff at all levels, though most acutely amongst producers and department heads. Cost efficiencies were made but at a cost to staff morale (Horrie & Clarke, 1994; Porter, 1995(a); Spangenberg, 1997). Management's approach to the necessary changes had significantly eroded the self-confidence and creativity of staff at all levels. Producers increasingly occupied the middle ground of production as risk-taking was sidelined for safer mainstream programmes. Furthermore, business discourse became the norm both internally and in the plethora of BBC documents made publicly available. These effects would further undermine the principles of PSB. Certain genres of programmes such as music, arts, ethnic and, of course religious programmes would face an uncertain future as they were caught between the forces of the marketplace and changing social objectives. For example, Cottle (1997) describes how ethnic and minority programmes began to feel the pressure at that time:

[T]he producers [of programmes for ethnic minorities] recounted a relatively staid and unadventurous, hierarchical and bureaucratically remote, production ethos and environment - an ethos and environment that apparently inhibits and constrains the aims and creative expression of many of its programme makers [...] Despite recent public statements of intent committing the Corporation to continued production of ethnic minority programmes, the producers tended to see a different future scenario. (1997: 213)

Conclusions like this were to be found in research into other areas such as natural history programming (Cottle, 2004) and in more traditional genres such as drama (Born, 2004). For some of these genres, the institutional framework of the BBC and the regulatory climate overall simply no longer supported this type of special programme provision and thus specialist production departments (Cottle, 1997).

The effect of the transformation was also seen in the changing nature of relationships between departments. Internal rivalries between departments have always fuelled diversity and debate and were essential preconditions for an innovative production culture. Burns argued that even in the 1970s there were "areas of direct competition and areas of cooperation, but these were overlaid by layer after layer of convenient fictions, 'traditional' public images, and labels fixed by each other on the other" (Burns, 1977: 54). Birt's changes to the Corporation meant suspicion and hostility between departments was rife. The News department was firmly at the top of the

institutional hierarchy; although it too was subject to change. However, it was not only the relationships between departments where there was change as the way the BBC conceived of its wider structure and its place in the lives of those outside of London also changed. There was a firmer commitment to regional production as Birt promised to steer £75 million into this area in 1997/98 (Porter, 1995 (b)). Manchester, where the BBC's Department of Religion and Ethics found a new home, was the main winner and continues to receive significant investment from London.

This section illustrated the scope and nature of the changes which took place in the BBC during the 1990s, the effect of which was the ascendancy of business objectives within the production context; a greater focus on audience demographics and channel positioning; a raft of cost cutting measures; the escalation of internal department rivalries; and the embrace of independent production within the BBC commissioning system. All of these had a huge bearing on the production culture in place today adding further agendas and complexities to the production process. Therefore, this research is an opportunity to see how these complexities are negotiated within a specific area of output, religion. To understand the issues this study sits within a developing field of production studies and thus draws on a number of themes and methods employed by other researchers.

### **Mapping the field of production studies**

Production studies centre on “the organisational or institutional context in which media professionals operate in the initial ‘making’ of media texts” (Devereux, 2003: 76). In order to map the field of production studies it is helpful to first consider its theoretical origins (Corner, 1997). Cultural production has been debated by many theorists and one of the most influential is Pierre Bourdieu (Born, 2003: 776; Calhoun, 1990: 502). Bourdieu proposed the theoretical concept of the ‘field’ which refers to “a partially autonomous arrangement of social relations according to basic forces, power relations, interests, and hierarchies of value and judgement” (Calhoun, 1990: 503).<sup>10</sup> He argued that cultural production could be seen as one field with production ranging from small to large scale. Each field is characterised by its autonomy from, and its interconnectedness with, other fields such as the political, economic, educational and intellectual arenas. For the researcher there is a need to understand the rules (conscious or semi-conscious) of the game for each field in order to appreciate the way in which struggles takes place between various groups in an effort to exercise control

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<sup>10</sup> According to Calhoun (1990) the concept of ‘field’ is one of Bourdieu’s most enduring and important ideas.

(Garnham & Williams, 1980). Overall Bourdieu believed that the field of cultural production was a useful theoretical tool to help the researcher make sense of the actions and discourses of cultural production and to expose the taken for granted assumptions of everyday life. Therefore, this research acknowledges the connection of production to cultural, social, political issues as various players exercise control or negotiate that power.

However, there are some limitations of Bourdieu's writings for understanding cultural production in terms of broadcasting and some of these are outlined by Hesmondhalgh (2006(a)). Overall much of Bourdieu's analysis is restricted to products such as art and literature. Though he has written on television journalism and the reproduction of social power within that realm, he ignores broadcasting in its wider forms which by its nature is "historically messier than many cultural fields" (Born, 2003: 776). This is clear from his writings which were more concerned with small-scale production and how it disseminates rules and rewards, than with large-scale production (Hesmondhalgh, 2006(a): 223). As a result he largely underestimated the growth in size of the cultural industries, particularly broadcasting, and the way in which professionalisation and the division of labour contributed to its complexity. To this end Raymond Williams may form a crucial complement to some of Bourdieu's ideas on cultural production and broadcasting.

Williams wrote extensively about a range of cultural outputs such as literature, art, cinema and broadcasting, seeing them:

[N]ot as the outcome of an isolated aesthetic adventure, but as the manifestation of a deeply social process that involved a series of complex relationships between authorial ideology, institutional process, and generic/aesthetic form. (Drummond, 2007)

In particular, he saw television, the epitome of 'ordinary culture', as "actively defining the period and shaping issues" (O'Connor, 2006: 43), separating him from many of his intellectual peers at the time (Calhoun, 1990). On writing about production he makes a number of points relevant to this research. He argued that any form of central control or censorship should be vehemently opposed believing (perhaps naively) that greater professional autonomy for producers would allow the cultural democracy he so valued (Calhoun, 1990: 501). He disagreed with scholars like Marshall McLuhan on the power of technology to transform the media and thus culture, taking the view that technology was but one element in the mix and that culture invariably influenced its development in the first place. He also supported scholarly research that appreciated the complexities of cultural production (O'Connor, 2006: 80), in other words the influence,

for example, of institutional culture, professional autonomy, occupational training, technological advancements and wider cultural values on the everyday practices of those who work in the mass media.

With this in mind, many scholars interested in the culture of production have linked the theories of Bourdieu and Williams to the everyday experience of media producers moving from the theoretical to the practical. A number of writers have attempted to map the major research themes within production studies uncovering many shared conditions. For instance, writing in 1969, Philip Elliott and David Chaney (1969) differentiated between two levels of analysis in production studies: the macro (where focus is on the institutional structure) and the micro (the role of the individual or team within the process of production is the central element under investigation). More recently Hesmondhalgh (2006 (b)) offered a more systematic classification of the research basing it on the relationship between media producers, the texts they produce and their distance from powerful interests in society, in other words the *autonomy* of media producers. Each of his categories sees a different role for producers in the production of culture from supporting existing power structures to displaying relative autonomy and agency. Hesmondhalgh's comprehensive account of some of the existing research also highlights the methods of analysis available to researchers who can integrate content analysis, interviews and ethnographic work as a means to understanding the issues more fully.

However, a more helpful classification than either Elliott & Chaney's or Hesmondhalgh's, for the purposes of this research, may be Corner's (1999) work on production studies as here, he draws a distinction between two types of production research using the output, as opposed to practitioner, to categorise the research.<sup>11</sup> His first category is, television as a producer of "public knowledge" (1999: 73) where the focus is on informational television, particularly news. Themes such as the sourcing, representation and objectivity of outputs dominate the research in this category. In contrast, the second type of research focuses on "television as a creator of popular culture" (ibid.). Here, genres such as drama and light entertainment are assessed for their aesthetic and commercial value. In order to see where the present study is located within the field it is necessary to give a critical audit of some of the main pieces of research and which are widely seen as key works in the field.

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<sup>11</sup> In this research practitioners are united by the style of programmes which they produce (i.e. religious or faith based programmes) and not by the structures which they occupy as it looks at both the experiences of the internal Department of Religion and Ethics at the BBC and the small number of independents working in this area. Therefore, Corner's classification provides a more useful vantage point with which to survey existing literature.

Taking the first of Corner's categories, television as producer of "public knowledge", a number of studies contribute to this area. Work done by Philip Elliott (1972) is seen as a precursor to many later studies. In this research, the central aim was "to throw light on the relationship between culture and social structure as it is mediated through television" (1972: 6). By following the production of a current affairs programme, *The Nature of Prejudice*, from inception to airing, he showed programme-making as part of a social process set within a series of socio-cultural contexts (such as the dynamics of the production team, the demands of the broadcaster, the professional conditions, etc.). His verdict on the process was that "television production tends to ensure cultural repetition and continuity" (ibid.: 147) and he saw very little opportunity for the cycle to be broken. He contributes this to the lack of dialogue with the audience (or wider public), which therefore perpetuates an insular cycle of production, something which he speculates will continue as the level of freelancing grows. However, at the same time, he also points to the development of an increased (self-serving) professionalism within the industry as practitioners balance commercial, financial and aesthetic concerns within each production decision.

Another important study builds on this inward looking, self-serving culture within production. Philip Schlesinger's *Putting "Reality" Together* (1978) investigated how daily news output at the BBC is constructed. He does this through observations in the newsroom and interviews with journalists. Echoing Elliott's work, Schlesinger also deduced a lack of sustained dialogue with those outside the newsroom. This dialogue is replaced by "a heavy reliance on occupational knowledge and the cognitive support of the organisation" (1978: 108). In other words, the routines of news production are worked out within an organisational structure that is heavily conditioned by shared norms of professional competence and this fills the gap between those inside and outside the newsroom. However, one of the most interesting elements of this research relates to the methodology used. Through comparing the journalists' own reflexive accounts of how news was produced with what he saw in the meetings and on the newsroom floor, Schlesinger recognises the contrast between the official line, coated in professional rhetoric with the day-to-day rituals and procedures of news journalists and their editors. This theme on the origins of the decisions that shape the content of news, occupational values and journalists own reflexivity is taken up again by Harrison (2000) and Matthews (2008) and they also conclude that the failures of news as a genre has significant impact on the debates that take place in the public sphere and condition public knowledge.

The studies in this category of “television as producer of public knowledge” (Corner, 1999) draw attention to the way in which media professionals exist within carefully managed environments and therefore, norms relating to professional practices are created. On the whole, these norms are found to be self-serving as competition between organisations and workers intensifies. As a result, this has a huge impact beyond the newsroom as the flow of information is directed and controlled producing a specific type of public knowledge.

The second category of research that Corner (1999) suggests is that relating to popular culture and drama where the focus is not on the presentation of fact but on the “distinctive set of questions about creativity and the play-off between artistry and industry within television” (1999: 76). He mainly outlines research on drama. This includes Todd Gitlin’s work written in 1983 on the police series *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981 - 1987) for his book *Inside Prime Time* that examined decision-making at the American television networks. In this work, Gitlin emphasises the unpredictability of the production system concluding that decisions are normally taken on the basis of a narrow consideration of demographics and ratings. He further argues that television production is subject to structural and organizational constraints imposed on all members of the production team, so although the conventions of the output produced is constantly changing, producers still operate within existing constraints (this is further supported by Sandeen & Compesi’s (1990) work on the soap opera *The Young and the Restless* (CBS, 1973 - )).

A more recent account, based on the experiences of the drama department of the BBC is provided by Georgina Born (2004). Although she does provide a useful account of the way that democracy is framed within the confines and expectations of the newsroom, she also gives her readers an interesting insight into the production conditions within the drama group - a division of the Corporation previously sheltered from academic view. She analyses how, following an intense period of organisational restructuring and management intrusion, the BBC emerged in the late 1990s over-dependent on politically safe, repetitive and formulaic programming. The drama department was, in particular, adversely affected by these changes. As well as causing many talented production staff to leave the BBC and join the independent sector, the changes created a culture that thwarted creativity and only rewarded efficiency. The result was for many to pose the question “What price creativity?” (Ralph et al, 1998) showing that in the playoff between artistry and industry recognised by Corner (1999), it is the latter that is winning out.

All the research outlined above speaks predominantly about television and this thesis takes a bi-media approach. Some of the research outlined above does look across both media, for instance Schlesinger's study (1978) covers journalism across television and radio, and Born (2004) speaks to management about the rebranding and repositioning of radio stations within the BBC. However, while "there has been a good deal of television-centred work undertaken" (Corner, 1997: 247), research specifically on radio production is scarce. One exception is David Hendy's *Life of Air* (2007) that, although a historiography, does provide an important insight into the production culture of BBC Radio 4 and as one critic described it is a "wonderful case study of the dynamics of anxiety produced by social change" (Collini, 2007). Hendy's account is particularly illuminating in relation to the influence of various station controllers and commissioners as they try to impose their mission on a group of fiercely independent producers and a loyal but conservative audience. As a result over the years there has been plenty of internal discord at the station, a subtle change in programme style (for instance, the inclusion of swearing) and the occasional political interference. Another element of the account that is interesting is the way in which creativity is negotiated between various levels of the organisation and the reflexivity and politics at work in events such as the BBC's Weekly Programme Review Boards. All of the research, interviews and anecdotes combine in Hendy's work to show how the production context in an organisation as large as the BBC can both shape and be shaped by wider cultural and social developments.

Having discussed his categorisation (television as producer of public knowledge and television as creator of popular culture) Corner (1999) also writes about the changes which media production as a research field has undergone believing the current field to be too narrow. He argues that the scope of inquiry needs to widen as distribution, scheduling and internal evaluation become increasingly important in the production process. He also calls for researchers to look beyond news journalism where a number of in-depth studies have been done and to look at other genres, departments and institutions that produce media texts. To this end there is a small but significant body of work examining genres outside of these. For instance, Simon Cottle's (1997) work on ethnic minority programming and his later study (2004) of natural history television suggest that a third space is developing beyond the traditional genres of news and drama. These genres combine the authenticity of factual with the aesthetic and creative element of drama, thus straddle both of Corner's categories. At one time ethnic programming, natural history television and religious programming had organisational units within all of the UK broadcasters. As competition intensified many of these specialist units found themselves squeezed out. If research into the process of production maintains its momentum hopefully we shall see more research occupying this

new space examining genres which mix knowledge sharing with popular culture and which face their own unique set of issues relating to their long-term viability.

In terms of practical lessons to be learnt from the existing research, the way in which researchers have used a mix of methods to get the most interesting results should be noted. Although many of the works are ethnographic in nature, each of the findings has been grounded in analysis of texts, interviews and secondary sources in order to provide more robust conclusions. Greater access, resources and transparency have allowed researchers to see inside structures previously hidden from view. The voice of practitioners has been given greater authority by researchers as they uncover more about the relationship between production, output and reception. Writing specifically about his work on producers of ethnic and minority programmes, Cottle (1997) suggests:

From their professional understanding and experience of programme production, television producers help provide information and insight into the complex of forces, constraints, and representational claims that variously inform their professional practices as programme makers. Of course their accounts do not simply describe the situation, but also tell us about how such forces and settings are perceived, experienced, negotiated and managed. (1997: 11)

Therefore, although it cannot be assumed that producers offer an “omniscient view of all things” (ibid.), they can offer a useful vantage point from which to view the workings of media institutions.

### **Conclusion: the context of this research**

To conclude, the studies that have been detailed in this chapter are essential to our understanding of media production and the forces which impact on it. From the four areas of research mapped here (i.e. religion in broadcasting, debates about public service broadcasting, the shifting organisational culture of the BBC and ethnographic studies of broadcasting production) it is clear that producers are subject to a complex interplay of professional, ideological, institutional and commercial pressures (Cottle, 1997) and the interaction between these elements means that the broadcasting ecology is constantly changing. On the other hand, production as an activity has a complex and powerful influence on the reconstitution of broadcasting’s social and commercial role.

For the purposes of this thesis, the literature detailed above also confirms that PSB is an imperfectly realised concept both in the broadcasting of religion and beyond. The social need for output that deals with faith-based themes is challenged by the difficulty



in appealing to mass audiences. This dilemma in itself is not fatal in the traditional definition of PSB; however, problems arise when combined with the more recent drive within terrestrial broadcasting institutions towards professionalism and its associated managerial discourse. Here, quality is not defined solely in terms of social purpose but in the more tangible metric of 'value for money'. Within these conditions a more troublesome relationship between occupational demands and public service is clear.

## Chapter Two: Methodology

This thesis examines the professional context in which religious programmes are commissioned, produced and transmitted by the BBC. It therefore focuses on the experiences of the specialist Department of Religion and Ethics in the BBC and the few companies in the independent sector involved in this style of programming uncovering the institutional, cultural, commercial and professional constraints which they negotiate in their daily work and which shapes their final output.

As there is a narrow range of research in the area of media production and a particular lack of investigation into the production of religious content, a number of options were available to the researcher in order to carry out this study. For example, the researcher could have conducted a quantitative survey of attitudes using a representative sample of producers with an emphasis on statistical validity. This, however, would have limited our understanding of the complex factors at play. On the other hand, qualitative methods allow for “experiences to be viewed as part of the whole” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975:4) and have the benefit of giving the reader “a rich description of the social world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:10). For these reasons, the researcher has decided on a chiefly qualitative methodology. More specifically this research will involve a historical account of the evolution of religious broadcasting, followed by a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with those involved in this area to explore the issues further. A brief period of observation was also carried out in order to increase the validity of the findings and taken together these will highlight the factors affecting the production of religious content.

### Historical analysis

The first major undertaking was a historical analysis of religious broadcasting and covered both radio and television from the inception of the BBC in 1922 to the present day. This work was motivated by a need to understand the factors that have affected the evolution of the programming and the specific incidents that caused change. It was also intended that a history such as this would provide a greater appreciation of the current situation and a discernible pattern to see the future of religious broadcasting. According to Corner (2003):

An enriched sense of ‘then’ produces, in its differences and commonalities combined, a stronger, imaginative and analytically energized sense of ‘now’.  
(Corner, 2003: 275)

A good historical analysis will not only tell the reader about what happened and when but it will also balance themes of change and continuity. Many contemporary issues in broadcasting are claimed to be present-day when in fact they are heavily rooted in history. Part of the role of writing a history is to understand the ways in which the terms of the debate have changed even if the core principles are the same. Therefore, this style of analysis can uncover much of the complexities associated with contemporary broadcasting. Furthermore, historical narratives hold considerable power:

Over time, the most powerful versions of history are reconfirmed, they become sedimented down, pressed into new narratives and accounts. They always involve taken-for-granted assumptions which in turn shape the relationship of television's legislators, trainees, practitioners and historians in an imaginary past and an even more speculative future. (Branston, 1998: 51)

Here, Branston draws attention to the calcification of historical narratives and the way in which some histories have more currency than others. For example, the experiences of women in the production setting have received less attention than their male counterparts (Branston, 1998) and in television in particular there is an over-privileging of institutional histories (Wheatley, 2007: 8).<sup>12</sup> Branston also refers to the naturalization of meaning and how some histories despite their subjectivity become part of everyday narratives. This comes back to Bourdieu's argument about the power of taken for granted assumptions that circulate around the field of cultural production and which he argues should be challenged.

However, having outlined the advantages the limitations of such a methodology should also be considered. The main drawback when writing a historical account is "matching data to claims" (Corner, 2003: 277). In their eagerness to reveal something new, the researcher may link events that are merely incidental in an attempt to form a bigger narrative. In order to overcome this potential danger, this researcher has used a variety of sources to corroborate stories. This forms a more thorough awareness of the issues and their inter-relatedness.

Sources, themselves, can be problematic and access to them was a concern in this research. In the end a variety of materials was used including oral accounts, written documents and audiovisual material to improve the representativeness of the final narrative. However, due to limitations on space, not all the material gathered could be directly included, though indirectly it will have shaped the final account. In relation to

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<sup>12</sup> For example, one criticism made of David Hendy's (2007) historical account of Radio 4 was that it was the "establishment's version of history" (Hanks, 2007).

the inclusion and exclusion of materials in this narrative, it was the research objective, the researcher's own interests and the respondents remarks that shaped the final narrative. This raises the related question of value and how this is judged (Branston, 1998; Johnson, 2007; Thumin, 1998). Institutions themselves make judgements on the documents and material that they consider to be important enough to be preserved. Radio, and more often television, is thought of as ephemeral commodities, this means:

[A]s historical researchers we can only gain access to items which at the time were considered sufficiently valuable to be preserved and that we are thus inevitably subject to the hierarchy of cultural worth which informed the production teams of the day. (Thumin, 1998: 99)

Furthermore, as religious broadcasting was a feature of the earliest days of radio, the technology to record was not available and so many early broadcasts have been lost forever.

In writing the account, one other factor impacted on the source material used; the context in which both the material had been experienced when first transmitted and the context in which this material was now being read. This history spans more than eighty years and over this time social values and beliefs, not to mention changes in political power, market forces and standards of living have all affected the context in which this history can be produced and read. For instance, the blackout on Sunday programming (i.e. the closed period), which has dominated debates on religious broadcasting throughout its history, seems alien to audiences today. Yet this was welcomed and widely accepted in the schedules of earlier broadcasters. Changes like this need to be contextualised if the reader is to benefit from such a historical account. To facilitate this understanding, the historical account was presented in a specific way and Corner (2003) was particularly helpful as a guide for 'telling the story'. When writing about television history (although it could be applied to any media history) he describes the aspects that need attention. These are:

- the institution and the industry where the focus of the research is on policy and corporate management;
- television as professional culture and practice;
- aesthetics which uses texts as its primary material;
- television as socio-cultural phenomenon and takes account of television's evolving place in theories of the public sphere; and
- technological developments.

This researcher has used these as a checklist when researching and writing this historical account. The benefit of combining these factors is that the connections between them become more visible. The themes described in Chapters Five, Six and

Seven are an attempt to combine these aspects and to consider the wider implications for contemporary religious broadcasting.

Corner's work also sets out challenges to writing an effective history (ibid.: 277-278). The first of these is the periodization of the narrative. While dividing written history into decades is a popular format, it does not always lend itself to such compartmentalisation. Change does not take place in a linear metrical pattern and to force the history to suit this would lose much of its value. For this reason, although some sections cover certain decades, others relate to a moment in time, such as the Broadcasting Act (1990) which had an important impact on access to the media marketplace. Corner also advocates that researchers adopt a longitudinal and latitudinal approach to their research. Not only should the institution under consideration be observed over time but also in its dealings with other organisations and departments. For this reason, in the written history a number of references are made to the Talks Department which had most involvement with the Religious Broadcasting Department. The third challenge relates to the narrative schemes where the values of contemporary researchers are imposed on past events; a factor considered previously. The level of detail to be achieved is Corner's final test and weighs up the value of adopting a chronological approach against adding context to specific issues. As context is a key factor in judging the success of this history it is vital that further methods make up for the limitations of the history. It is with this in mind that the next stage of research was designed, the semi-structured interview.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

The interviews contributed to the validity of the research and were based on the view that in-depth interviews "balance intimacy and distance, while opening understanding on how particular individuals arrive at the cognitions, emotions and values that emerge for the conversational journey" (Crabtree & Miller, 1999: 106). They were conducted in order to further explore themes that may have gone unseen or unreported if only a theoretical study or historiography was undertaken.

Once the parameters of the research had been decided a short-list of potential interviewees was drawn up. These included staff at the BBC (involved in the production, management and commissioning of religion), and independent production companies (specifically those involved in recent religious programmes). This range of respondents was selected in order to integrate a diverse set of voices and experiences

into the research and thus further increase the reliability of the findings. According to King:

In terms of criteria for recruitment, most qualitative studies set a premium on diversity, because (in varying manners and for differing purposes) they seek to show the range of ways that a phenomenon is experienced within a chosen context. (King, 2004: 17)

Over forty named individuals were identified and these were ranked according to perceived importance to the study. For instance, the key people targeted for this research were the Head of the Department of Religion and Ethics, senior executives in the department, the commissioning editor for religion on television and radio and producers working specifically in the area of religion. Potential interviewees were contacted via letter or email and in most cases agreed to be involved in the study. The reason for the interview was outlined and an abstract of the research was provided to the interviewee in the days before the interview commenced. In a number of cases the researcher was asked to provide a list of questions. It was felt this would affect the flexibility of the interview itself so a list of themes was provided in the place of specific questions. Between August 2007 and March 2008 a total of twenty-three interviews were conducted (a list of interviewees is included in Appendix A). On average the interviews lasted approximately one hour. Due to financial and time constraints some interviews had to be done over the telephone, however, interviews with key personnel were done face-to-face allowing for observation of the respondent's non-verbal responses. This added to the richness of the material and adhered to Shipman's (1997: 46) suggestion that research takes place in a naturalized setting. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in BBC TV Centre and the BBC's other London offices and in Manchester at the Department of Religion and Ethics, allowing the researcher to also see first-hand the work of those involved in religious output.<sup>13</sup>

As a research method, interviews focus on understanding the meanings and the rules of meaning making within a chosen sample of informants (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). It is an interaction between interviewer and interviewee around a general area of inquiry avoiding narrow closed questions. Therefore, in this case the researcher wanted to avoid free conversations but also highly structured questions and so an interview guide was produced before each interview as suggested by King (2004) and Kvale (1983). These guides (tailored to each interviewee) contained a list of the main themes that this research sought to explore as identified from the literature, history and research objectives (a sample of the interview guide can be found in Appendix B). Generally each interview began with discussion on the interviewee's background, how they

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix D: Research Diary for the researchers impressions of these buildings and the clues they give to the working cultures of the various departments.

became involved in religious broadcasting or what a typical day involved for them. This was used to ascertain the interviewee's relationship to the themes and to put the person at ease within the interview situation thus helping to build rapport. From there questions were phrased as openly as possible and tried to use the interviewee's specific situation and experience as the prompt for further questions. This meant flexibility with the themes was crucial and as the interviews progressed some themes proved more fruitful than others. This meant that for the later interviews there was also the opportunity to verify what had been learnt in earlier interviews and to get feedback on the researcher's lines of enquiry. Interviews continued to be done until the goal of diversity and "theoretical saturation" (Johnson, 2002: 113) had been achieved.

Each of the interviews was recorded, including those conducted by telephone. Each of the respondents was also asked to sign and return a Research Consent Form as approved by the University of Glasgow's ethical committee (a copy of this form is included in Appendix C). All respondents provided this written consent. After each of the interviews the recording was fully transcribed. Both the recordings and the transcriptions allowed the researcher to have more detailed accounts of the responses than the interviewer's notes alone would allow.

There are limitations to doing interviews and it is important to acknowledge these. First, there is no widely agreed system for conducting interviews effectively. In the literature relating to research methods and specifically interviews a variety of techniques and tips are suggested. However, although Kvale (1983: 172) argues, "the interview is more an art than a science" a number of guiding principles can be put in place that help balance objectivity and sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 42). These principles include the use of open questions, the focus on specific experiences and incidents and the need for flexibility within the interview situation. A further limitation of the interview method is that short-listing candidates and conducting interviews can be time consuming and once complete the volume of data produced can be daunting. However, these limitations can be overcome with careful planning. On balance this research method did provide more credible and original themes than had the research focused solely on the literature and history.

### **Observational research**

One further method that this research employed, and which was very useful in checking the validity of the analysis, was observational research. In November 2007 and again in

early 2008, the researcher was invited by an independent production company to join the crew as they filmed two editions of *Songs of Praise*, the BBC's most recognisable and popular religious strand. During that time as "participant-as-observer" (Waddington, 2004: 154), the researcher took on a number of roles and responsibilities within the production many of which are outlined in the Research Diary in Appendix D. This gave the researcher first hand experience of the challenges and realities of producing religious material for the BBC.

The main disadvantage of such an approach is that there will be a change in the behaviour of those involved as a result of the researcher's presence. However, in this case everyone was aware they had a specific job to do within a production that was subject to considerable financial and time pressures. Coupled with the transient nature of television production which means people are used to working closely with others they know little or nothing about and whom they may never see again it is unlikely that anyone changed his or her behaviour very significantly during the period of observation.

As stated, this was not intended to develop a huge volume of additional material but to refine some of the specific analysis (for instance, the relationship between the BBC and the independents, the use of 'ordinary people' in television, the primacy of production values over religious aims). It allowed the researcher to talk with those involved in this area informally about the research and get valuable feedback. It also allowed access to an area where few researchers get the opportunity to venture and thus added much to the originality of the research. Therefore, the advantages heavily outweigh the effort needed to co-ordinate and conduct this style of research.

The material generated from this experience was mainly anecdotal but gave important insights into the daily activities of those involved in this area. Respecting the confidentiality and privacy of those involved was essential and so a balance had to be struck between the roles of observer and participant. This was mainly achieved by openness in terms of the remit of the research. The researcher was introduced by the Executive Producer to the production team as a PhD student conducting a study of religious broadcasting, but equally was there to assist on the current project acting as runner, researcher or assistant to the producer and crew when needed. This was important in gaining acceptance from the production team.



In retrospect, as Waddington (2004) concedes, at times this can be untidy but as a method it is unrivalled at getting to the heart of human experience.

Once the researcher left the field and the interviews had been conducted and transcribed it was necessary to again conduct a focused review of the literature in order to enhance understanding and clarify the themes. The informants themselves recommended many books, writers and resources that they felt would be beneficial to this work. Following this the research moved onto the analysis stage, the most critical stage of the research.

### **The analysis**

To summarise, this research has adopted a methodology that was qualitative in nature. Historical analysis, semi-structured interviews and observational analysis formed the basis of this research. These different methods produced an enormous volume of material including audio and visual recordings, field notes, and notes from informal discussions, not to mention a large collection of official documents. In order to make sense of this material, in particular the interview transcriptions, a system of coding was necessary.

Like the interview process there is no definitive, fully applicable theory with which to begin the analysis and interpretation of material. According to Kvale:

The analysis and interpretation of completed interviews has been far less treated in the literature than the interview situation. (1983: 179)

Having a system that was manageable and efficient, yet flexible enough to allow for the emerging theory, was the overriding concern. To this end the research drew on two procedures outlined by Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) and Strauss & Corbin (1998). Both of the systems outlined by these authors followed a similar logic and both had the ultimate aim of discerning patterns within the research text.

The procedure outlined by Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) provided the most straightforward method of analysis. Firstly, the researcher read all the interview transcripts and associated material, highlighting relevant quotes and ideas that produced a manageable data set from which to work. Although subjective, close consideration of the research questions and the overall aim of the work guided the inclusion and exclusion of certain material. Following this, the researcher performed a

'microanalysis' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 57-71), which involved a line-by-line analysis of the selected text. This allowed the researcher to distinguish two levels of data:

1. the participant's recollection of events and actions; and
2. their interpretation of what these mean.

Distinguishing these levels made the later questioning of the data more productive as it allowed the researcher to have a greater sensitivity towards the material and provided for more detailed analysis of the conditions and contexts experienced by the participants. The result of the microanalysis was a list of repeated ideas that appeared both vertically, that is in individual transcripts, and horizontally, across a number of respondents.

The next stage was to group repeating ideas under a common theme, labelled "categories" by Strauss & Corbin (1998: 102). As suggested (ibid.) some ideas are grouped for similarities and others for differences, which "allows for finer discrimination and differentiation among categories" (ibid.). As the analysis continued the specific properties and dimensions of each theme became clearer. The result of this grouping can be seen by the reader in the subheadings used in the proceeding chapters.

The use of quotes in the final narrative was particularly important as it allows the reader to engage with the first-hand experiences of the respondents. When directly quoting from the interviews the researcher has chosen to identify the respondents by their occupation rather than name as this allows the reader to position the respondent in relation to the themes and other interviewees. Furthermore where possible, the researcher has attempted to assign 'Vivo Codes' to the headings and main themes under discussion; that is use the respondent's own words or phrase as a section heading (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 115). This helps us understand how the interviewees see their social world and guide the reader through the main points of discussion.

Theoretical constructs are then created by linking themes to form a more precise and complete explanation. These constructs formed the chapter headings of this study. A further review of the literature was needed to add more depth to the analysis, strengthening links and filling gaps. These theoretical constructs integrate both macro elements taken from the wider broadcasting market and microelements outlined in the interviews to form a more robust understanding of the questions that concern this research. Finally, Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) advocate creating a theoretical

narrative linking back major themes to earlier sections of research and drawing a conclusion to the research. This is the aim of the final chapter.

In doing any analysis, questions about the validity of findings will undoubtedly be raised. There were three specific ways this research increased the validity of its findings. First, when writing the narrative the researcher used the respondents' own words where possible providing an evocative account of their thoughts and experiences. Secondly, having completed the theoretical construct, the researcher returned once again to the raw data to ensure that the constructs could explain the data collected. Thirdly, before the final narrative was written, all of the respondents in this study were contacted with a summary of the themes and analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003: 45; Kvale, 1983: 182). Writing about the aim for doing an exercise like this, Strauss & Corbin write:

Naturally it will not fit every aspect of each case because the theory is a reduction of data, but in a larger sense, participants should be able to recognise themselves in the story that is being told. (1998: 159)

A few of the interviewees chose to respond to the summary. Some corrected factual inaccuracies while others sought to further elaborate or clarify points made. In general they agreed that the issues had been done justice and the challenges carefully considered; therefore this exercise further validates the overall findings of this thesis.

## Part II: Historical Analysis

This part of the thesis will explore the unique development of religious broadcasting in Britain. By examining its historical evolution, this research has contextualised the current position of religion as a specific style of programming within broadcasting. Furthermore an account of the history allows the researcher to illustrate the wider role of religion in society and how technological and social progress affected this evolution.

Communication has always been vital to spreading the message of the church. Religious institutions first relied on the medium of storytelling and then printing to spread their message. Indeed the first major interaction between the media and religion occurred through the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century (Thompson, 1995). Initially the church welcomed the new technology as a way of spreading its message to a wider audience. However, it quickly became apparent that unlike the control they exerted over the reproduction of earlier manuscripts, printing as an activity had grown exponentially and the church could not exercise effective control. This resulted in many questioning the legitimacy of the church and forced it to concede its symbolic power to new centres of authority, a legacy that continues today.

Today, religious institutions rely on a combination of media to communicate with those both inside and outside their faith. However, as a result of their first encounter with the printing press, their interaction with broadcasting has raised numerous issues regarding control and trust. It has taken longer for religious institutions, particularly in Britain, to acknowledge the way in which the media can make timely and effective communication possible. At the same time, the media have treated religion with a growing level of scepticism and increasingly marginalised religion, something that is discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

Therefore, this section investigates how broadcasters and religious leaders have negotiated the issues of control and attempted to overcome some of the distrust. The first chapter begins by recounting the early development of the genre on radio from its initial inception in 1922 with the establishment of the British Broadcasting Company, later becoming the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The second chapter in this section continues the narrative by looking at the emergence of television and how both religious institutions and policy makers dealt with the most revolutionary change to the media environment since the printing press. Both of these chapters introduce the

reader to many of the issues that continue to influence religious content in broadcasting today.

# Chapter Three:

## The History of Religion on BBC Radio (1922 - 1950)

### The beginning

It is the ubiquitous nature of radio that both distinguishes and limits it. Andrew Crisell writes that “although its audiences may be counted in the millions the medium addresses itself very much to the individual” (1986: 13). In theory, this should make it a valuable resource for the religious message but some critics attributed the decline in religious observance directly to the arrival of radio, although the effect was likely neutral (Pegg, 1983: 162). A further characteristic is its place as a “secondary medium” (Crisell, 1986) demanding little from its listeners and allowing them to go about their daily business. These characteristics mean that its influence is sometimes considered negligible. However, the significance of radio to society should not be underestimated (Wolfe, 1984: xxi). Since its inception, radio has been seen as a way of joining the cultured and the uncultured and has allowed all manner of social (and religious) issues to be brought into the homes of the people (Dinwiddie, 1968).

In the early days of radio in Britain, only the BBC had permission to engage in broadcasting. This restriction was to regulate the use of scarce wavelength and to act as a form of government protection from foreign competition. As a result, it was the BBC hierarchy, who initially defined public interest and decided what the listening public should hear. At this time the first concepts of public service broadcasting (PSB) were shaped and “whose traces are still discernible today” (Crisell, 2002: 18; Hetherington: 1992). Part of this ethos was to reposition the BBC away from being a commercial enterprise towards being a respected national institution, free from commercial pressure and political interference. Furthermore, at the BBC’s core was the cultural and intellectual enlightenment of society as a whole. This was to be achieved through providing ‘something for everyone and everything for someone’ (Crisell, 2002: 18) coupled with high standards across all output (although this ideal would prove problematic throughout the BBC’s history). As the BBC’s monopoly continued for many years, focus during the formation of the radio network would stay squarely on enriching British culture over attracting a mass audience.

Key to the encouragement of religion in broadcasting was John Reith, first managing director of the BBC and himself the son of a Scottish minister. Although not legally obliged (Paulu, 1981: 274), Reith saw a need for the BBC to be engaged with the

religious affliction of the nation and also saw the opportunities which broadcasting would provide to the Christian churches. His conviction in the relationship between radio and religion was heavily influenced by his own personal piety (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 23). According to Wolfe (1984):

His Christianity was unrealistic but lyrical; the harsh poetry of his Presbyterian origins embraced personal piety enmeshed in notions of duty which in turn were bound up with his troubled relationship with his father. It was a Christianity impatient with the churches and indignant with the culture south of the border which seemed more and more obviously to be doing without it. (Wolfe, 1984: 4)

This impatience with the church would continue throughout his career with the BBC but Reith insisted:

I could not myself endure the thought that I had been part to anything in the nature of a denial of Christ. (Reith, 1930 cited Wolfe, 1984: 29)

However, despite Reith's own conviction, religion was not initially seen as key to the BBC's output. When religion was acknowledged, it was seen as primarily recreational with little concerted effort made to formalize output. Slowly, teaching became part of the objective, with conversion and evangelism tied to this objective. This reticence can be attributed to the fact that few believed the BBC could bolster the place of Christianity in British culture. Furthermore, the recruitment and development needed to begin such a process of spiritual engagement was beyond the resources of the Corporation at the time. Therefore, it was not until the mid 1920s that the strategic place of religion in radio was re-examined.

The dominant Protestant churches for their part also thought radio to be trivial (Wolfe, 1984: xxi). They viewed broadcasting as a threat to their power, representing competition that they could ill afford. They also believed that the secular body of the BBC was intruding in theological affairs far beyond its capability. Finally, Reith convinced the churches that involvement with broadcasting was beneficial and unavoidable and the first tentative discussions took place to create a strategy. However, the BBC was not to have it all its own way:

The churches wanted broadcasting to serve their interests on the oft-questioned assumption that Christianity and religion were best served by people not being diverted from the possibility of attending their churches and not being offered any substitute for that congregational and participatory aspects which, of course, belonged to church worship. (Wolfe, 1984: 60)

This idea that people should not be distracted from their religious duties as this would lead to their spiritual demise was to reverberate through religious broadcasting for years to come. The other main concern of the churches related to audiences not giving

due reverence while religious services were being aired. The appropriate place for listening could not be regulated by the broadcasters. Therefore, the churches had to accept that the benefit and support to religious adherents would be greatly outweighed by the occasions a broadcast was heard in a public house or when someone kept their hat on! The churches also discussed the styles of programme that would make a valuable contribution to the church message. Broadcasting live from church services was favoured but brought its own technological and theological problems. The main issue which dominated the discussions on this matter, and which would reappear again and again, was the inclusion of denominations outside the Protestant church. Roman Catholics were generally excluded at this time and “non-Christian talks [on religious themes] were regarded as controversial and thus forbidden” (Wolfe, 1984: 10). This was not without protest from groups such as Christian Scientists and the Unitarians and in time this division would have to be removed.

On Christmas Eve 1922, the Rector of Whitechapel gave the first religious address. He commented how through the technology of radio he was now speaking to more people than St Paul had in his whole lifetime (Wolfe, 1984: xxi). The first advisory committee, ‘The Sunday Committee’, convened in May 1923. Their task was to look at the possibilities for this new medium and how this new religious offering would look. The committee were given the job of short-listing names of people suitable to take their seat at the microphone. As a result of the newness of broadcasting, religious output had to form its own conventions - some of which were successful, others less so.

The first full service took place on January 6<sup>th</sup> 1924 from St Martin-in-the-Fields. This venue was chosen for its “diffused rather than a sectional Christianity” (Sheppard, 1928 cited Wolfe, 1984: 8) thus adhering to a non-denominational broadcast. The problems of denominational bias were also overcome by inviting various preachers to be involved (Dinwiddie, 1968: 20; Wolfe, 1984: 10). The service was popular with listeners and despite some criticisms from the church, the service and the idea of religious broadcasting were generally well received (Dinwiddie, 1968; Pegg, 1983; Wolfe, 1984). The recommendation of the Sunday Committee to extend the religious services to other venues was soon integrated into BBC policy. It is worth noting the key role which Rev. Dick Sheppard, cleric at St Martin’s, played in organising this broadcast and that in him Reith found an admirable supporter.

Sunday, which was termed ‘the closed period’, later referred to as ‘Reithian Sunday’ or the ‘God Slot’ (Paulu, 1981: 281), was to be the main home of religious broadcasting on



radio at that time in order to maintain the support of the church. A Sunday policy was formed with a distinctive schedule of religious programming for that day. As Street (2000) remarks, this was to be a policy concerning “steadfast Sabbatarian “Britishness”” (2000: 166). It was a long-term policy which would continue for many years and “caused more controversy in the 1930s than did any other programme policy” (Paulu, 1981: 282). Transmission began at 12.30pm and comprised religious services, talks and classical music (Crisell, 1986: 24). The introduction of the *Epilogue*, which marked the close of broadcasts for that day, combined with hymns, verses of scripture and a psalm reading proved very popular among audiences according to the BBC Handbook of 1928, which reported:

[T]here is no item in the weekly programming which is more popular or which is looked for more eagerly than the Sunday evening religious service. It has been welcomed by the church authorities and by the general public alike. (BBC Handbook, 1929 cited Hollinshead, 2002: 51)

However, the BBC was misguided basing their appraisal of Sunday programming on “Reithian principles rather than audience research” (Street, 2000: 165). According to Crisell (2002), ‘Reith Sunday’ was “a serious misjudgement of the national mood” (2002: 51) and would be directly responsible for the loss of the BBC monopoly. The popular press mounted a campaign to change the BBC’s Sunday policy and, more broadly, to relax restrictions on Sunday entertainments (Pegg, 1983). This, coupled with the arrival of Radio Normandie (1931) and Radio Luxembourg (1933), would make the Sunday restrictions untenable. Both Radio Normandie and Radio Luxembourg provided a steady stream of light music and reserved their strongest output for Sundays (Crisell, 2002: 51). Audiences would respond by switching away from the BBC in their millions (Street, 2000).

In December 1926, a *Daily Service* of fifteen minutes was broadcast to cater especially for those who were housebound, such as the elderly and infirm. This was seen as a great success with 8,000 letters received by the BBC from listeners suggesting prayers for inclusion in the programme. The *Daily Service* continues today and after more than eighty years of continuous broadcasting, it is the longest-running programme of its kind anywhere in the world (BBC, 2008 (b)).

While Sundays were essentially in the hands of the church with regards output, the BBC’s policy for weekday programming was simplicity and comfort, and this delivered large audiences. This was exemplified by popular shows like *Rev. W. H. Elliot’s Thursday Evening Service*. Religious programmes were also extended into other days and genres, for example children’s programming.

Technical advances in radio allowed clearer reception and improved transmission quality. It also made outside broadcasts more financially and technically feasible. Many people, both inside and outside the broadcaster, favoured church services as opposed to studio services that were thought to be artificial and colourless (Wolfe, 1984: 45). However, this raised the question whether there should be one centralised service transmitted to all the regions or allow each region to broadcast its own local service now that there was the technical ability. At the time the BBC had the National Programme, which originated in London and the Regional Programme, which supplied material from both London and six regional services across the country (Crisell, 1986).<sup>14</sup> The onslaught of war in 1939 would resolve, or at least postpone, this question. However, in 1926, this was one of the questions to be explored further by the renamed committee advising the BBC on religious matters, the now titled Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC).

Progress in the broadcasting of religion continued apace. 1928 saw the ban imposed by the Postmaster-General on questions of controversy lifted. The ban had forbidden the Corporation to voice its opinion on issues of public policy relating to political, religious and industrial controversy. Now, lectures and debates on religion were allowed but not items that would offend or provoke the majority Christian community (Wolfe, 1984: 27). The BBC still retained the view that:

[I]t [religious broadcasting] is not sectarian. Any form of religious opinion is invited provided that it will appeal to a wide section of the public, and is consistent with established fundamental facts. Creed and dogma take a backseat in broadcast addresses; to give something helpful and inspiring to the listener is their object. (Charles Lewis, first Organiser of Programmes, 1924 cited Smith, 1974: 44-45)

This meant that theological matters were slowly being sidelined in favour of more pastoral aims. However, it still meant the continued exclusion of Christian and religious groups outside the Protestant faith. Therefore the lifting of ban had little significant effect on religious output. However, Hollinshead (2002) provides an audience perspective from the time, which shows that religious exclusivity had not gone unnoticed<sup>15</sup>:

I wish to point out that all licence holders do not receive equal treatment at your hands - the religious one having not only rights, but privileges, whilst his opponent has neither. This is patent from the position of religion on the programmes: it is not subject to the laws governing controversy - the opinion against it not being allowed - whilst broadcast daily and monopolizing Sunday. R.B, Belfast, July 20, 1928. (Hollinshead, 2002: 51-52)

<sup>14</sup> Today we refer to 'programme' as a network.

<sup>15</sup> Hollinshead (2002) uses reader's letters to *The Radio Times* to highlight the differing perspectives towards religious output at that time.

Despite the criticisms the House of Convocation (the council of the Church of England) issued a report in 1930 celebrating the work of both the BBC and CRAC acknowledging what they had done for Christianity in Britain and vindicating the policies of the Corporation with regards the treatment of religion (Bailey, 2007: 12; Dinwiddie, 1968: 37). This effectively began a period of growth for religious broadcasting. The volume of religious programming grew significantly (perhaps because no secular alternative existed and so they were needed to fill airtime).

The creation of the Empire Service (1932) and the broadcasting to the colonies provided, from the churches' point of view, the opportunity to promote Christianity abroad. People were keen to be kept abreast of events at home and religion was important in this, specifically church services. However, the policy of the Empire Service differed from the approach of the Religious Broadcasting Department (RBD), in that the former had no evangelistic objective. It was to be anecdotal and nostalgic and use elements such as the chimes of Big Ben to signal a time for reflection (Wolfe, 1984: 266). The emergence of recording technology was vital to the success of these services and the overseas broadcasts were intended as a morale boost for British troops abroad. The opening of a religious studio in Broadcasting House in London, also in 1932, cemented the place of religion in policy considerations and the radio schedules. This also coincides with "the golden age of wireless" (Briggs, 1985; Crisell, 1986; Smith, 1974), from 1927 to the outbreak of war in 1939.

To manage the remit of religious broadcasting, Rev. F.A. Iremonger became the Corporation's first full-time Director of Religion in 1933 and signalled that the churches were now firmly within the Corporation. Iremonger would be heavily involved in the Coronation broadcast of 1937 and his "remarkable and deeply reverent commentary" (Dinwiddie, 1968: 23) would be seen as testament to the success of broadcasting services of a religious nature. As a result of this broadcast *The Listener* described the BBC's religious policy as "national, aesthetic and didactic" (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 30). Iremonger's appointment was particularly significant as he represented "the widest diversity of Christian interests" (Wolfe, 1984: 64) and he set about establishing policy to deal with the growth in religious broadcasting and its associated dilemmas. He had a desire to develop religion outside of its Sunday slot through talks and drama, and to harness the educational role of broadcasting to children. He was also acutely aware of the need to professionalise the output and co-ordinate its regional output. With regards to Sunday policy, Iremonger believed that "BBC Sunday should be essentially different from the rest of the week and that the general audience wanted a different 'quality' Sunday" (Wolfe, 1984: 74) suggesting he had ambitious plans for improving the reach of

religious broadcasting although he still acknowledged that there was some support, both inside and outside the church, for the 'Reithian Sunday' ethos. This meant the 'God Slot' would remain in place for the time being.

Although Iremonger was himself a member of the clergy, his actions may have indicated the first signs of the split between the BBC and its Central Religious Advisory Committee. The advisory body did not assist in the formation of policy but was consigned to working out the practicalities of existing policy. The most significant change Iremonger made to BBC policy was the recognition of smaller religious groups such as Christian Scientists that now were allowed to contribute in balanced discussion but not to programme or policy development.

In 1936 a debate began on the inclusion of secular items on Sunday broadcasts, a move that the Lords Day Observance Society vehemently opposed. Despite much debate, the churches and CRAC resisted pressure to allow this change. Their argument was that broadcasting secular items or even religious items at the same time as religious services would detract people from attending churches, quite a naive argument to many. However, Briggs reports that:

By 1939 there seemed no longer to be any place for equivocation, and at an informal conference held in June of that year under the auspices of Dr J. W. Welch, a new Director of Religious Broadcasting, it was agreed unanimously that 'the strict Puritan Sunday' could no longer be enforced. (Briggs, 1985: 130)

This period up to the 1940s was both an exciting and problematic time for those involved in religious broadcasting. The BBC, CRAC and the churches were involved in something, which had the potential to revitalise the faith of Britain. It was an opportunity not granted to the church since the invention of printing. This had been heavily influenced by a relatively small number of people such as Reith, Sheppard and Iremonger who put their own stamp firmly on the output. They had taken the first tentative steps towards creating a specific style of programming in which music, debates, bible readings and religious services were central in the weekly schedules. At this time also management and producers shared many of the same aims and ambitions so there was general agreement within the Corporation about the direction in which the genre would move. However, this unmapped terrain would eventually bring the mainstream Christian churches and the forces of audience competition into opposition with each other, and it was to prove a difficult journey for the churches.

## The war years

The onset of World War Two in 1939 brought dramatic changes to the organisation and content of the BBC. National and Regional programmes combined into a single Home Service (Crisell, 1986). The Corporation was to have a key role in addressing national tensions and for keeping morale high, both in Britain and amongst its troops overseas (Crisell, 2002: 58). A shortage of newsprint during this time meant people turned to radio for their main source of information and entertainment, giving “added power to words on the air” (Briggs, 1985: 175). However, considerable censorship existed during this time (Briggs, 1985; Wolfe, 1984) and this was to have a significant effect on religious output.

This period also highlighted the role of religion in a time of crisis and how this role was changing. Now people would turn to religion as a source of comfort but not in the ways experienced during the First World War. Wolfe (1984) describes this change:

[T]he emphasis now moved from the churches as institutions to churchmen who were able exponents and protagonists of that faith which stood at the foundation of English culture. (Wolfe, 1984: 154)

During the war period something else unexpected happened:

It was quite clear that the responses to the war crisis of the main Christian institutions were being shaped and sharpened by the BBC. (Wolfe, 1984: 158)

The BBC was playing a greater role in determining the way in which institutions like the church communicated with people showing that the medium of radio and the BBC were coming of age. However, although the churches may have begun to pay more attention to the work of the BBC, the relationship between both parties was slowly shifting as their aims diverged:

The BBC was concerned with the general public and the Churches, through CRAC, were concerned with congregational numbers. (Hollinshead, 2002: 64)

This departure would prompt the first tentative steps of the BBC to progress independently of the clergy.

Regardless of these first signs of dissension, through the advent of radio and its religious output many religious preachers had become household names and it was this recognition, in effect celebrity, which would form the basis of broadcasting policy in the genre. However, a debate raged throughout this time on the inclusion of pacifist voices on the radio (Wolfe, 1984: 170). Prior to the onset of war there had been some religious lectures on aspects of war. The BBC (under pressure from the government)

ordered those presenters known to have anti-war sentiments not be permitted on the radio in fear of demoralising the nation. Many religious leaders who had subscribed to this view and who had preached on radio before 1939 found themselves effectively blacklisted until peacetime. This created some difficulty for the Religious Broadcasting Department as they struggled to replace these popular presenters with those who had the inclination *and* skills to go on air.

Despite these logistical problems the emergence of the 'radio personality' continued during this time due to the BBC's interpretation of the role of religious leaders in a crisis. Two of the most famous at this time were Ronald Selby Wright of the Canongate Kirk in Edinburgh, who became known as 'Radio Padre' and, Reverend Dick Sheppard, who had orchestrated the first broadcast from St Martins. Both men appealed greatly to audiences for their friendly manner and straightforward talk.

Organisationally within the BBC and the Religious Broadcasting Department (RBD) changes occurred. Both Reith and Iremonger retired and as indicated previously Rev. James Welch took over. Welch favoured a much broader policy when dealing with religious content, though "he still felt that there should remain a clear distinction between Sunday programming and that for the rest of the week" (Street, 2000: 174). He wanted the church to become more vocal on critical questions facing the country and to provide the people with greater spiritual resources to deal with the hardships of the time (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 31). He was at pains to "reaffirm the centrality of the Christian faith for the survival of Christian civilization" (Wolfe, 1984: 205). Furthermore, in Welch's view an ecumenical message needed to be delivered to the people and programming was to be created around this.

There were dramatic changes to religious content on the radio during wartime. As mentioned, a single programme with no regional alternatives was to be aired. Within the religious output, the *Daily Service*, the *Sunday Epilogue* and some church services broadcast throughout the week remained. During the war period a short programme of faith-based reflection entitled *Lift up your Hearts: a thought for the day* (Home Service, 1941 - ) began and enjoyed considerable success. Its aim initially was to remind listeners of "the constant need for God's power and love in the dark days of war" (Dinwiddie, 1968: 27). After the war its content diversified to attract a larger audience. Today, it goes on air simply as *Thought for the Day* and according to the press release, it contains "reflections from a faith perspective on issues and people in the

news” (BBC, 2006(b)). The positioning of this controversial programme will be considered further in Chapter Seven.

Throughout the war, the BBC also aired what it titled the Forces Programmes, a broadcast service introduced in 1940 provided for armed services serving abroad. It was also broadcast in Britain. Its content was a narrower mix than available on the Home Service with light music and some religion (Crisell, 2002). On the Forces Programme, religious programmes, and their presenters, were advised to avoid the preaching style of eulogy that could be heard on the Home Service. At the same time hymns became crucial to national morale and became the most popular style of religious programming on both the Forces and Home programmes. On Sundays, there was a *Community Hymn Singing* service broadcast for half an hour and this was adapted becoming *Songs of Praise* which today appears on the BBC’s main television station each Sunday afternoon. Another successful service programme was the *Sunday Half Hour*, an evening service that began on the Light Programme in the spring of 1951 and would take a youth group format. This focused style of output would continue to impact on programme choice after the war, effectively ending the Reithian principles of mixed programming (Crisell, 1986).

Possibly one of the most successful and influential broadcasts of that time, and one which continued to influence broadcast policy in the years after the war, was a cycle of twelve plays, produced by British author Dorothy L. Sayers. These were entitled *The Man Born to Be King* (Home Service, 1941) and told through drama the story of Jesus (Dinwiddie, 1968: 87-91; Wolfe, 1984: 218-237). Production of these plays was fraught with difficulties as the Central Religious Advisory Committee, the churches and outside forces expressed their concern at the realist interpretation given to the story of Jesus, accusing those involved of blasphemy (Wolfe, 1984: 215). Sayers persevered and these plays achieved critical success enjoying large audiences throughout the series despite the fact they were created under the auspices of children’s programming.

War had a number of affects on broadcasting. The BBC had “dug itself deep into the roots of British society” (Smith, 1974: 62) through credible unbiased reporting and “the steadiness and familiarity of its output” (Crisell, 2002: 65-66). However, for the first time there was to be a stratification policy for its audiences and this would herald the introduction of the ‘Light Programme’ to meet the new demand. In religious broadcasting, the BBC had begun to refine the conventions of the output. They saw the demand for non-theological talks and they sought to capitalise on the popularity of

certain performers. Furthermore some successes within the programming had put it on the BBC map and this meant that department were in a better position to compete for resources.

However, the biggest change to religious broadcasting was in relation to its scheduling on Sundays. The changes in content, both inside religious broadcasting and in the wider BBC, led effectively to the end of the BBC Sunday policy. Significantly, this decision was made largely without consulting CRAC. Despite this, co-operation continued between both the BBC and the churches. Even within the faith groups dialogue continued, although, Roman Catholics largely stayed out of this, leaving the Protestant faiths to unite. However, like Reith's initial criticism, the churches would still not take the initiative when it came to broadcasting. In the churches' opinion, radio could never be as effective a resource as an actual church service. Furthermore, they still held the (now outdated) view that the BBC had an obligation to protect *and* promote the Christian message. With church attendance falling rapidly (mainly due to widespread social change) and the introduction of competition to the religious monopoly on Sundays and throughout the schedules, this outlook was to effectively mean that the churches failed to capitalise on the opportunities which radio afforded.<sup>16</sup>

### **Change in the air**

The changes, which were imposed during the war, meant that broadcasting could not go back to its pre-war format to the advantage of the BBC (Street, 2000: 174). The Home Service continued as a London service which the regions could draw content from. The Forces Programme was renamed the 'Light Service', continuing with the same output and the 'Third Programme' was introduced as an "unashamedly 'high brow' network" consisting of items such as concerts, operas, plays and intellectual talks (Crisell, 1986: 26). Crisell (2002) advises that although this was a major change to the structure of the BBC, the overall ethos of cultural enlightenment still remained. Now, however, the tripartite system "would provide 'something for everyone' - but across the entirety of its network rather than within any one of them" (2002: 67) moving to what he calls a post-Reithian phases of public service provision (Crisell, 2002: 114). Street (2000) suggests, "[t]he message for the old guard was clear: Taste would not be undermined by change, culture would not be sacrificed for populism" (2000: 176). Further changes occurred in the techniques used on air which had been experimented with during the war. A more intimate style of speech had been tested and proved to be successful.

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<sup>16</sup> Fortner (2005: 61) argues that the Christian churches in both Canada and the United States also missed the opportunity to revitalise the faith that mainstream radio afforded.



Once the censorship of war had been lifted, free speech on controversial issues also became of key importance.

As stated by Melville Dinwiddie (1968: 28), BBC Scotland controller, “a more positive and vigorous proclamation of the Gospel was noticeable” across the BBC schedules. However, according to Wolfe, religious broadcasting was now facing competition from other departments, most notably the Talks Department, and was under pressure to justify its primetime scheduling in peacetime (Wolfe, 1984: 315). Therefore any celebrations of post-war glory days for religious broadcasting, as measured through the increased output, the appreciative audience and the significant resources employed, must be balanced against the sense of urgency and the need to build on this great opportunity. The focus had to move from the quantity to the quality of the output.

The introduction of the Home, Light and Third Programmes by the BBC proved problematic for its Religious Broadcasting Department. There was an increase in popularity of the Light programme which would only broadcast religion during the weekend and a five-minute service during the week. At the same time there was a decrease of the Home Programme (the main outlet for religion); it seemed the audience had spoken irrespective of the importance of cultural enlightenment.

The internal structure of the BBC pitted the RBD against the Talks department as both fought for control. During the war, 30 per cent of talks had been produced by the religious department, compared to just 8 per cent before the war (Seaton, 2007). Although the department had made strong progress, sustaining this would be a challenge. According to Seaton (*ibid.*) internal memos suggested that this growth in the RBD's remit was not widely appreciated and many raised questions about whether lectures on moral issues would be better dealt with by the RBD or the Talks department. Both the RBD and the Talks department reported to the CRAC, with the Talks department reporting on broadcasts by non-Christian groups, ethical broadcasts and other controversial broadcasts (Simon, 1953: 307-308). The RBD needed to raise their standards for presenters and production if they were to compete for resources with the sophistication and prestige of the Talks department. Despite three separate wavelengths, religious output was under significant pressure to find fixed points in the schedule and to deliver audience figures.

Until this point the BBC policy had been to present “as faithfully as possible the wide diversity of the Christian church presence in British culture and society” (Wolfe, 1984:

329). Even this had been difficult, for instance the Roman Catholics had the reputation within the BBC of wanting to “present what they saw as the truth and the whole truth” (Wolfe, 1984: 331). Now, however, breaking the Christian monopoly became an issue for both the RBD and the CRAC to discuss. The opening up of broadcasting to alternative views seemed like an obvious step in broadcasting policy. However, CRAC questioned the airing of what they saw as anti-Christian views and whether this would be against the values of the BBC. Welch believed that the BBC gained little from its protectionist stance toward Christianity and felt that debates between Christians and non-Christians would strengthen the faith for the future (Hollinshead, 2002; Wolfe, 1984: 340). In 1946 the BBC, under the direction of William Haley, moved the Corporation “away from this position (protectionism) towards a more democratic attitude, greater freedom in the exchange of ideas, and the questioning of belief” (Wolfe, 1984: 346) but they still kept a vague commitment to high moral responsibilities. CRAC clung to the notion of the BBC as defender and promoter of the Christian faith, demonstrating that divisions were inevitable between the Corporation and its advisory body.

The churches had hoped that radio could be used as a means to re-establish the Christian message in post wartime. A report in 1950 from the British Council of Churches, looking at the responsibility of the BBC and more specifically religious broadcasting, concluded that the BBC had two roles:

- to avoid undermining Christian morality;
- foster an understanding of the Christian religion. (Hollinshead, 2002: 65; Wolfe, 1984: 363)

However, the BBC was now defending the rights of its audience to receive the most comprehensive debate possible about the place and nature of religious belief - a far cry from the pre-war days. This was only the beginning and soon the BBC would move its religious programmes to be aired at the same time as church services thus coming into direct competition with the clergy.

Regional wrangling also became an issue, especially in Scotland under Melville Dinwiddie (BBC Scotland Controller, 1933-57). He wanted more output from Scotland’s own denominations (i.e. Scottish Presbyterians) but Welch as overall controller of religious output wanted the BBC to lead the religious convictions of the nation without a focus on denomination (Wolfe, 1984). It revived a problem, which had been in place since before the war, of regional autonomy. Religious broadcasting was traditionally Church of England broadcasting; Church of Scotland services struggled to meet the aesthetical

and sermonical requirements of broadcasting so they were largely overlooked. After the war the regions appointed their own co-ordinators and they were in charge of meeting the spiritual needs of their respective audiences. Despite this measure debate raged on the representation of religious beliefs on network radio and created a dualism between London and the rest of the country; a debate on regional and national identity, which plays out today in a wider context (Broadcast, 2008; Linklater, 2007; Welsh, 2008).

Francis House replaced Welch as Head of Religious Broadcasting at the end of 1946 and instigated another radical change of policy. The regional movement had become strong so gaining effective collaboration and control was to be an important task. House favoured an ecumenical message and stressed the homogeneity of Christian belief. For him, innovation was crucial to finding new ways of communicating theological thoughts and he piloted new formats such as radio dramas and dramatic radio sermons. The churches resisted and argued that these forms were too much like entertainment, therefore trivialising the religious message. House published a report in 1949 entitled *The Aims and Achievements of Religious Broadcasting* using both discussions with stakeholders and audience research carried out by Robert Silvey of the BBC's research department.<sup>17</sup> The report demonstrated an acute understanding of the situation facing religious broadcasting. The main emphasis for House was to reach the Light Programme audience and this would be done through more appealing formats. There would be a shift from Sunday to weekday activities and programmes such as church news were to be dropped from the schedules (Dinwiddie, 1968: 96).

For the church, evangelism had always been a key objective for the medium of radio. This was revisited after the war, specifically in Scotland as they set out to stamp their national identity on religious output. Britain had survived the terrible experience of war and now had a new outlook on the future. This, for some, should have been a great time for religion, and radio should have been at its centre. However, despite radio's increasing ubiquity in public and private life, the church still doubted its real potential and failed to co-operate fully. Gaps were particularly prevalent between the work of the BBC and the parochial clergy. In 1950, under the control of the Scottish religious radio team, work began on what was to be called a 'Radio Mission'. This mission would have three aims "to challenge the careless, to reclaim the lapsed and to strengthen the faithful" (Dinwiddie, 1968: 96). It was to be a combination of radio services, lectures and debates, aimed at all three groups, which would be supported by local clergy

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<sup>17</sup> Wolfe (1984: p. 355 - 361) provides an extensive account of this report and its findings.

through services, meetings and house calls. However, it was heavily dependent on the mobilisation of both the clergy and the laity, and it would be the former, which were crucial to its success.

Success in this project was mixed. There was some short-term evidence of increases in congregations and where there had been concerted effort on behalf of the local clergy an increased enthusiasm was evident. The project would be used as an initial attempt to gauge reaction to the experiment and it would be repeated a year later. However, the widespread response, which was expected, did not materialise. In the longer term, little in the way of evangelism had been achieved and it served more as a comfort for those already within the church. Pegg (1983) argues that the overall real effect of radio on religious observance over the thirty preceding years was likely to have been neutral with radio neither discouraging attendance nor stimulating new membership (1983: 163). Any downturn in congregations was likely to be attributable to a change in social values.

This post-war era was marked by a number of innovations in religious output. Broadcasting the sacraments, specifically the Service of Holy Communion, on radio brought a great deal of ecclesiastical, technical and social debate. Religious content filled eight hours per week of radio time (Simon, 1953: 307) outside of church services. This meant that the department had to grow in size in order to produce this output and run events like the Radio Mission. Programmes changed as undemanding pastoral programmes became the norm, particularly in an attempt to attract the Light audience. Aside from programme output, the RBD in association with a number of other departments and contributors set out to produce the BBC Hymn book, which through its criteria of “good theology, good poetry and good music” (Welch, 1941 cited Wolfe, 1984: 388) became a key resource for choirs and parishioners across the country showing their ambition to provide non-programming resources for audiences.

### **Conclusion: religion in the early days of BBC Radio**

To conclude this early history of radio and its relationship with religion, it should be clear that the development of religious broadcasting was seen by a number of senior people as something which was vitally important to a national broadcasting system. However, its creation and continuation was fraught with many logistical, technological, financial and social challenges. Gaining consensus between the various stakeholders about the direction in which the output should develop took considerable negotiations

and determination between key individuals. However, as a result there would be some successes; the most important being the creation of a recognisable and sustainable style of programming.

Over time, issues of control appeared as the BBC and the churches wrestled over the nature and timings of religious output. The first signs were appearing which suggested that the BBC would eventually assume control and take religious broadcasting in a direction where quality was paramount, and inclusion favoured over exclusion or elitism. However, the BBC was not to have it all its own way. The debates over 'Reithian Sundays' and the continued Christian monopoly demonstrated the power still held by the churches.

Initially developed in association with the church the aims of religious broadcasting had been relatively consistent up to this point. These aims were to avoid challenging the Christian faith and encourage a greater appreciation of the faith amongst listeners. When television arrived both of these aims would be thoroughly reconsidered.

In line with the broader evolving internal culture of the BBC, the values and working practices of the Religious Broadcasting Department were slowly emerging and finding their place within the Corporation. Central to this was ensuring a professional standing for the output relative to other departments. From this a unified BBC strategy between management and staff was forming for religious output; though internal struggles with regional output were the exception to this. Together management, staff and external contributors developed a style of programming which was non-denominational, incorporating an increasingly popular theology much of which was delivered by well-known names. It was the beginning of a style of programme known as "BBC Religion" (Bailey, 2007; Wolfe, 1984) and one that would directly influence the entire development of religious programming up to the present day.

## Chapter Four: Religion on BBC Radio and Television (1950 - )

### New competition

BBC Television commenced transmission in November 1936; however, it was not until after the war in 1946 that the service began to establish itself, and eventually, in the 1950s surpassed radio in terms of coverage, resources and prestige. In the early days of this new medium television was to be radio with pictures, therefore, the structures and practices of radio production were applied to television thus restricting much of its natural appeal. At the same time many of John Reith's principles of public service broadcasting and mixed programming were applied; that is 'something for everyone' and 'everything for someone'.

Unlike the relatively efficient radio system, television required immense resources. Two particular limitations would impede its initial growth; first, the high cost of start-up and content production and second, the rapid development of the technology which meant hardware quickly became outdated and was an unattractive investment for audiences (Crisell, 2002: 77). However, following what Crisell terms the "first media event" (ibid.: 81), the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, television would demonstrate its merits and surpass radio as the most influential medium of the time. In terms of religious broadcasting, this event would require careful negotiations with the church. The televising of the sacrament of communion would be a significant problem as the fear of trivialisation remained. It was to be the first of many disagreements between the church and the broadcasters.

The churches in Britain expected much the same reverential treatment from television which they had largely received at the hands of radio up to this point. While the churches demanded airtime, the Religious Broadcasting Department was aware of the difficulties that the different faiths had yet to overcome with radio, specifically in terms of the quality of speakers, a weakness television would further expose. In terms of content, the outside broadcasts of church services were vital as far as religious groups were concerned. In practical terms, however, some services were more aesthetically pleasing on television than other services; therefore Roman Catholic and Anglican services were generally favoured. This was a major drawback for the Church of Scotland who relied on a specific type of address to communicate with its

congregations. Nevertheless, the BBC would have to be sensitive to the needs of all faith communities and negotiate a delicate balance between all groups.

At the same time, the RBD wanted to experiment with non-liturgical programmes, which they felt would reinvigorate the declining religiosity of the country. In 1952, Colin Beale, Francis House's representative for television, wrote a report on television's religious output and called for 'TV ABC' - television that was "Adequate, Balanced and Challenging" (Wolfe, 1984: 490). Beale called for greater variety in religious broadcasting in areas such as children's programming, drama and studio discussions. He reiterated the special characteristics of the medium and how these should be treated in religious programmes. In his eyes, the churches needed to contribute proactively to the ideas and content of these programmes. In return, television would provide a platform, which would visually accentuate the importance of the church. In response to this report, the Central Religious Advisory Committee broadly supported the move to more experimental programmes but sought some reassurance that there would continue to be some protection from the broadcaster. However, two specific concerns would again resurface: the question of scheduling and the sacrament of communion.

The RBD found itself in a dilemma. The churches, with support from CRAC, were adamant that television should not broadcast in competition with church services. Sunday seemed a natural place for religious broadcasting; however, the RBD were keen not to be relegated to this day only by the BBC schedulers. They would need to show that they could provide weekday material. Religious plays for children, debate programmes and one-off documentaries such as *Quiet Revolution* (BBC, 1957), which told the story of a city priest, were the main outlets for religion outside of Sundays. *Meeting Point*, a discussion programme on the moral and social issues of the day began in 1956 and covered many topics relating to religion with clergy and senior church figures regularly appearing as panellists. However, although the regional and national services also contributed many programmes, Sunday continued to be the main day for new religious material.

The televising of communion proved another significant problem and was:

[T]he issue which, more than any other divided the Corporation from the churches and, more significantly, the RBD within itself. (Wolfe, 1984: 494)

This problem came to a head with the coronation of 1953. Initially, the cameras were felt to be too obtrusive and were not to be allowed broadcast from the service. However, through extended negotiations between the church, the BBC and royal

representatives, it was decided that there were “valuable advantages in presenting this event to the public in its full religious significance” (ibid.: 498). It was to be one of the great broadcast triumphs of the BBC and cemented the place of television in daily life (Briggs, 1985: 18). After this the issue regarding the sacrament of communion moved beyond fears of triviality to a fear that broadcasting the sacraments from various Christian traditions would highlight the differences between these groups therefore displacing the ecumenical message favoured by most contributors (Wolfe, 1984: 499). Eventually, following a number of experiments, the churches and CRAC agreed to the inclusion of the sacraments in the broadcast of religious services.

The publication of the Beveridge Report in 1951 ended the BBC monopoly of the television market. The reasons cited for ending the monopoly included the BBC’s continued preoccupation with its radio output, increased demand for advertising outlets and a “democratic revulsion against ‘someone else knowing best’: people craved diversity and choice” (Crisell, 2002: 83). Commercial television, in the form of ITV, came on air in September 1955 and would be characterised by advertising revenue and a regional structure.

Support for the new channel was not unanimous. While the churches wanted more airtime in which to reach audiences they were fearful that commercial TV would lower the standard of broadcasting. The National Television Council (NTC) became the voice against competition and the church fell mainly on this side of the debate against the Popular Television Association (PTA), which called for new outlets. Despite the argument from the NTC that the introduction of a commercially funded channel would herald a fall in minority programmes such as religious ones, it would be the PTA and its supporters who would win the day.

Religious broadcasting, however, was to be given some shelter in this new duopoly. In 1954 the Independent Television Authority (ITA) came into being and would supervise the various contractors that made up ITV. It was at the discretion of the ITA, rather than a legislative requirement, that the programme contractors include certain types of programmes such as religious output. The British Council of Churches (BCC) was also to play a key role in the debate on the religious output of the new commercial station. Through talks with all those involved it was stipulated that religious programmes would be part of the required output of the new channel, there would be no option for religious groups to buy airtime and through the Television Act (1954) religious groups would not be allowed to advertise. In due course, CRAC was to advise this new regulatory body on religious matters, along with its on-going commitment to the BBC.



This arrangement in relation to religious output worked well with competition between the broadcasters during the closed period (which ITV was also subject to) providing a high standard of programmes and a diverse audience (Dinwiddie, 1968: 121). Dinwiddie recounts that “the items became in due course more complementary than competitive between the BBC and ITV and showed the remarkable diversity possible in the presentation of our faith” (ibid.) pointing to the multiple interpretations possible for the content and format of religious broadcasting.

The Beveridge Report also addressed the question of whether the BBC should negotiate with non-Christians for access to airtime. Wolfe summarises the arguments of Beveridge:

[T]he BBC had to decide who would have a say, and the need for cohesion and leadership would easily be lost in the attempt to do justice to the tiniest minorities. But that was precisely what Beveridge wanted: the BBC should give a voice to everyone, provided they were not advocating crime. (Wolfe, 1984: 409)

Furthermore Ernest Simon (1953), Chairman of the BBC at the time, recalls that the recommendations of the report were for the BBC to move away from its evangelistic role and towards maintaining the common elements of all Christian faiths (1953: 308). Ultimately, the Beveridge report would not be wholly accepted by CRAC or the BBC hierarchy, and thus its religious department (Simon, 1953: 308). The work of the RBD was to largely remain unchanged. However, the Governors expressed hope that there “might be more programmes on secular moral values” (Wolfe, 1984: 418) giving one of the first indications that the remit of religion was growing to include moral and ethical themes from a non-religious stance. Significantly the Talks department would take a greater role in providing these (Simon, 1953: 308). Overall this episode suggested that although the Christian monopoly continued it was inevitable that in time it would be removed.

In relation to the staffing of the RBD, 1954 saw the formal appointment of Agnellus Andrew to the RBD. Up until then Agnellus had been an adviser on Roman Catholic affairs to the RBD but now the department had its first Roman Catholic, ending the Protestant monopoly among section personnel. The following year Roy McKay succeeded Francis House as head of the Religious Broadcasting Department and once again a change of strategy was inevitable. McKay’s focus was very much on the new medium of television as he felt that this offered an even greater opportunity for religion to be part of everyday life. This may have been ambitious considering the churches had yet to master or accept unconditionally the medium of radio and that society in general

was seen to be entering a period of increasing secularity. McKay also wanted greater “co-operation with the churches but was certainly not ready to seek approval for every innovation” (Wolfe, 1984: 528) suggesting further divisions were inevitable between church and television. This debate also shows that the relationship between church and broadcaster was very different at the start of television services compared to how it was at the start of radio only 30 years earlier.

Although institutional focus was primarily on television, radio faced its own challenges; this was despite continuing high quality programming where “between 1945 and about 1960, BBC radio enjoyed what was probably its greatest era broadcasting distinguished programmes of every kind, many of them regional in origin, to audiences of several million” (Crisell, 2002: 74). The Home Service came under severe competition and surveys reported a loss of stature and authority with the advent of the Light Programme; a problem for the RBD as most of its output was aired on the Home service. Furthermore, analysis of the ratings of the Home Service suggested that religious programming was losing audiences rapidly. In 1955, an internal report from the Audience Research Department, entitled *Religious Broadcasting and the Public* would call into question much of the policy of the RBD. It again raised the question of whether the BBC should be involved in the indirect promotion of church attendance or whether it was an arena for theological debate, even if this was sometimes perceived as anti-Christian. This report along with the social change reflected in television output, led to even more people questioning the role of religious institutions in British society.

Unrest came in 1955 when Mrs Margaret Knight, a lecturer in philosophy from Aberdeen University, delivered a series of radio talks on the Home Service entitled *Morals without Religion*. She related her talks from a broadly Humanist approach. Opinion on the series was divided with some believing that it was a welcome alternative to the monopolistic Christian commitment, while others saw it as a direct attack on Christian Britain, something that the BBC still had a commitment to. This resulted in the debate on religious access to the airwaves being reopened and further alienated many church leaders from the BBC initiatives (Wolfe, 1984: 445-454).

By the end of the decade a number of changes occurred which would irrevocably alter the face of religious broadcasting. The churches now had another set of broadcasters to deal with and few had the resources or inclination to monitor the increasing activities of the broadcasters. The advent of commercial television in 1956 and more sophisticated audience measurement techniques would further intensify the pressure on all BBC

departments, including the RBD, to deliver audiences (Burns, 1977:48). The genre of religion was slowly being bypassed by ratings conscious broadcasters in favour of more commercially favourable output such as comedy and drama. However, there were some successes during this period. *Jesus of Nazareth* (1956) was filmed for television and experienced many of the same problems and successes that its radio counterpart, *The Man Born to Be King*, had experienced in 1941 (as discussed in Chapter Three).

This was also the last decade in which Christian sensibilities would be as overt in both broadcasting and the wider society. According to Hollinshead's historical research on the 1950s:

The sense of religion as still important to viewers and listeners is very strong when you read the *Radio Times*. Church services are not just mentioned in the listings but frequently are discussed in the diary pages with extra information about the church, congregations or clergyman. There is no embarrassment in referring to religion. (Hollinshead, 2002: 68)

However, for religious institutions a period of unsympathetic criticism was approaching; one which would also cement television's place as "the most influential force in modern society" (Crisell, 2002: 113). As a result of these changes from now on religion would become less visible in its traditional guises, particularly the institutional representations mentioned above by Hollinshead.

### **An end to the golden age of radio**

When the 1960s arrived the focus, both socially and organisationally, would move even more from radio to television. Indeed Crisell describes 1964 as BBC radio's "lowest ebb" (1986: 30). This was as a result of a number of factors, such as the introduction of yet more competition in the form of BBC 2 television, problems with the network structure of BBC radio and most importantly the transmission of pirate broadcasters. The issues from the networks structure stemmed from the overlap, which existed between each of the BBC radio stations available. Each tried to adopt a narrower form of mixed programming but was not "sufficiently distinctive to command listeners' loyalty" (Crisell, 2002: 136). Strong competition also entered the market in the pirate stations of Radio Luxembourg (reinstated after the war), Radio Caroline and Radio London (both came to air in 1964). Each of these had a substantial impact on the radio waves due to their new broadcasting techniques and more especially their pop music content, which was largely missing from BBC output. However, two things happened which would revolutionise the medium - one outside the control of the BBC and the other inside the Corporation, both of which would revive BBC Radio's fortunes.

The first and most important of these were the technical advances, which were made in the early 1960s. The introduction of transistors made the radio more portable, robust and increasingly affordable, particularly to the new generation of music listeners. This would breathe new life into the medium and allow radio to retain its place within British lifestyles, albeit as a 'secondary medium'. The second important change came in 1969 from within the BBC itself in the form of *Broadcasting in the Seventies* (1969), the BBC's strategy document for a "specialised" radio network (BBC, 1969: 3). It further demarcated the networks and heralded a move away from the Reithian view of programme provision. As a result of this report the Light Programme was rebranded as Radio 1, followed by the introduction of Radio 2, which was to be of similar content but for an older audience. The Third Programme was rebranded as Radio 3 and continued to provide classical music to its listeners. Radio 4 would take over from the Home Service and would be the new site for factual programming which would be transferred from the others. At the same time it would retain the Reithian principle of mixed programming (i.e. factual with some entertainment programmes), which was largely abandoned in the others. Audience segmentation and size would be key to deciding output from now on. Plans by the Post Office to remove the radio license fee were also contained in the report. This meant that the medium of radio would no longer generate its own funding within the BBC and would be financially dependent on television - something which those in the radio departments felt underscored the declining stature of the medium in the BBC's overall broadcasting strategy (Crisell, 1986: 36).

As radio's popularity declined there was a change in the stature of television as it became "a main factor in influencing the values and moral standards of our society" (Crisell, 2002: 116). The Pilkington Report (1962) was to be one of the first formal acknowledgments that television was an immense force and the report registered some of the disquiet with how it was being used. The most important change coming from the report was the introduction of BBC 2, which was seen by many as an outlet for minority interests but according to Crisell was "the hesitant beginning of television narrowcasting" (2002: 120). A major issue, which the report outlined, was the notion of 'triviality' on television in terms of approach and presentation. It signalled a discord between the notions of public service television and audience ratings, a debate which endures today.

In relation to religious broadcasting the Pilkington Report made a number of points. It recognised the overall high quality of religious broadcasting and tentatively supported the shared aims of the BBC and the Independent Television Authority (ITA) in this regard. The report defended the dominance of mainstream Christian religious

broadcasting because of the limited resources available and the needs of the majority Christian population. However, it questioned the concept of 'mainstream', in other words which Christian groups were classed as 'in' or 'out' of the production process and how this was decided. It advocated a more liberal interpretation reporting that this move had the backing of the churches. Lay members were to be included on the board of CRAC and the advisory group was to expand its remit to advise the ITA (the regulator at that time). The unique religious needs of Scotland were also highlighted and recommendations were made to promote regional programmes to cater for this. In all, the effect of the Pilkington Report was hardly revolutionary to religious broadcasting but it did highlight the changes taking place in both society and British television.

The Pilkington Report, although generally more concerned with television, did praise the quality of radio's religious broadcasting. The increase in remit of CRAC was a problem as it was felt by the BBC that radio was the main loser in this expansion. This discontent was also felt more widely:

[R]adio had come to be regarded as only of secondary interest, whereas in fact the Corporation's religious output in sound services is much greater than in television and no less important. (BBC memorandum to the Pilkington Committee 1962 cited Paulu, 1981: 276)

This disclosure by the BBC underlines two vital points. First, according to many there was a serious undervaluing of radio's influence on the agenda of the Corporation. Furthermore, within radio religion continued to have a significant position.

Despite the changes inside and outside the Corporation, religious broadcasting was still "an important BBC Commitment" (BBC, 1962: 52) and remained so throughout much of the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> At this time the BBC made the decision to maintain a single Religious Broadcasting Department, which would deal with output for both radio and television, and staff would report to one head of department. This goes against the general trend of separating the output into autonomous departments, which occurred in other areas. Over at ITV they had decided to take a different organisational approach to producing religion having a religious programme advisor for each of the companies that made up ITV. Teams to produce the programmes were drawn from the general staff and in many cases had little specialist knowledge (Brockman, 2005). This would continue until the 1980s when ITV gave responsibility for co-ordinating all religious output to just one of the programme companies (like it did in other genres, such as children's programmes). This responsibility went to Tyne Tees Television.

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<sup>18</sup> As per comment section on 'Religious Broadcasts' within the BBC Handbooks 1961, 1962, 1963 and 1965.

In the 1960s religious observance was decreasing and so many questioned the importance of religion to broadcasting and the need to have a specialist department at all. In 1961 the aims of the RBD appeared to acknowledge the traditional role the department played and the established format of its output:

The aims of religious broadcasting may be briefly summarized under three heads. The first is that it should reflect the worship, thought, and action of those churches, which represent the mainstream of the Christian tradition in the country. The second is that religious broadcasting should bring before listeners and viewers what is most significant in the relationship between Christian faith and the modern world. The third aim is that religious broadcasting should seek to reach those on the fringe of the organised life of the churches, or quite outside it. (BBC, 1962: 52)

This suggests that, despite the sometimes radical ambitions of the various heads of the Religious Broadcasting Department, the objectives of the RBD were still largely underwritten by the aims inherited from the output's early days: Christian centric output, promoter (but crucially no longer defender) of the Christian faith and advocating a curious form of non-denominational content. However, in comparing this to the later objectives of the RBD in 1965 a significant change is visible. In the 1965 handbook the objectives are vague, employing statements such as:

[R]eligious broadcasting also attempts to reflect something of both the simplicities and the splendours of Christian faith. (BBC, 1965: 67)

It appears that in the short period between both reports the commitments of the BBC and the RBD had become more ambiguous, possibly as a result of the social current of the day towards religion and its place in society. This, however, is not discernible from the number of hours of output of religious programmes which stayed between 430 and 455 hours of radio between 1960 and 1964. On television there were 70 hours in 1960 and 141 hours in 1964 showing that although there was greater growth in television output there was still over three times more output on radio (BBC, 1961; BBC, 1965).

In the same handbook the issue of controversial anti-Christian broadcasts is acknowledged:

Today religious broadcasting extends beyond the reflection of the faith of Christians and of the life of the churches into the wider field of discussion of belief so that controversy is no longer excluded. (BBC Handbook, 1965: 66)

This was written nearly forty years after the Postmaster-General had lifted the ban on questions of controversy and gives the first explicit forecast that the days of the Christian monopoly were numbered. Although not intended by its writer Dennis Potter as something to throw down the gauntlet to the church, the play *Son of Man* did cause some controversy. Transmitted as part of BBC 1 Wednesday Play series in 1969 this was

a further retelling of the story of the crucifixion; however, this time Jesus was portrayed as a rebellious and fiery carpenter racked by self doubt; a portrayal which some audiences and church leaders publicly rejected (Paulu, 1981: 286).

To conclude, in the 1960s a turning point was reached with how religion was treated in society and therefore in the media. In religious broadcasting only programmes that could compete in the schedules would be considered. *Songs of Praise*, which emerged as a result of the popularity of hymns on the radio was broadcast for the first time in 1961 and continues to occupy a Sunday afternoon schedule today. Other programmes of this time, which were popular, included *Sunday Story* (BBC, 1962) and *Viewpoint* (BBC, 1959 - 1964). Another effect, besides the move to populist programmes, was the airing of criticisms of religion including dissident voices from *within* the Christian church. According to Hollinshead (2002) although there had always been a history of institutional politics and disagreement within many of the churches, the growth of broadcasting made these divisions more visible to those who might have been otherwise unaware. The churches themselves began to feel the force of the media and its intrusion into their sacred institutions.

### The mood darkens

By the 1970s the political cynicism, which had been spread through Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, was steadily replaced by a growing sense of alienation amongst the electorate. Crisell (2002) describes the decade as follows:

During the 1970s the mood, which had characterised the 1960s, seemed to darken. There remained that scepticism of authority and of traditional values and institutions which television had almost certainly helped to create. But it was now less genial and relaxed, more serious and militant [...] there seemed to be a much greater preoccupation with class conflict and the rights of minorities than with social cohesiveness and interdependence. (Crisell, 2002: 194)

This change in outlook, coupled with a global economic downturn complicated by successive energy crises and tense relations with trade unions, smouldering racial disaffection and the growth of gender politics meant that the political, economic and social mood in the 1970s was much less accommodating to traditional institutions such as religion.

In broadcasting the 1970s saw the introduction of Independent Local Radio (ILR). It was hoped this would stimulate business, act as competition to the BBC, would enlarge choice and provide output for minority groups (Crisell, 2002). In theory, this would

mean that religious groups, churches and those with a specific interest in faith could give voice to their beliefs. However, this was not to be the case. Crisell accuses the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) of over-regulating by imposing certain public service obligations on the ILRs (ibid.: 34-38) - possibly to prevent the type of activity described above. This meant that each station, although dependent on advertising revenue, had to sustain a balanced mix of programmes, irrespective of the genre's ability to attract an audience (this regulation would not be removed until 1980). This coupled with technology restrictions would damage the overall development of ILRs.

Speaking to a small number of those involved in religious output on ILR at the time a number of things come to the fore.<sup>19</sup> Religion was part of the PSB remit of these stations and was generally left in the hands of a very small number of people (in some cases one person being the entire religious department). Many of those involved (ranging from full-time to part time to the occasional volunteer) came from a religious background (usually clergy), echoing the early days of BBC involvement in this genre. Unlike the BBC, ILR had little in the form of a singular strategy for religion. For instance, Richard Steel responsible for religion during the early days of ILR station Radio Trent recounts his vague instructions from management to:

[M]ake my programme sound as much like the rest of their output as possible [...] the station wanted me to be the friendly acceptable face of Christianity. (Richard Steel, personal communication: 2007)

Steel was also keen to demonstrate that in the case of Radio Trent, religion was not seen as a box-ticking public service exercise and its success was measured in the same terms as other genres:

[T]hey [the station] were saying a chunk of our audience are going to be interested in religion, just as in sports [and] business so I was just in that mix. I wasn't anything particularly special. I was seen as a professional...over the years we were squeezed just as those programmes were as speech got less and less. (ibid.)

However, in many case religion had a greater shelf life than many of its other factual counterparts for the simple reason that it cost the station very little. Many of the personnel were on secondment from the church and so the church bore much of the costs of the output making it a cost effective proposition for many cash-strapped ILRs.

The Annan Committee was convened to investigate the state of broadcasting and it produced its report in 1977. It proposed a fourth channel to cater for the interest of minorities, including religious groups. Channel 4 would be a publisher and a commissioner for content but would not be involved directly with production. Funding

<sup>19</sup> A number of those who contributed to the interview stage of this research started their careers in ILR.



would come initially from the ITA, which would sell advertising on its behalf. To some, this was seen as a “first attempt to apply a modified version of the public service concept to the commercial model of broadcasting” (Crisell, 2002: 206). The report also detailed the committee’s requisites for ‘good broadcasting’, which were flexibility, diversity, accountability and editorial independence. These were the requirements, which all programming, including religious programming, should strive for according to the report.

The report took a detached view of the current state of religion in broadcasting. It recognised that religious sensibility in the country was still relatively strong but that this was no longer synonymous with Christianity (Annan, 1977: para. 20.12); this was a significant departure from the Pilkington Report produced fifteen years earlier. The concept of ‘mainstream’ that had been instilled at the founding of religious broadcasting was replaced by a policy of inclusion and the integration of most faith groups. A tangible result of this change would be that the advisory committee, CRAC, would further broaden its membership to non-Christian faith groups.

The report considered the closed period, which between 6.15p.m. and 7.25p.m. had always been a feature of Sunday television. During this time only religious programmes could be shown on all channels. This was (albeit naively) to ensure that television did not compete with the church. In 1976 this was reduced to 35 minutes and religious programmes appearing outside of this protected slot would have to compete for airtime in the schedules. The Annan report advised against removing the closed period of British broadcasting altogether as it felt that it would further weaken religious broadcasting as it tried to compete for audiences.

The report also acknowledged the redefinition of religious broadcasting and its aims that had taken place in the previous decade. It expressed mixed views on this. Undoubtedly, there were increased commercial pressures, which made religious broadcasting unattractive to many advertisers and audiences. In an attempt to overcome this, a “synthetic television and radio religion” (Annan, 1977: para. 20.19) had emerged to attract as many viewers and listeners as possible. This was not seen as a wholly positive development as some voiced opposition believing that “religious programmes were remarkable for their non-religious content” (ibid.: para. 20.8; citing the evidence given by the National Association for the Protection of Family Life). The report recognised a conflict between religious broadcasting which was watered down beyond recognition, and religious broadcasting which would be akin to party political

broadcasts; neither of which was desirable. In response to this conflict, the Annan report placed much of the responsibility for this situation in the hands of the churches, making a similar complaint to that of John Reith who believed that the churches failed to adequately take the initiative:

Some of the evidence displayed only a tenuous grasp of what the word “religious” meant. Those whose denomination played a major part in religious broadcasting seemed to be less than clear about what they should be doing, and those who played no part were clear only that they should be admitted to the privileged status of religious broadcasters. (Annan, 1977: para. 20.10)

This suggests that the report sought a clearer definition on the part of the churches on what were the objectives of religious broadcasting and how would these translate into more effective programming on television, giving the churches one further chance to assume control of religious broadcasting; something they largely failed to capitalise on.

Further to this, the report recognised that “CRAC wanted to escape from the religious ghetto, engage a wider non-committed audience and attract top quality producers to make adventurous programmes” (Annan, 1977: para. 20.17). To this end the report made tentative suggestions to either bring in new staff with different experience to the RBD or, more radically, to disband the RBD and place its staff in different departments so that moral and religious issues could permeate all other output. This latter recommendation seems to contradict the reports earlier stated desire to offer religious broadcasting some form of protection, as it is unrealistic to assume that staff in other departments would be infused with a greater sense of moral obligation and interest in religion as a result of this decentralisation. In the end, however, the RBD would remain an autonomous department though the plan for decentralisation would resurface at various times in the future.

Another major development came in response to the changing society of the time. Before the war, Britain was largely a homogeneous Christian country. However, over a relatively short period of time after the war the country became a diverse mix of ethnic groups and religious beliefs. This was specifically due to urbanization, migration, education and mass communication (Berger, 2001). These diverse groups formed communities all over the country and from this diversity the notion of multiculturalism, and the subsequent political agenda, was born in the 1970s. The RBD acknowledged this change and in their aims began to accept that there were interests “other than Christian” (BBC, 1977: 35). In their recommendations to the Annan Committee, CRAC also accepted this change and called for the inclusion of religions beyond the mainstream (ibid.). This development was highlighted in the 1978 Handbook, which

specifically acknowledges other places of worship, including mosques and temples.<sup>20</sup> Although it falls short of fully embracing the ethos of multiculturalism it does show a significant move away from the weight of Christian protectionism, which dogged the RBD throughout its history.

A review of the BBC Handbooks published during the 1970s present a number of interesting developments in the religious output of the decade.<sup>21</sup> Radio continued to play an important part in the BBC religious strategy due to the broad audience for radio and the cost to experiment was significantly less than its visual counterpart. This importance is seen in the number of hours dedicated to covering the topic. For example in 1975 there were only 150 hours of religious programmes on television compared with 450 hours on radio spread across all four BBC radio stations. This is another indication of the importance of the medium of radio to the churches and those with an interest in religious issues. The programmes on radio were mainly discussion programmes and broadcasts of worship which “formed a substantial part of the religious department’s work, especially in radio” (BBC, 1976: 223). Programmes included *Daily Service* (Radio 4), *Morning Service* (Sundays on Radio 4), *People’s Service* (Radio 2) and *Choral Evensong* (Radio 3). *Sunday* was also introduced to Radio 4 in the early 1970s providing religious news and discussion, a programme that continues to be popular today (the role of *Sunday* and its contribution to the radio schedules will be considered in more depth in Chapter Seven). On television the regular strand *Everyman* (1977 - 2005), the BBC’s religious documentary programme, began transmitting. According to Quicke this was “not only different in style, it was ideologically a completely new kind of programme” which was sceptical about the supernatural and the transcendent (Quicke & Quicke, 1993: 44). This was followed by others that took a more neutral and objective tone such as *Archaeology of the Bible Lands* (BBC 2, 1977).

Some important changes took place within the RBD itself in the 1970s. The first was a change to personnel within the department. Up to the 1970s the staff of the RBD were mainly clergy who were trained to produce programmes for the Corporation; when television arrived generally each programme maker specialised in one of the two media (BBC, 1978). During the 1970s the number of laypeople joining the department grew to

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<sup>20</sup> Seaton (2007) describes how mosques and temples had featured in religious programmes from as early as the 1930s on radio, however, up to the late 1970s other faiths were not fully embraced within the system and were “treated like an ornithologist would treat an exotic new species, curious observers, specimen hunters”. (2007: 10m13s)

<sup>21</sup> Up until the end of the 1960s BBC Handbook’s section dedicated to reviewing religious broadcasting was largely unchanged. It detailed the BBC’s continuing aims to avoid undermining Christianity and encourage a greater appreciation amongst audiences.

nearly half of the department's staff by the end of the decade.<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, the BBC viewed this as a positive change. According to the 1976 Handbook on 'Religious Broadcasting':

A decade ago all producers were clergy of the Church of England and other main churches in the country. Though they were talented people many of them suffered the disadvantage of coming into a new profession rather late in life. In 1975 about half are layman and the proportion is still rising. What is more, many of them are appointed at or near the beginning of their working lives so that they learn the craft of programme production from the bottom up. This has already had a marked effect on programmes and should in due course raise professional standards to a very high level. (BBC, 1977: 35-36)

This marks a move away from the churches involvement directly in the BBC and marks an end of Reith's vision of a directly involved clergy. It is unclear whether the churches acknowledged this move at the time. One of their key concerns at the beginning of broadcasting was that the BBC would be unable to deal effectively with theological affairs as it was beyond their capabilities - something the BBC at the time accepted with the inclusion of clergy on their staff. It seems that by the 1970s, the BBC had grown enough in confidence to cut that tie to the church.

Gerald Priestland, a well-respected news journalist and foreign correspondent joined the department in 1977 lending much institutional credibility to the RBD at an important time when many began questioning the need for a specialist department at all. He worked mostly in radio and was part of some of the most important programmes in the department's history including *Priestland's Progress* (Radio 4, 1981) and *The Case Against God* (Radio 4, 1984); the former of which received nearly 20,000 letters from the audience. In his autobiography, *Something Understood*, he recounts how this was "the most rewarding part of my career" (Priestland, 1986: 262) showing that within the Religious Broadcasting Department morale was relatively high.

Issues of decency and taste were also debated throughout the 1970s. Religion became entwined in this debate on taste and morality as concerns about blasphemy were repeatedly raised. However, providing a definition of good taste or decency was extremely subjective and open to multiple interpretations. In January 1973, the BBC issued a report entitled *Taste and Standards in BBC Programmes* and one of the issues it dealt with was 'bad' language and blasphemy, particularly within light entertainment and drama. The report treaded carefully between its responsibility to its audience who

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<sup>22</sup> Until 1962 all of the heads of department at the RBD were ordained ministers of the Church of England (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 26).

may be offended and its creative writers saying that the use of terms like 'bloody', 'bleeding' and 'God' showed a "lack of understanding of the audiences and hence lack of courtesy [...] and [...] conceal[ed] what is a failure on the writer's part" (Smith, 1974: 193). However, it concluded that there were occasions where it was justified, encouraged vigilance where the terms were to be used and if doubts were raised the matter was to be referred to senior management.

The 1970s were a tumultuous time in British society and one in which the Christian traditions found themselves under severe pressure. This social change was also felt by the RBD who had to negotiate a broad religious aim with meeting the needs of a major broadcaster. Furthermore, religion would inexorably become tied up in the identity politics that grew at this time. At times this balancing act was difficult and numerous experiments failed (e.g. *Contact*, a late night counselling programme). At the same time the department both organisational and editorially underwent some of the most significant changes to its role since its inception. Within the Corporation the increased value placed in broadcasting professionalism (not only in the RBD) and in building critical mass (to ensure departments were self-sustaining) was at the centre of these changes.

### **Market reforms**

Developments in technology meant that the arguments relating to wavelength scarcity were increasingly redundant in the beginning of the 1980s. In response the Hunt Report was published in 1982 and this led to the Cable and Broadcasting Act of 1984, which oversaw the selection, and monitoring of the new cable operators. Although this meant more channels, it also heralded an increase in channel narrowcasting in Britain. In theory this would also mean more potential channels for religious output but this actually meant increased marginalisation of religion on terrestrial channels in order to keep pace with the competition. For example, religious output such as *Credo* (ITV, 1977 - 1993) and *Highway* (ITV, 1983 - 1993) was to suffer at the hands of schedulers and increasingly moved out of peak-time transmission.

In 1987, the Conservative government published the Green Paper, *Radio Choices and Opportunities*, which sought to deregulate the existing system of radio. Many felt this would lead to an overall fall in quality programming but according to McNair (1994: 142) this never materialised. This report and other factors (such as technological advances) meant that sound broadcasting was now offered at three levels: national radio, local

radio and community radio. Within the BBC, reform was also underway on its radio services as all four networks moved to FM frequencies which provided better sound quality.

The most common types of religious programmes on radio continued to be worship services and discussion programmes, the former receiving the largest audiences. Examples of these programmes included the *Daily Service*, *Evening Service*, *Choral Evensong*, *Prayer for the Day*, *Soundings* (a topical religious documentary series) and a host of other regular and one-off programmes with pious undertones. Throughout the 1980s religious output was stable on radio at over four hundred hours annually, peaking at 512 hours during the period 1981/1982 (the time of the Pope John Paul II's visit to Britain in 1982).

The 'Religious Broadcasting' section of the BBC's Annual Report (which replaced the publication of the handbook) outlines the department's aims and achievements for the year. In the Annual Report covering 1981 there is a radical overhaul of the aims of the RBD, which is worth reproducing at length:

Firstly, the drive to improve the quality of religious worship in both its traditional and experimental forms - continuing a tradition which goes right back to the origins of the Corporation. Secondly, the attempt to take with greater seriousness the proper concerns and interests of viewers and listeners who are devotees of great historical religions other than Christianity. In honesty, religious broadcasters confess they do not know as much as they ought, nor are they as sensitive as they might be to the claims of other religious traditions, but they are doing their best to remedy the deficiency. Thirdly, the search for religious truth through documentaries and investigative programmes, which combine factual accuracy with rigorous inquiry. Here, the aim has been to produce programmes whose professionalism will stand without apology alongside the output of sister departments such as current affairs, science, music, arts and so on. (BBC, 1982: 22)

This, taken with other entries throughout the 1980s demonstrates a number of things. Quality, as opposed to quantity, continued to be a crucial marker of success for the department; a legacy which continues today and will be considered more fully in Chapter Six. This is despite the fact that 'quality' is an entirely subjective measurement and one, which was to cause much angst for the RBD. Furthermore, multiculturalism grew in prominence within the department. During the 1980s the multicultural discourse, which began in the previous decade, seemed to formalise and today is obvious throughout the BBC. Faiths outside the Christian tradition became significantly more visible during the decade and their treatment is optimistically seen as gaining in "insight and self-confidence and receive much wisdom and understanding

from the leaders of these communities” (BBC Annual Report, 1987: 30); could this be overconfidence on behalf of this anonymous contributor? Finally, the extract above draws on one of the issues which affected the RBD throughout its history - the boundaries between their work and that of other departments in the BBC. This may relate to the underlying assumption that journalists outside the RBD did not have the capabilities and sensibilities to cover contentious religious matters. Overall, this quote demonstrates how the RBD was forced to change its outlook to cater for an audience that was increasingly polarised between the secular and the religious.

According to the RBD, the 1980s was the decade in which religious broadcasting was seen as “coming of age” (BBC, 1982: 28). One of the main successes of the time was the 1985 television drama *Shadowlands*, based on the life of the writer C.S Lewis, and produced by the BBC. Lewis wrote extensively on religion and contributed to many religious programmes on radio. This film tells the story of his spiritual crisis when his wife dies from cancer and was the recipient of over a dozen prestigious awards including the International Emmy for Best Drama and two BAFTA Awards. It was showcased as the epitome of the BBC’s dedication to religious programmes (BBC, 1988: 27).

Furthermore, the RBD were keen to warn about the dangers of alternative styles of religious broadcasting. In 1988 the BBC screened the TV film, *The Vision*. According to Simpson (1989) the film’s message was clear:

[I]t purported to deal with a hypothetical, sinister, religious organisation which would stop at nothing in its attempts to beam the Gospel message into the unsuspecting homes of Europe via satellite [...] Indeed the film’s director - Norman Stone - freely admitted that he intended the production as a “warning blast to the citizens of the UK”. (Simpson, 1989: 44)

The film was a direct criticism of the way in which US televangelists were perceived to work. Its timing was crucial as cable and satellite operators began to enter the market bringing with them a host of potential regulatory troubles.<sup>23</sup> Some of the stakeholders in the area of religious broadcasting were getting uneasy that it might upset the status quo and affect the direction in which religious provision might go (Simpson, 1989). Evangelism and proselytising were definitely not to their taste.

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<sup>23</sup> The first cable channel dedicated to religion in the UK began transmission in 1986 when on Swindon Cable a company called Vision Broadcasting aired 2 hours of religious programmes every week on a Sunday morning (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 59).

Organisationally the RBD continued to persevere, thanks mainly to the success of the programmes mentioned above and the continued success of strands such as *Songs of Praise*, *Everyman* and *Heart of the Matter* (BBC 1, 1978 - 2000). In his thesis Simpson states that:

The Religious Department is not regarded as being inferior in any way within the Corporation because religion is still regarded as a valid human pursuit. (ibid.: 89)

Although this might have been the case when Simpson wrote his thesis, the Religious Broadcasting Department's status was changing within the BBC. The actions and attitudes of the Corporation were increasingly marginalising the department, putting its future in jeopardy, something that will be explored in later chapters.

There were two areas that the Corporation's yearbooks continued to single out for special mention within BBC services. The first was the contribution of the national regions such as Scotland and Wales who, with significantly smaller budgets and closer ties to the traditional church institutions, continued to provide innovative and important programming much of which would be broadcast nationally. The other area to mention was the religious output for the World Service, which retained its reputation for responsible journalism while broadcasting programmes appealing to the varied backgrounds of its listeners. Indeed it was on the World Service where the Christian monopoly was first firmly broken in the 1970s and that showed best practice through the contributions made by all the major faith groups. By the 1980s it had become established practice for the World Service to have a weekly rota of speakers representing the various world faiths (Webb, 1991: 128 - 129).

As the 1980s drew to a close it became more and more apparent that religious broadcasting was facing a difficult battle. The voice of secularism was growing and religion seemed to be in danger of being removed completely from the public sphere. In an increasingly secular society, many questioned the inclusion of religion within the BBC's remit at all. When the secular section of the audience came into contact with religious output its relevance and meaning to their life was not immediately evident. For the RBD this had to be balanced against the loyal and not insignificant numbers of listeners to items such as the *Daily Service*, who were resistant to change. In between this, the BBC saw another group, young people who were both cynical yet interested in spiritualism, and one that the BBC saw as a key demographic for the future. Reaching a consensus for each of these groups would be quite a balancing act, one that the Corporation would not always be able to perform successfully.



## The Broadcasting Act (1990)

The aim of the Broadcasting Act of 1990 was to remove what Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister at the time, saw as “the last bastion of restrictive practices” from British broadcasting. The act would reform the entire structure of the television market. Along with from the creation of a fifth terrestrial channel, the single biggest change was the creation of the Independent Television Commission (ITC) to replace the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). This regulator, which also assumed the responsibilities of the Cable Authority, would rule with a ‘lighter touch’ than its predecessor and would concern itself with the licensing and regulation of satellite and cable channels originating in the UK (Viney, 1993: 254). This move would directly affect religious broadcasting, as the ITC would no longer have a say in scheduling which would now be solely in the hands of the broadcasters. As a result of this move religious programmes became increasingly marginalized by broadcasters in favour of more secular programmes which commanded greater audience share.

There was little formal reference to religious content within the report. Religion was to be a mandatory programme category for the reformed ITV network with a minimum of two hours per week dedicated to its treatment, therefore for the first time religious output was a legislative requirement for the broadcaster. However, the main impact of the act was not on content but new restrictions on the ownership of media outlets by religious broadcasters in the UK. In a move that was largely a reaction against the US model of televangelism (Quick, 1992: 5) religious organisations were prohibited from holding many types of broadcasting licences. It was at the discretion of the regulators to issue certain types of licences including local analogue radio licences and satellite and cable licences for both media. This remit was further extended by the Broadcasting Act (1996) with the inclusion of digital licences to this list of inaccessible media.

Being labelled as ‘persons disqualified’ by the Broadcasting Bill incensed many religious groups (Wilson, 2003). However, the argument about ownership highlighted a division within religious broadcasting itself. On the one hand there were those who wanted non-denominational programming which would be free of proselytising. This group comprised the terrestrial broadcasters, CRAC, the mainline churches, and the IBA. On the other hand, there was a group of independent Christian broadcasters of which United Christian Broadcasting and Vision Broadcasting were the main proponents of a more commercial view of religious output.

The independent Christian broadcasters felt that the White Paper, which preceded the 1990 act, was particularly harsh and directly threatened their commercial future (particularly at a time when independent production was being encouraged in broadcasting). They believed that “legislation designed to increase competition and choice, might also be used to facilitate the removal of two existing British broadcasting stations” (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 97). In response to this they mounted a strong campaign that centred on key areas of debate: ownership, the inclusion of advertising by religious groups, and programming style. In the latter area this group wanted the freedom to “broadcast evangelistic religious programmes without having to be ‘pre-censored’ by the Religious Broadcasting office of the IBA” (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 13). Previously, certain material had been banned by the IBA on the groups of contravening the regulatory codes. The most disputed of these were films made by the Salvation Army that were thought to unduly promote their own work.<sup>24</sup> The independent broadcasters also rejected the advisory role of the Central Religious Advisory Committee and openly questioned its importance to religious broadcasting. The debate between both sides raged from the inception of the act in the 1987 White Paper until its final inclusion in the constitution of 1990.

The independents campaigned vehemently and found the government of the time sympathetic to many of their aims. However, significant power lay with the regulators who drafted the codes. The regulators remained outside government control but their codes were legally enforceable. Essentially this meant that the two authorities (television’s ITC/IBA and the Radio Authority) could interpret the Broadcasting Act in differing ways. In the end:

The three real achievements of the campaign groups in the Lords debates were firstly, the complete removal of the ‘no editorialising’ and ‘no undue prominence’ clauses.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, they had denied CRAC legislative recognition, and thirdly, they had preserved the principles of religious advertising. But they had lost the battle to have the ITC and the Radio Authority lay their codes before parliament; the consequences would show in 1991. (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 191)

In response to the consultation both the Radio Authority and the ITC would draw up their own codes for religious broadcasting. The codes from the Radio Authority were generally well received by both sides of the argument and gave “freedom to religious broadcasters and protection to the listening public” (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 200). The codes asserted that the identity of religious bodies must be clear; groups must not be

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<sup>24</sup> See Simpson (1989) for a further account of the controversies surrounding the programme *Jesus Then and Now*, which Channel 4 refused to show as it “contravened the IBA policy of not broadcasting anything with a “proselytising” intent” (ibid: 72).

<sup>25</sup> These were replaced by ‘responsible’ and ‘improper exploitation’ allowing a more accommodating approach to religious material.

misrepresented; output was to be both fair and accurate; appeals for donations were allowed but these must not permit exploitation of vulnerable persons, recruitment to a specific religion was also permitted; sensitivity must be shown to local listeners, and certain groups, such as the Moonies, were banned from providing content to broadcasters. The ITC concurred with many of the codes; however, crucially appeals for money were banned, recruitment to a particular faith was not permitted on non-specialist channels and unsubstantiated claims, such as those associated with miracles, were also banned. The independent broadcasters had lost their fight for fundraising on air and for direct uncensored evangelistic programming on television. In sum, the codes highlighted that:

The power continued to lie with the IBA religious regulators, who were quick to invoke the opinions of the CRAC in defence of their own position. (Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 165)

Quicke (1992) speculate that this episode drew attention to what they saw as the IBA's "hidden agenda" achieved through its regulatory codes for religion. Despite its reputation as a 'light touch' regulator, in the field of religious broadcasting it adopts an unusually strict regulatory stance. Quicke questions whether as part of this "hidden agenda" CRAC may have been used furtively to gain support for the IBA's agenda demonstrating inconsistencies in the evidence used to support the IBA's decision. However, apart from the obvious ideological divide between the regulators and the independent Christian broadcasters it is unclear what would have been gained by the IBA with such a surreptitious motive.

The ownership of media outlets by religious groups was again reviewed in the early 2000s by Ofcom with submissions from both sides of the argument. The latest review of ownership was published in November 2006. In the television market, religious bodies are still prohibited from holding the licences for Channel 3, Channel 5, public teletext, additional television services and television multiplex services. Religious bodies are also still prohibited from holding licences to provide national analogue radio services and multiplex services. The arguments for both these restriction relate to the fact that:

[S]pectrum in these areas is severely limited and most of the services in question have significant influence. In these circumstances it would not be appropriate for these services to be controlled by religious bodies given the public interest concerns which might arise. (Ofcom, 2006)

Other television and radio licences can be held by religious bodies at Ofcom's discretion. By 2006 ten licences to provide satellite/cable television services have been awarded to religious bodies (ibid.).

The Broadcasting Act (1990) brought major changes to the media ecology. It heralded a new era of broadcasting with greater access for independent broadcasters, although this did not apply to all broadcasters as this section demonstrates. Despite moves from certain groups to reinvigorate television with the Christian faith the tide of multiculturalism was too strong. Religious broadcasting on the national broadcasters would be increasingly characterised by “a liberal, dispassionate and journalistic approach” (Wolfe, 1992 cited Quicke & Quicke, 1992: 2) in which talks were more *about* religion than *proclaiming* it. For many this was not acceptable and as the next debate under consideration shows, some people would publicly vocalise their dissatisfaction with this style of religious output.

### Public discord

The quantity and quality of religious broadcasting was to hit the headlines in 1999 when the General Synod, the national assembly of the Church of England tabled a Private Member’s Motion from Nigel Holmes. Holmes, a former producer with BBC Local Radio, argued that the BBC had neglected its public service commitment to religious broadcasting. In its goal to attract audiences the BBC had significantly decreased religious output, relegated existing programmes to the ‘graveyard spaces’ and had adopted a ‘trivial’ approach to programmes thus decreasing the BBC’s professional values for television production. Holmes (2000) concluded that within the religious output of the BBC there was a deep “spiritual deficit” (Holmes, 2000: 3) reiterating some of the arguments that had circulated at the time of the Annan report (1977).

In his book, *Losing Faith in the BBC*, he outlines his arguments using figures from the BBC own reports, audits and documents:

The key fact to emerge was that whilst the total output of BBC 1 and BBC 2 combined had increased by a half within the span of ten years, the hours devoted to religious broadcasting had fallen by one-third. That highlighted the scale of the decline which could not be ignored; similarly, the network religious radio figure was down by an unprecedented 15 per cent between 1997/98 and 1998/99. (ibid.: xii)

He directs his criticisms at the BBC’s Religious Broadcasting Department and its strategy contained in the 1999 report *BBC Religion: Into the Third Millennium*. His criticisms centre on the move away from evangelistic faith:

The tenor of the document is that there must be marked change from proclaiming faith first and foremost from a Christian perspective [...] The present workforce is criticized for producing programmes with a dull image, being too Christian, establishment and middle class and somewhat demoralised and battered. (ibid.: 39)

Again criticising the professionalism of the BBC in relation to religion he indignantly states that “it cannot be long until Christian worship programmes are being produced by non-Christians” (Holmes, 2000: 40). While the RBD receives the brunt of Holmes’s criticism, it also garners some of his sympathies. He hints at an internal atmosphere characterised by distrust between management and staff, and fear for the future neither of which are conducive to effective programme provision.

Holmes singles out BBC Radio for the quality and range of its output. In particular he praises the provision of worship programmes and underscores the importance of radio to religious output. However, he also highlights some of the inconsistencies in the radio strategy which in 1996 explicitly sought to target religious output for young people but which never materialised. In the end the Synod voted unanimously in favour of supporting Holmes critique but tempered the tone of their response. They issued an amended motion that would encourage, as oppose to chastise, the Corporation.

However, the debate at the Synod would spark a national debate in the newspapers and other media on the shape of religious broadcasting and public service commitments more generally.<sup>26</sup> Within these Holmes had support from many quarters and had picked up on a general tone of disgruntlement with religious output. For example:

The good news is that all broadcasters are trying to broaden the genre’s appeal and - to some extent - cope with a multicultural society. But the bad news is that they limit themselves to lip-service by continuing to screen religious programmes in off-peak hours, with tiny budgets to match. (Brown, 1999)

Furthermore, the BBC’s commitment to the public interest also came under fire:

The saddest thing about the slow demise of BBC religious affairs is that it trumpets in microcosm the fact that the intellectual rot at the heart of the BBC has not yet stopped. Here we can see all of the weaknesses that have beset the Corporation of late. (Orr, 2000)

The reports in the newspapers also suggested that institutionally the RBD was facing its own troubles:

The brightest and the best tend to get out of the religious department as soon as they can. They soon realise that they are working in a protected, subsidised environment where the most they can hope for from their colleagues is polite tolerance. So they acquire their production skills, earn a few screen credits and head for television mainstream. (Twisk, 1999)

[T]he BBC’s Head of Religious Broadcasting [Ernest Rea] has to defend publicly that which he may feel privately to be indefensible. [...] He is quite

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of the media coverage and commentary, see Holmes (2000), specifically ‘Appendix A: What the Papers Say’.

clearly telling his BBC bosses [...] That they are out of touch with the spiritual life of Britain [...] Religious broadcasting has to broaden its agenda and have a larger place in the country's agenda. (Bolton, 1999)

This was a difficult time for religious broadcasting and its producers as the criticisms were no longer just about the religious institutions but about the professionalism of religious broadcasting. In its history the department had never taken such intense criticism. Previous disapprovals had been voiced about particular programmes or policies (such as the exclusion of non-Christian faiths and the Sunday programming policy). Now all aspects were coming under fire.

The BBC responded in 2000 with the announcement that the Religious Broadcasting Department, which had moved to Manchester in 1994 (although scheduling, commissioning and budgetary power remained in London), would be renamed the Department of Religion and Ethics. It would have the aim of developing "a cross-media editorial strategy" (BBC staff newspaper *Ariel*, 2000 cited Holmes, 2000: 69). In January of the following year Ernest Rea resigned his post as head of religion and ethics and voiced his concerns at the future of religious programming. He openly blamed the commissioning editors for their role in its failures, saying "religion is rarely a priority in the minds of the movers and shakers who commission the programmes and dole out the money to make them" (Rea, 2001) accusing those responsible for television of "dancing to a secular agenda" (ibid.). The appointment of his replacement, Alan Bookbinder a man with no discernable religious faith, again put religious broadcasting on the agenda of the media (Combe, 2001; Lister, 2001). Holmes prediction that "it cannot be long until Christian worship programmes are being produced by non-Christians" had not only come true but now the whole of the BBC's in-house production was in the hands of an agnostic.

In January 2005 there was a further controversial episode in the history of religious broadcasting, but this one was outside the remit of the Religious Broadcasting Department, when BBC 2 controllers and commissioners took the decision to screen the controversial musical, *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. Based on the US television show, *Jerry Springer*, the opera is a British musical which at the time of its screening had been playing in London theatres for three years. It features images of Jesus, Mary and God as guests on Springer's TV show and is laden with sexual references and profanities. Prior to its television screening, the BBC received 55,000 complaints and a further 8,000 after its broadcast. Street protests outside many BBC offices also took place before and during the broadcast (Barnes, 2005: 3; BBC, 2005(a); Morgan & Bourne, 2005: 13). Protests came from TV lobby group Mediawatch-UK which claimed, "the show breached

the Corporation's guidelines on respecting religious sensibilities" (ibid.) and Christian Voice who led the campaign and would later bring an unsuccessful private blasphemy prosecution against the BBC.<sup>27</sup>

The episode relating to *Jerry Springer: The Opera* demonstrates that the BBC was no longer afraid of offending Christian sensibilities and that religious beliefs were definitely not beyond rebuke or satire - a considerable change from its earlier stand.<sup>28</sup> However, we should be cautious in arguing that the BBC were totally open to offending Christian audiences as the previous year BBC 3 had taken the step of not transmitting a cartoon it had commissioned on characters in the Vatican over concerns it would offend Catholics. The channel's controller said the comic impact of *Popetown* did "not outweigh the potential offence it will cause" (BBC, 2004(a)) showing that free speech had its limits in the BBC's approach to religion. Significantly in both decisions there was no extensive consultation with its increasingly overlooked advisory group, the Central Religious Advisory Committee.

In the last number of years reaction to the BBC efforts have been mixed. For some it appears that the BBC have taken notice of their critics and amended previous failings. The change has been acknowledged both inside and outside the BBC. Adam Kemp, commissioning editor for religion at the BBC is reported as saying "you're seeing the stirrings of a renaissance in religious broadcasting" (Turner, 2006), while Hudson (2006) speculates that "2005 might just turn out to have been the year when religious broadcasting finally came out of its dusty, dated cloisters and got back into the mainstream". This new style of programming is characterised by a desire to "make faith entertaining, progressive and accessible" (Turner, 2006). These articles report that the renaissance is supported by a new breed of commissioning editors:

[W]ho actually get it. They realise that religion in all its aspects, not just fundamentalism, is a source of good, powerful stories - good programme material. (Watts, 2007)

Furthermore, there is perceived to be a greater imagination amongst programme makers who have a plethora of questions to address and issues to understand from the social aspects of religion to the effects of natural catastrophes:

[T]hat producers have started rolling out an increasingly wide range of programmes to address those questions is partly, I'm sure, out of a genuine

<sup>27</sup> Later in the year judicial proceedings brought by The Christian Institute against the BBC for this broadcast were also rejected (BBC, 2005(b)).

<sup>28</sup> Though Seaton (2007) advises that the BBC did redo their media literacy labels to warn people about the provocative content and the introductory programme which preceded the opera was re-recorded to include a discussion of the religious issues raised by transmitting the performance.

belief that contextualisation of TV news is an important part of their remit.  
(Hudson, 2006)

On the other hand many say that even more could be done and Christmas and Easter schedules are particularly contentious times because of the dearth of overtly Christian programmes shown at that time (Bolton, 2006; Brown, 2005).

### **Conclusion: religion on BBC Radio and Television**

The introduction of television to Britain would coincide with the repositioning of religion within the public sphere. The role that the media played in this is unclear. While the quantity of religious output on television fell considerably, radio continued to thrive offering a broader mix of programming. However, together both media changed the way in which religion would be perceived. From now on debates on the place of religion in society and the challenges faced by the churches would be a regular feature of broadcasting.

As this history has described, this change in the terms of the debate had an obvious effect on the way in which religious broadcasting developed. Some of these effects include a major revision of the aims of religious programmes, the extension of the output to accommodate new interests and beliefs systems, the use of conventions from other genres to create new formats and styles, and finally, an even greater concern with delivering quality programming. Religious broadcasting would continue but it would have to make accommodations relating to its content and access. If there was a move to popular theology in early history then there was now a move to popular spiritualism. These changes did not go unnoticed and throughout the history of the programming, protesters and detractors have been vocal.

Social developments were one reason why the output developed in such a way, but another reason lies with the principles of PSB that were instilled in national broadcasting from its early days. If comparisons are drawn with other broadcasting contexts it is clear that the way religious broadcasting developed in the UK was not inevitable. For example, in the US there was a different approach to religious broadcasting and it developed in its own distinctive way. In the early days of the US system, religious output was constructed as something potentially controversial and largely outside the remit of the commercially focused broadcasters. As Hoover and Wagner (1997) describe, the result was that religion, where it was found, was explored in very general spiritual terms; faith groups were the main purveyors of programmes as



broadcasters deferred responsibility (and thus accountability) to these; and finally it was seen solely as the preserve of public service rather than having the entertainment potential or newsworthiness that these broadcasters demanded. The cumulative effect was that religious programming in the US system was quickly marginalised in schedules and overlooked for resources. The lack of protectionism afforded to it meant that from the early days of national broadcasting in the US, religion on the mainstream channels was nearly invisible.

In contrast, at the same time in the UK a number of measures were taken to protect the genre. These included greater restrictions on broadcast license holders, the introduction of mandatory quotas on broadcasters for the provision of religious programmes and the continuation of the God Slot until competition in the 1990s made this unique feature of UK broadcasting no longer tenable. The effect of this protectionism was mixed. While it has prolonged the life of the output on radio and to a lesser extent on television, this sanctuary from competition meant that the genre has been increasingly marginalised (though less quickly than in the US model) within the strategic decisions of the broadcasters, including the BBC, and overall it has struggled to appeal to mainstream audiences. More recently there has been a move against this artificial protection and the ghettoisation it affords as religion fights for its continued existence in the broadcasting ecology. This will be explored later in this thesis.

Throughout this narrative the Religious Broadcasting Department, and its rebranded Department of Religion and Ethics, has been at the centre negotiating the various organisational strategies and internal culture which surround it while at the same time responding to outside influences. Over the decades it has developed its own values and its own world-views that have originated from the practices and relationship it has created and sustained. It faces its own challenges in today's contemporary broadcasting environment and so deserves closer scrutiny. This is where the next chapter will pick up.

## Part III: The Contemporary Production Context

This part of the thesis draws on some of the issues raised by the history and provides a contemporary view of the challenges facing those involved with religious output at the BBC. Interviews, informal observation studies and a review of the strategic decisions made by the BBC form the core of this analysis. In order to make sense of the vast material gathered and to provide a logical narrative for the reader, the chapters are arranged thematically and consider how religious production functions within the BBC's organisational culture.

Culture is “to an organisation as character is an individual”, knitting an institution together (Schein, 2004: 212). It is a product of its history, environment, people and mission. It should be clear from the previous chapters that the BBC's own organisational culture as seen in its values and expectations comes to bear on the actions of its employees. Chapter One of this thesis outlined some of the main features of the organisational culture of the BBC, heavily influenced by the ideals of its early leader, and which is characterised by its obligation to the public interest achieved through high production values. But as with any organisational worldview it can change over time and as outlined earlier the BBC is showing signs of a significant shift towards enterprise and commercialism; thus its culture is adjusting (Born, 2002; Born, 2004; Spangenberg, 1997).

However, the BBC is not a homogenous culture and each unit within the organisation will also have its own character. As the DRE is organised around the theme of religion, which has its own conventions and style, it can be seen to constitute a professional subculture. Bloor & Dawson (1994: 280) use the term “professional subculture” to show how some groups within the organisation are arranged with a specific professionalism in mind and through the history, values and practices they share, form their own subculture (pp. 281-283). The chapters that follow this introduction provide a closer analysis of the way the Corporation's evolving culture is shaping the work of those in the “private world” (Tunstall, 1993) of religion.

Chapter Five relates specifically to the Department of Religion and Ethics as a semi-autonomous unit within the BBC and picks up on the theme of *change* that was evident throughout the history. It focuses on the relationship between various levels of the Corporation and examines the diverging aims of the religious department from that of senior management. It describes a number of times where this relationship has become

strained but singles out the relocation of the department to Manchester as most emblematic of the tension. The chapter concludes by arguing that according to the interviewees the BBC's own institutional culture is one of the key threats to the continued viability of the Department of Religion and Ethics and the provision of religious programmes more generally.

The next chapter examines the responses of all producers (in-house and independents) to the marginalisation of religion within the BBC's focus. Despite their role in fulfilling the BBC's commitment to the public interest the rhetoric of quality, professionalism and mainstreaming forms their main strategy for legitimising the output. This sits within a discourse of professionalism evident in the wider broadcasting ecology which has emerged in response to greater commercial pressures. This chapter also highlights a call from many of those interviewed for an in-house specialist department to continue producing output in this area.

Entitled *Producing Religion*, Chapter Seven moves from a discursive view to a practical view and examines the current output. It begins by discussing the aims of in-house producers, independents and commissioning editors with regards religious programmes. These aims are to explore the socio-political debates around religion and the human engagement with faith and spiritual belief. The chapter then moves to examine the current style of religious programmes on radio and television and questions whether these form a sustainable strategy for religious broadcasting.

This final chapter combines many of the factors affecting production discussed in the previous sections of this thesis and examines their contribution to wider debates in media studies. It is structured around three specific themes: the evolving relationship between PSB and religion, the impact of the digital landscape on programme provision and, finally, the dynamics of supply. In this final theme speculation is on the future of the Department of Religion and Ethics at the BBC and on the prospects for in-house production more generally at the Corporation.

## Chapter Five: Challenges from Within the BBC

The previous chapter provided a historical overview of how the Department of Religion and Ethics (DRE) managed its integration within the BBC and reacted to changes in its external environment. This chapter focuses on the department's response to recent developments and how internal politics, strategies and overall culture have impinged on the workings of this professional subculture. As the study of organisational culture "is closely bound to the study of organisational conflict" (Bloor & Dawson, 1994: 281; Schein, 2004: xi) this research will consider two key sites of tension. The first is the evolving relationship between BBC management and the department and the second, related to this, is the relocation in 1994 of the department to Manchester. This chapter concludes by arguing that according to the interviewees, one of the most significant threats faced by the department is actually coming from within the BBC's own institutional culture.

### **BBC management and religion: killing it softly?**

Both the BBC and the Department of Religion and Ethics have faced, and are continuing to face, a period of unprecedented change in the current broadcasting environment. In the early history of religious broadcasting the relationship between the DRE and management was relatively close, especially in the very first stages when it was the Directors General who were championing the inclusion of religion in the BBC's output. As society became more secularised so did the attitudes of many senior BBC managers and from the 1970s onwards cracks began to appear in the relationship. Certain decisions, like those in relation to decentralisation, underlined that the department and its executives were no longer always in accord. This section builds on the general overview provided by the historical analysis and examines how and why the relationship has shifted from the point of view of those involved in generating religious output. It then focuses on ways in which this uneasy relationship spills over into the everyday working environment, particularly around debates about the style of output and the choice of head of department.

Tunstall (1993) writes about the baronial power exercised within the television system by those in senior management positions. He argues that strategic power is increasingly being placed in the hands of a few key individuals and that the communication between this end of the system and the programme makers is imperfect, "largely defeated by hierarchy, the sheer bulk of material and the scarcity of time in which to consider it" (1993: 199). It was clear over the course of this research that the interviewees were

very aware of the strategic power wielded over them by programme barons such as controllers, commissioners, managers and trustees and that imperfect communication and mismatched expectations were at the heart of an ongoing tension.

One reason posited for this imperfect communication was that many of those interviewed felt that controllers, commissioners, managers and trustees came from a narrow social grouping. One respondent lamented this to be “liberal left of centre, *Guardian* readers, not religious who are quite young relative to the rest of the population” (Producer/Presenter, 2007) with similar pictures drawn in other interviews. The effect of this exclusivity was that religion as an important theme was largely dismissed in the upper levels of the BBC hierarchy leading to what on one occasion was emotively termed a “failure of imagination” (Producer/Presenter, 2007) amongst management. The interviewees claimed that this indifference from management towards religion is acutely evident in the lack of formal strategy for religion:

[I]f you were to ask for example what is the role of religion on BBC 1, ask the controller, he would tell you *Songs of Praise*, he wouldn't tell you anything else ... What's the role of religion on BBC 2, I don't know, and no one else does. What's the role on BBC 3? What's the role on BBC 4? To take the odd documentary particularly if they have an extreme title but there is no strategy. If you ask what is the editorial strategy for religion and ethics on 1, 2, 3, and 4? There is none, there is none that is published. (Producer/Presenter, 2007)

This lack of a publicised plan for religion is apparent within BBC publications and reports and the respondents felt this limited the genre's long-term strategic development especially if it wanted to attract new talent.<sup>29</sup> However, the commissioning editor in this area for television refuted claims that there was no cohesive strategy and listed a number of areas where he was keen to commission content. Therefore, it seems that there is more a failure to communicate a clear and consistent plan than a lack of a strategic direction altogether.

For many of the respondents, as equally frustrating as not having a discernable strategy was their experiences within the daily internal culture of the BBC. Management were perceived as not taking religion seriously and many of those interviewed believed that staff throughout the Corporation were allowed to be ignorant of the complexities of faith traditions and the origins of religious conflict. While this indifference was tolerated for religion they argued that for other subjects this would be unacceptable. They recounted a number of experiences where this was evident to them:

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<sup>29</sup> The implications of a lack of publicised strategy will be explored in more depth in Chapter Seven which maps the current output and considers whether there is a cohesive strategy for religious broadcasting on BBC television and radio.

This was disputed you see by other departments who said “Everybody knows about religion” and it’s a fascinating thing this. In things like the Programme Review Boards where the heads of various departments meet every week to talk about programmes, if you said to them “Well, anybody knows about science, you don’t have to have a degree in science”, “Everybody knows about politics”, there would be outrage. This [religion] is a specialism. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

When I used to go to Radio 3 Talks meetings I would be constantly amazed at how people could be utterly philistine and ignorant about religion, whereas if I exhibited the same ignorance or philistine approach to say Shakespeare, I would be regarded as a heathen stroke peasant. And yet in that world its perfectly acceptable [...] Being ignorant about religion would not count in the same way as being ignorant about the semiotics of *Coronation Street* or having a vague sense of who is in the government. One of the big changes that has happened in television in general, is that it has become much more self-referential. When I started the people you would find around the review board table ... they had a life, they went to the theatre, they read, they went to concerts, they made music. Their whole life was not centred around the medium. These days, I fear that the whole thing is much more self-referential and inward looking. (Former Head of Religious Television, 2007)

This demonstrates some of the everyday experiences of producers in relation to their peers’ dismissive attitude about religion as a specialist subject. They claim that it was not always like this and is symptomatic of a change in the wider occupational values of producers. It was unclear whether repeating the arguments for the importance of the subject had any effect on the attitudes of their colleagues.

Significantly, both of the experiences outlined take place in meetings such as Programme Review Boards.<sup>30</sup> Born calls these meetings “core rituals of unification” (2004: 87) as it is through rituals such as the strategy meetings and performance reviews described above, that the senior management seek to integrate the norms and judgements of producers and in-house staff into the overall mission of the Corporation. As these experiences suggest, if it is accepted that the BBC, while externally committed to religious output does little internally to support it, then it is not surprising that resentment has developed amongst religious producers. If through rituals like these, management get their view of religion accepted as legitimate and this becomes part of the assumptions which structure organizational life, it means few other departments are likely to see religion as an important avenue for production. In this case if religion is not seen as significant or needing specialist knowledge then it affects whether the subject and the department have a future. It also eliminates support for the department coming from other areas and thus raises the question of who will fight for

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<sup>30</sup> The Programme Review Board assess various programmes that had been broadcast on the BBC during the previous seven days. It is attended by senior BBC executives and some production staff.

and champion religion. This sentiment is expressed by one of the interviewees when he says:

There is some vague feeling that religion should exist but ... they know it exists but there is no interest, no one championing religious broadcasting.  
(Freelance Producer, 2007)

While it may seem idealistic to expect someone to champion the genre, the respondents gave numerous examples of how this senior level support played out at crucial moments for the department. For instance, Colin Morris, former head of the Religious Broadcasting Department, told the story of how both current affairs programmes, *Heart of the Matter* and *Everyman*, were introduced and subsequently axed some years later. He attributed the creation (against huge resistance) and their success (both critical and commercial) to the support of Bill Cotton (then controller of BBC 1) and how once he left this post none of his successors were supportive, cutting budgets and moving it to off-peak times in the schedule thus making it unsustainable in the longer term. This did not mean that current senior staff were completely unsupportive of all risky projects. *Manchester Passion* (BBC 3, 2006), a live broadcast of the passion story was given unequivocal support by the commissioning editor when interviewed and could be seen as equally risky.<sup>31</sup> Although this was not acknowledged by many of the interviewees, critics pointed out: “It’s [*Manchester Passion*] a logistical nightmare, a potential minefield and great fun - just the kind of thing BBC should be doing” (Hattenstone, 2006). Overall, the message from the interviews was clear; risky programmes need firm senior support to get off the ground and to stay on air.

However, despite the fact that the majority of interviewees judged senior staff unsupportive there was a clear feeling that at the current time the BBC would not, or more accurately could not, cut the in-house production unit from the Corporation’s structure. There were two reasons for this. The first being that with the current centrality of religious issues in public debate a move such as cutting the DRE could be seen by critics as the BBC renegeing on its commitments to the public interest. The timing of this move would be crucial as it looks to secure its public funding. The second reason for not removing religion completely, according to the interviewees, was that a move like this would not be “politically expedient” for the Corporation:

Interviewee: Quite a lot of them [commissioners and controllers] would have got rid of it.

Researcher: Why didn’t they?

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<sup>31</sup> *Manchester Passion* was a play of the last hours of Jesus, retold using a backdrop of contemporary and orchestral music. The free event took place on the streets of Manchester, and aired live on BBC 3 on Good Friday, 2006. A similar event in Liverpool, staging the Nativity of Jesus was shown on the BBC during Christmas 2007.

Interviewee: It wasn't politically expedient as I'm sure it still isn't. If you look at Mark Thompson who happens to be Catholic and he has this big issue [Charter Renewal] the last thing he is interested in is carrying out a vendetta against a religious department [...] Because it's not politically expedient to kill it, just neuter it if you like rather than kill it. Just make it ineffectual. (Freelance Producer, 2007)

This quote suggests that the BBC is reluctant to remove religion because of the public repercussions of this move both within and outside the Corporation. It remains cautious as a result of previous public clashes with groups such as the General Synod. The BBC management still regard religious groups as having a certain level of influence and such a move would mobilise supporters in a battle the BBC does not currently want to have. Both of these reasons show the BBC as mindful of the public expectations of its role, particularly its social responsibilities. Religion still forms a vital part of its PSB commitments and has a symbolic value particularly at times when the BBC needs to demonstrate a tangible commitment to the public interest. However, neither of these are compelling reasons in the long-term and as the quote also suggests, there are other ways management can exercise their power to influence the future strategy of the department in less abrupt ways than removing it completely. This can be clearly seen, for instance, in the relocation of the unit to Manchester which weakened its position and, as this interviewee points out, in their attempts to "starve" the department of regular commissions - the life source of any production unit<sup>32</sup>:

Because nobody is going to kill it. Nobody at top level ... the commissioning editors can't kill it, they can starve it [...] Nobody has to make a decision about whether you actually get rid of the department and get rid of these people. I don't think anybody is prepared to, currently anyway, prepared to make that decision ... because of how it would be perceived. (Former Head of Religious Television, 2007)

Therefore, this interviewee insists that by not supporting it internally and not taking it seriously at a senior level they are equally killing the department, but over a longer period of time.

### **The fight for religion**

In such conditions of apparent unrest within the BBC's organisational structure, the head of department is an important link (and negotiator) between top management, which takes a broad, strategic perspective, and ground-level workers (e.g. producers and technical staff), who are the most informed about the everyday challenges within their roles. From the discussion above, as the respondents felt it unlikely that many of the senior management are 'fighting for religion', attention turned to the head of

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<sup>32</sup> Chapter Six looks at the dynamics of commissioning more closely.



religion and ethics. The interviewees placed even more strategic importance in this position and saw it as a role that takes on this crucial responsibility within the Corporation:

I think that's why the position of head of religion and ethics is so important because there has to be a relationship between him or her and the channel controllers and commissioners. A position of trust and that's what Michael Wakelin has to work on at the moment. (Former Head of DRE, 2008)

Researcher: What was your objective when you started as head of department?

Interviewee: It was what my predecessor [had] also done; just what heads of Department do really: fighting for resources, fighting for space, fighting for staff. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

As the latter quote suggests through the use of "fight" to describe his activities, the role is strategically important for the department in order to jostle for resources within the BBC production hierarchy and in order to retain its status for production. Furthermore, the position of head of department has been imbued with even greater importance since the restructuring which accompanied the department's relocation to Manchester. As part of the change the position of Head of Religious Programmes, Television was removed and that means today there is no dedicated person who assumes responsibility for overseeing the department's television strategy, managing the production plans and building the necessary contacts. This means responsibility falls to the head of the department and is assisted through various executive producers and heads of development.

When discussing the role of the head of department a specific tension was evident in the selection of certain individuals to fill this role by management. Most of those questioned in this study did have a religious faith and argued that this allowed them to have a better understanding of the issues. Therefore, many felt that a certain passion for religious themes was needed to fight the corner of the department. This did not have to mean following a specific religious denomination but did have to go beyond good programme-making skills to include passion for the subject matter. Parallels were drawn with other departments to demonstrate that the Department of Religion and Ethics was not a special case:

[I]t is a problem because you wouldn't have someone fighting for Natural History who didn't have watery eyes at a sunset over the Serengeti. You got to be excited about the subject. (Head of DRE, 2007)

Similar statements were made by others in relation to producing sports and music programmes. This need for passion within a producer, and most importantly within the head of department, was articulated again and again. As this respondent says:

You expect people running their department (it's true in science), is a passion for the subject. To be aware of the latest developments [...] You want them to have a passion for the subject matter as well as a realist and a good relationship with the controllers and commissioners who are going to decide what goes on their network. (Presenter/Producer, 2007)

However, the respondents claimed management have not always shared this view of the need for a passionate advocate of the subject of religion and what it represents and so problems have arisen with their choice of head of religion and ethics.

This was most firmly displayed in the interviews over the appointment of Alan Bookbinder as head of department in 2001. Bookbinder was widely seen as a very good programme maker but had little direct involvement with the department prior to his promotion. More importantly, he was the first ever agnostic head of religious broadcasting at the BBC (although he was widely labelled an atheist by the press, many of the respondents doubted the truth of this). His appointment came as a surprise to many in the BBC and caused a ripple of discontent amongst religious observers outside the Corporation (Combe, 2001; Lister, 2001).

Bookbinder's appointment would reveal a key site of tension between the BBC's executive who favoured a more managerial approach, and the department who wanted a more fervent leader demonstrating some of the tensions between the network barons and programme staff. The BBC appeared to appoint Bookbinder with the hope of bringing a greater strategic dimension to the role using his background in factual production as a catalyst for fresh approaches to the material. On describing his briefing from BBC management when he took on the role, it is clear that the focus was on producing quality television rather than any religious objective:

[T]he BBC was looking for someone they hoped could revitalize the television side. Ernie [his predecessor, the Reverend Ernie Rea] was a radio specialist, built up a very successful radio portfolio but had struggled with television. The BBC was looking for someone who had a strong background in factual television [...] The expertise of religion was already there in the department they didn't need someone to bring that [...] I mean creative renewal was the phrase that was used at the time.

As demonstrated in this quote there was no prerequisite for religious knowledge although those in the department felt they needed someone with specialist religious experience. This was described by one colleague as follows:

Alan was very much a programme man, he wasn't a political man, he wasn't an ecclesiastical politician [...] you do need some knowledge of how things like General Synods work and all the rest of it. Because very often it's from them that the raw material comes for your programmes. This is not critical of Alan in any sense. Alan was a very experienced programme maker but I

think he would be the first one to say that he didn't have very much interest in all the ecclesiastical stuff, which one would agree; it can be incredibly tedious. But never the less somebody has got to keep an eye on it because it's from these areas that the BBC management get grief. If they get grief they are going to pass it on. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

However, Bookbinder's main failing according to the interviewees was he lacked the enthusiasm and resilience which was needed when negotiating with commissioning editors - a criticism the interviewees directly attributed to his agnosticism. Many felt that he accepted rejection too easily and that if he had passion for the subject he would not have taken no for an answer or found ways to get around their rejections:

Alan brought with him a management culture which was good ... people liked Alan [...] none of us had ever heard of him [...] No passion, no enthusiasm and I'm now facing the same sort of battles that Alan had and whereas with me my hackles raise and I say "You're not going to get away with that" or they are throwing down ghastly decisions so I'm challenging [...] Alan would kind of come back and say "Well they have decided this and it's tough". Actually bollocks to that. Religion is a really important subject. (Head of DRE, 2007)

Indeed Bookbinder himself implied this during his interview, saying:

Television was seen to be in something of a crisis [...] I couldn't in my time there, I couldn't on the whole persuade the commissioners to send the high profile work our way.

In 2006, Bookbinder left his post as head of department and also the BBC. His replacement came from within the department as the Series Producer for *Songs of Praise*, Michael Wakelin, took over. This received less coverage in the press than the appointment of his predecessor and where it was covered the tone was much less hostile. Furthermore, in the BBC's press release regarding the promotion, Keith Scholey, BBC Controller of Factual Production, is quoted as saying:

Michael has a huge amount of knowledge and passion for the subject which, as head of religion & ethics, will make him a fantastic advocate, not only for the religion production base but also for the BBC as a whole. (BBC, 2006(a))

Here, passion for the subject is seen as a distinctive bonus in Wakelin's appointment by this controller. Wakelin also appears to have more support amongst the interviewees where his background in the department and undoubted interest in the topic adds greater legitimacy to his appointment. However, he is seen as less politically powerful within the Corporation as he has largely stayed within the remit of the department; a crucial reason why Bookbinder's appointment should perhaps be re-evaluated more objectively as his background in factual programming suggests he may have had more contact (and perhaps influence) with the barons. For some Wakelin's appointment was seen as a limitation as the department tried to secure more internal support:

At which point they have now appointed someone from inside. Again a nice guy but at least Alan knew people in London, Michael is a lovely man, doesn't know anybody, he's got the passion for it, but he has no money and he doesn't have the contacts and he is on a mission impossible. (Producer/Presenter, 2007)

In all departments, the head of department plays a key role in negotiating the daily life of the unit while also strategically planning for the future. Likewise, in the Department of Religion and Ethics this role is vital. However, as the discussions of the previous appointments to the role suggest, there is a gap in expectations between the network barons who in making the appointment take a more strategic approach and the demands of the department staff who want a more fervent leader.

The previous sections demonstrate the huge change that has occurred over the recent history of the genre in relation to the way it is managed and integrated into the BBC organisational culture. Chapters Three and Four showed that there was a largely shared vision for religion between management and the department throughout the early history of the output. This meant the department *and* the output were given some protection within the system. By the 1970s and the increased reconciliation of public and commercial interests both department and output had to prove their worth internally and externally and argue for their continued legitimacy in the broadcasting system - something which has not been an easy fight.

The interviewees clearly felt that a lack of effective leadership outside of the department has sidelined religion within the focus of the BBC and exacerbated what they see as a decline in influence, prestige and resources of the Department of Religion and Ethics. On the other hand the BBC argues that they still support the department and paradoxically that measures such as the introduction of the independent sector have revived the genre as "it raises everybody's game" (Commissioning Editor for Religion, 2008).

The experiences highlighted here show how in the "private world" of the genre there is a need to have senior decision-makers in this occupational circle to lend support and in the case of religion there appears to be very few. As a result today, an ideological distance seems to have developed between the department and the centre of the BBC. This manifests itself in the feelings of those around the department that they are being let down. Nowhere was this ill-feeling most evident than in the BBC's handling of the decentralisation of the department to Manchester.

## The politics of place

It was the most obvious sign to date that BBC management and the Department of Religion and Ethics were not in accord when, in 1994 as part of John Birt's decentralisation plan, the Department of Religion and Ethics was moved from its base in London to the offices of BBC Manchester. Significantly scheduling, commissioning and budgetary power would remain in London. This was the biggest upheaval to the department in its history and the most significant challenge to its future. This section discusses the reasons for this decentralisation, how this move was perceived at the time and whether it had an adverse effect on the workings of the department. It also considers the long-term effect of that move as it continues to shape the work of the religion and ethics staff in Manchester.

The renewal of the BBC's Charter is always a difficult time for the Corporation. Directors General must legitimise their strategy, negotiate their terms and concessions must undoubtedly be made. This was the case in anticipation of the 1996 Charter Renewal. Critics of the BBC had branded it elitist and out of touch with the majority of licence fee payers (Porter, 1995(a); Porter, 1995(b)). The Corporation had to do something, which would quash these claims and demonstrate its economic activity outside London, thus hopefully getting support from regional MPs as the Charter passed through the House of Commons. The Director General at the time, John Birt, seized upon the term "proportionality" (Porter, 1995 (b)) to illustrate his plans for increasing the BBC's financial reach across the UK. He proposed that the BBC would commit itself to spending one-third of its programme budgets outside London using either regional in-house centres (for example BBC Scotland or BBC Manchester) or local independent production companies. The main beneficiaries of this plan would be the regional and national production centres in Manchester, Bristol, Glasgow and Birmingham, creating what Birt hoped would be "centres of excellence", producing not just more regional programming but network programmes too (Harvey & Robins, 1994: 48). According to Tremayne (1995), of these cities Manchester would be the primary beneficiary of this additional commissioning money "thanks to some astute canvassing by northern MPs" (1995: 35-37). However, it would not end at this and the idea of decentralising part of the BBC itself was mooted. Over time the calls for decentralisation grew until eventually the BBC made the commitment to move some of its production units out of London. Crucially, however, editorial decisions were still to be made at the centre.

Following announcement of the plans for decentralisation rumours began as to which departments would go. There was some religious output already produced in

Manchester, though at this time there were religious producers in all the main BBC regional and national offices supplementing the work of the main department in London. According to the interviewees involved with the department at the time of the move, speculation abounded that it would be one of the bigger departments, for instance science or even journalism, who would be pushed out of the capital. Eventually the decision was announced - youth programmes and religion were the sacrificial lambs.

When the decision was announced it took the department by surprise. The interviewees insisted this was a political decision made behind the scenes that again pointed to the ideological gap between “them” (management) and “us” (those inside the department):

The story I hear is that the BBC persuaded them [BBC Governors] it would be a good move because it would bring more jobs to the north and the Bishop of Liverpool was a key person [...] And the Archbishop of York was involved and I think they were northern and they were persuaded by that argument. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

It was the Governors who wanted regionalisation and many of the Governors represented the regions so that was a political issue, somebody had to go and maybe our powder wasn't quite as dry as the other departments. And maybe we were a soft touch, I don't know. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

This move was about economic regeneration rather than directly improving the provision of religious, or indeed regional, programming, a focus that many of the interviewees felt was skewed. However, it did demonstrate Birt's ambition to extend the financial reach of the BBC beyond the capital. The securing of various resources and jobs for some of the poorer areas in the UK was a key condition of the trade for political support in the Charter negotiations. This highlights the BBC's responsibilities beyond programme making and the internal conflicts that can arise from its obligations.

According to some sources BBC Manchester (and indeed the local production sector as a whole) at the time was “struggling badly” (Former Head of DRE, 2008) and the BBC were keen to relocate a department with returning programme strands. Achieving these guaranteed strands is vital as it provides regular income in an industry characterised by uncertainty. Ensuring an effective mix of work in development, under negotiation and in production is a key duty for department heads. In 1994 the DRE, through returning strands like *Songs of Praise*, *Heaven and Earth* (BBC 1, 1998 - 2007), *Moral Maze* (Radio 4, 1990 - ) and *Sunday* (Radio 4, 1970 - ), had some financial clout. However, despite these obvious advantages almost all of the interviewees felt that the decision to relocate the department to Manchester was not driven by economic imperatives but was “an entirely cynical political move” (Former Head of Religious Television, 2007); though

it was more likely driven by a combination of economic motives, political pressure and strategic considerations.

This is echoed in the writing of Will Wyatt (2003), Deputy Director General at the time of the move, who credits himself for making the ultimate decision on whom to move from their base in London and to where:

It came down to one of the two smaller factual departments, science and religion. *Realpolitik* decided it. The science department was the only one of its scale in the world. It had some outstanding producers and I did not want to risk losing them if they were forced to move. There were good people in religion but fewer of the very top quality and the department was less strategically important to us. If we lost people, it would be a pity rather than a disaster. Religion it was. (Wyatt, 2003: 200)

This reference to the department being “less strategically important” is telling and is something that had been increasingly evident in the department’s recent history as it was marginalized for resources and programme slots. It also draws attention to the view that even areas which are recognised as central tenets of public service broadcasting need to be strategically important and cannot simply be there on their own merit. This represents a significant shift in thinking away from the shelter that religious output had been given in the past.

Wyatt later recounts the discussions he had with various senior staff in the department and the objections raised by them to the move but dismisses these offhandedly on the basis that “Manchester was as close to his [the head of the department’s] ultimate boss as London” (Wyatt, 2003: 201). Eventually the decision would be brought before the Governors but would go through “with minimal discussion” (ibid.). When the move did go through there would be casualties, the most senior of which was Stephen Whittle (Head of Religious Programmes, Television) who vehemently objected to the move. Surprisingly, according to some respondents, the Reverend Ernie Rea (Head of Religious Programmes, Radio at the time) bypassed him for the post of head of department. According to the interviewees Rea, although at first an objector was partially soothed by the promotion; however it didn’t stop him repeating his criticisms when he moved on from the Corporation in 2000 (Rea, 2001).

No other area of discussion for this research saw the same depth of emotion from respondents. All were united in their feelings of anger at BBC management. Those involved at the time felt betrayed, and many expressed a sense of disbelief at what they saw as the BBC’s naivety. I asked many of the interviewees whether the move was

motivated by a desire to remove religion from the BBC's remit altogether. No one felt this was the case, though a few speculated that this might have been an added benefit for some of the senior management at the Corporation:

They [management] didn't want to be thought of as getting rid of religion [...] That would be too drastic, too great a step to take. So they presented it as benefiting Manchester, demonstrating that the BBC was making programmes from all over the country. (Former Head of Religious Television, 2007)

As discussed in the previous section, decentralisation was not part of a professional vendetta from BBC management and Governors against the topic of religion or the religious department. In their view the Department of Religion and Ethics was simply not as important as other programme-making units. However, irrespective of the intentions it was widely felt by respondents that the move to Manchester was a huge blow to the department, the repercussions of which are still felt today. In the intervening years the department would occupy less of the BBC's attention, (and indeed press attention) other than when a head of department left or the General Synod were moved to comment (as the protests of Nigel Holmes demonstrate). This position off the radar brought some negligible benefits according to the respondents. The department was largely "left to get on with it" (Series Editor *Songs of Praise*, 2007) and did not have the same regular intervention from management that other departments had. However, the respondents felt that the benefit of relative autonomy was significantly overshadowed by the drawbacks. There were two main ways in which Manchester, as a base, affected the long-term viability of the department; these were in the department's distance from the centre of decision-making and seats of power, and in their limited ability to access key talent in Manchester.

In an industry that thrives on personal contact and proximity to the centre of decision-making and power, the move to Manchester represented both a physical and ideological distance. Commissioners and controllers were no longer in the next corridor, using the same lift or eating in the same canteen. This meant that religious producers did not get the opportunity to pitch informal ideas and make themselves known to senior staff as their counterparts in other London-based departments did. Meetings to discuss projects had to be pre-arranged, sometimes months in advance. These were usually in London so there was an onus on department staff to make regular visits to the capital. This perceived isolation caused much angst on the part of those who made the move to the Northwest:

We were hale and hearty and then they said we are moving you to Manchester. [Silence] This was the single biggest catastrophe [...] we are out of sight, out of mind. Unless we deliberately go out of our way to bump into



people, we don't bump into people. We are forgotten about. (Head of DRE, 2007)

[T]hey have had the stuffing knocked out of them. Partly because in Manchester, frankly you are at the end of a limb on the tree. Also the commissioning structure has become more opaque and Byzantine and channel controllers who used to know people directly, including heads of Department, and have dialogue with them regularly. I don't think that happens to the same degree. (Former Head of Religious Television, 2007)

It's a big disadvantage. I find you are not bumping into people in the 6<sup>th</sup> floor at TV Centre. You are not bumping into the channel controllers on a day-to-day basis. That is a disadvantage, no question about it. (Former Head of DRE, 2008)

This was not only the case with senior staff like commissioners and controllers. Many felt that creating relationships with departments and producers outside of the DRE was the catalyst for many programmes and that without it a significant part of the climate of innovation was gone:

You had to be in London, together with other departments and you have to be building relationships. (Producer/Presenter, 2007)

It's not just selling your ideas today; the ecology just went, thrown overboard, no question. (Freelance Producer, 2007)

A number of those in the department mentioned how it could take weeks for programme plans to filter up the motorway to the Northwest. For instance, in 2007 during BBC's schedule of programmes commemorating the abolition of slavery, the religious department felt they had a distinctive contribution to make to this. However, by the time programme plans trickled down, a number of people in the department felt they "were running to catch up" (Series Editor *Songs of Praise*, 2007). This was acknowledged by the commissioning editor for television who admitted that the sharing of information between departments had not always been successful but affirmed this was being improved. He added that the availability of communication technology meant that the department were not at a disadvantage and that he was committed to "maximising their potential" irrespective of their location.

The decentralisation of the department also had a knock-on effect on the logistics of making programmes, as many contributors had to be "enticed" (Former Head of DRE, 2007) to make the journey to Manchester or, as more often was the case, the programme moved back to London for recording, partially negating the aim of building local production capacity and skills:

You see this very day they're recording *The Moral Maze*, the programme. Where are they recording it? Not in Manchester because they can't get the contributors so they're recording it in London. So the producer and the AP [Assistant Producer] and all that have to travel down from Manchester to

London because the seat of government and the sort of centre of journalism and everything is where people are. Now I hate this London centeredness but it's just a fact. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

It [*Heaven and Earth*] was up in Manchester on a Sunday morning so it was difficult for people; so you know people in London, leading figures, might pop into Television Centre or whatever, they won't go to Manchester. (Producer/Presenter, 2007)

Experiences like those described above in relation to *The Moral Maze* and *Heaven and Earth*, make production conditions more challenging. This is particularly evident in the area of current affairs where many important contributors reside in London. These difficulties did not go unnoticed by the press who in the mid-1990s were mounting even greater pressure on the programme strategies, management culture and money saving rhetoric of the Corporation. This came to the door of the Department of Religion and Ethics when in 1995 *The Guardian* published a series of articles on the BBC and directly cited the apparent financial waste in producing *The Moral Maze* for television (perhaps a reason for its ultimate demise?) Henry Porter (1995(b)) calculated that to produce the programme in Manchester cost the Corporation an additional £9,000 per programme and was indicative of the Corporation's new focus on political placation rather than delivering best value for the licence payer.

The second way in which its location in Manchester was perceived as an obstacle to the long-term viability of the department was in the throughput of talented young staff and its ability to secure the services of established producers. When the move was announced many other departments picked off the cream of religious programme makers creating what one respondent termed "a massive brain drain" (Head of DRE, 2007):

The big challenge was to make the programmes to the same standard in Manchester as they had been in London. We lost over 50 per cent of our staff who didn't come to Manchester, so we had a big issue about whether it is possible to do weekly current affairs from Manchester ... Whenever it was known that we were moving to Manchester other departments came along and cherry picked the producers and said "You don't really want to move to Manchester, why don't you come to us". So basically we lost practically all of our television producers and we had to start from scratch again and that was very, very difficult. (Former Head of DRE, 2008)

I'm generalising but [...] the department moved to Manchester but the talented half didn't go ... And the people who could jump ship and get other jobs in London did and they were the more talented ones. And the people who couldn't went kicking and screaming but it was a job of course. And then they get to Manchester and there's nowhere to go so they entrench themselves ... So what we found we were doing is we were hiring in either freelance directors or taking directors from London on secondments. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

The loss of staff was, and continues to be, an important functional issue for the unit. Through analysis of the structures of independent production companies outside of London, Preston (2002) describes how staffing arrangements for regional firms tend to be different; there is a tendency towards permanent staff rather than the usual dependency on the large freelance talent pool which exists in the capital. Although this may deliver a more skilled and occupationally stable local production base it also impacts on the business models for these companies with high volume, low budget work needed to cover this fixed overhead. This poses problems for the DRE who must compete for local staff in these conditions and who have not traditionally produced this style of mass output.

There was also a need to retrain existing staff and attract new staff. Although the interviewees acknowledged that there were many skilled people in Manchester (particularly within Granada Television also based in the city), they argued that there were not the same numbers of established producers to draw projects from. While new talent is a key source of cost effective innovation for many in-house departments and independents, equally important is the ability to attract named talent who are synonymous with big commissions:

Commissioners, channel controllers would be much more interested in last year's BAFTA winner who was now interested in making a programme about Islam or this year's hottest indie or frankly you know the people they made films with when they were executive producers. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

[W]hat you need is a critical mass, a department bursting with talent that commissioners are itching to use and I think we did not have enough people with that sort of high profile that were ready to be trusted. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

A major fear for those questioned was that neither new nor established talent would see the department as a long-term option or as a significant stepping-stone to other work:

You don't have young bright things who see religion as an option for a few months. We need that you see. You need to keep current, you need to keep the whole thing going and yes, you need to be mixing with the controllers and you need to be mixing with today's producers who are tomorrow's controllers, the whole mix is vital. (Freelance Producer, 2007)

If you had followed it up with a significant devolution of other departments like journalism and so on but they didn't and they have been isolated there [...] Religion was relatively isolated when it got to Manchester in 1993. By 2007 it is even more isolated because there is no pool of journalists and documentary makers. There is no pool anymore, no new outlets. (Producer/Presenter, 2007)

Some pointed to the decentralisation of other BBC departments in 2011 as a way of replenishing the pool of local talent, though not all agreed that the move and this talent gain was a guaranteed reprieve for the department.

It was felt by those in the department at the time that none of these new operating conditions were considered when the relocation was instigated. It was clear that BBC management, whether naively or spitefully, expected it to be very much “business as usual”. No leeway was given to the department to compensate for this move and support from the BBC centre was less than forthcoming. According to the head of department at the time of the move:

[F]inancially we were given help from the radio side. We were given a grant by the then manager of network radio to make sure the transition worked smoothly. There was no grant from television and there was certainly no expectation that there would be any decrease in quality. It was made very clear to me when I made the point to the then Director General [John Birt] that it would take time for us to be able to compensate for the staff we lost, I was told I was being patronizing [...] And did I not think there were people in the north of England who were every bit as good as the people in London at making programmes. So it was made absolutely clear that we were expected to operate as normal and there would be no time allowed for us to make up for the loss of staff. (Former Head of DRE, 2008)

Despite the view from management, it was obvious to those in and around the department that things would not be the same. The Department of Religion and Ethics had taken a massive body blow and as a result would lose ground in many key areas; the most notable being, according to the interviewees, current affairs with the loss of *Everyman* (this will be developed more fully in Chapter Seven). In the long term, it would have an adverse effect on one of the main resources of any specialist department within the Corporation - its critical mass.

‘Critical mass’ was a term that reappeared again and again amongst the interviewees, many of who attributed the phrase to the Reverend Colin Morris, former head of the department. When interviewed, he described it as:

There is such a thing as a critical mass of broadcasting by which I mean you actually need a community where you can sit and argue and fight and all the rest of it, particularly with people from other departments who can see things quite differently. You say “What are you working on?” and they say, “I’m working on a programme about Islamic terrorism”. From the other people you will get reaction and this is hugely stimulating [...] If it means you lose the critical mass of broadcasting it can be a dangerous thing.

Critical mass therefore refers to a significant number of technical and creative staff dedicated to a specific area of broadcasting but who benefit from the experience of other departments and make a unique contribution to the BBC. As outlined it needs a

balance of established and new talent from a range of programme areas and backgrounds, not just religion. According to those questioned about this, the payoff is the ability “to develop ideas that are potentially attractive” to commissioners (Former Head of Religious Television, 2007). The move to Manchester and its limited ability to attract major talent was seen as cutting much of this critical mass, particularly its associated benefit of innovation and experience. It was felt that this put the unit at a disadvantage within the commissioning system as both are major criteria for commissioning editors when considering potential projects. Therefore, many of those who contributed to this study firmly believed that the difficulties the department has experienced, partly due to its relocation to Manchester, puts the department’s long-term viability in jeopardy.

However, it would be misleading to say that the decentralisation to Manchester is the only factor to negatively impact the critical mass of the department. Another factor was suggested by the interviewees:

At the moment there are still enough of them to argue with each other and criticize each other and you know gee each other up and make sure stuff is well made. And the strands guarantee staff and budgets, resources. But there are fewer and fewer regular strands. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

[W]hen things get rough politically in the BBC you need core output and core output means you have guaranteed programming that you can recruit and keep a team on top of that, with a certain budget and that keeps you going. (Producer/Presenter, 2007)

You can’t keep good people in Manchester together because there is no core output. (Producer/Presenter, 2007)

Delivering returning strands and having core output is crucial and these comments suggest that many believe this is missing from the department’s current provision. However, whether this is to do with their location in Manchester or with the BBC’s wider approach to commissioning programmes on the theme of religion is unclear and is more likely a mix of both factors. The BBC’s move to outsourcing many regular strands to the independent sector and the current round of staff cuts (which effects not only religion) has taken its toll, cutting into much of the department’s core output. Ensuring the Department of Religion and Ethics is sustainable with a reduced staff, lower budgets and few returning strands is a key challenge for its current staff.

While Manchester may be seen as one of the factors threatening the department it may also be one of the key reasons for keeping it. The BBC’s commitment to the regions means that it would be politically difficult to remove it while there is nothing else there. As it is, at the moment, the BBC’s only major production unit in Manchester it

provides important collateral for the BBC and any move to close it would meet with resistance not only from religious groups but also, more crucially, from the local production community and its support agencies.

Why did the decentralisation strategy fail so much in the case of the Department of Religion and Ethics? According to Kawashima (2004) decentralisation has three levels: cultural, financial and political and each is needed to ensure effective dispersal of resources. In the case of the DRE decentralisation, while there was some BBC investment financially (through allocated programme budgets etc.) and culturally (through opportunities to develop programme making skills for local staff) there was little or no political decentralisation in the form of the relocation of key decision makers. If, as Kawashima argues, the aim of decentralisation is to gain equality between those at the centre and those on the periphery, then it is clear that this move put the DRE at a disadvantage as two resources (access to decision making and large pools of talent) were missing. In the evidence submitted to the Review Committee the experience of the DRE was used as an example of the problems with decentralisation (House of Lords, 2006(b): para. 85). The fact that central decision-making remained in London was particularly criticised and this was seen as directly limiting the potential development of the unit.

At the time of the DRE's initial relocation this was supposed to be the first of a series of department relocations, however, in the time since the move further decentralisation has not happened. Although youth programming was to move at the same time as religion few of those interviewed felt this had ever been carried out, or at least not in the same way religion had fulfilled its obligation to move. In the meantime the regulator, Ofcom has responded to the disparity in regional and national production by imposing quotas for out-of-London production on all PSB broadcasters. To meet this and appease some of its critics in the Charter Renewal in 2006 the plan for decentralisation was once again revived. As a result the BBC will move several major departments - Children's, Sport, New Media, Five Live and Research and Development - out of London to the Northwest by 2011.<sup>33</sup> This time, plans are also afoot for new BBC offices at Salford Quay and the creation of mediacity:uk, "a new media city; an innovative and creative hub [...] it will rival other new media cities emerging around the world" (Salford City Council, 2007). The BBC is seen as the anchor within this "media city". It is expected that other creative companies will relocate or emerge there and in due

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<sup>33</sup> The decision to locate to Manchester is coming at a time when many other broadcasting companies are moving the other way. For example, while the BBC has committed to decentralisation, its rival ITV is "leading the metropolitan way" (Liddiment, 2003: 4) by selling many of its studios in Manchester and demonstrating the near end of one of its founding characteristics, regionalism.

course the Corporations move will bring £1billion to the regional economy (Midas Manchester, 2007: 4). The ultimate aim is to improve the economic capacity and sustainability of the cultural industries in the Northwest.

In response to the earlier failure relating to political decentralisation the strategy of the BBC this time round is mixed. All the production departments that will move are self-commissioning (Churches Media Council, 2008); in other words they decide on output and work with controllers and schedulers to deliver it. Therefore, the majority of the BBC's commissioning power will still be firmly based in the capital. It seems the BBC has learnt some lessons from the DRE experience but is only partially fulfilling its commitment to the region and, at the same time, to the Department of Religion and Ethics. As a result most of the respondents felt that although this partial decentralisation was long overdue they were fearful that it might be a case of 'too little too late' for the religious department. They also questioned whether any of the programme-making departments earmarked for the move would be compatible with religion as none has a strong tradition of religious output.<sup>34</sup> The inclusion, however, of the New Media department might give some life-blood, particularly as the iPlayer and the web become crucial resources for the department's future viability (to be discussed further in the concluding chapter); though for this to be achieved departments will need to work together and overcome the problems of departmentalism which have plagued the Corporation's history.

The episode around decentralisation highlights the strained relationship that can exist between the BBC management and the department. This is again mainly due to mismatched expectations on both sides; the DRE expect more internal support now that they are in Manchester, while management expect business as usual and do not feel they need to single out the department for special treatment. Mark Thompson (current DG) in a speech in 2005 on the value of religion argued "that viewers and listeners no longer feel deferential towards particular programme categories" (Thompson, 2005). The same can be said for the BBC management and their relationship with religion.

This case of decentralisation also demonstrates the ways in which various broadcasting policy objectives can come into conflict. On one side are the BBC's responsibilities, forced on them by political and industry pressures, to halt the decline of the regional

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<sup>34</sup> Although in the past some of the most successful programmes for religion were done for children (for example *The Man Born to be King*) this style of programming has been much less prevalent in recent years and now there is little or no religious production for children on television or radio.

production bases and its social responsibility to give a voice to the whole of the UK, not just London. This is something it has struggled with throughout its existence (Harvey & Robins, 1994) as the BBC has regularly faced criticism for its focus on London based production and its limited representation of audiences outside the capital.<sup>35</sup> On the other side of the debate is its obligation to licence payers to commission programmes and producers on merit and thus ensure a quality service - irrespective of the programme maker's location. In this instance the Department of Religion and Ethics has been caught in the middle of this policy struggle. While Manchester is a tangible demonstration of the Corporation's commitment to the regions, it reduces the department's ability to access and retain the full range of talent that the sector has to offer. In addition, as the case of the television version of *The Moral Maze* shows, this can put the department at a cost disadvantage in an increasingly cost sensitive industry.

### **Conclusion: the challenge from within**

Management and leaders within media companies play a significant part in the expression of an institutional culture yet little academic work has been done specifically in this area (Mierzejewska & Hollifield, 2006: 52).<sup>36</sup> This research finds that in the case of the BBC, senior staff (or "networks barons" (Tunstall, 1993)) through their actions, values and communication play a major role in shaping the culture of the Corporation. At the same time the staff and producers interviewed for this research were aware of the influence and power exercised over them but gave very few occasions where this influence was seen as a wholly positive factor. Indeed most of the examples discussed in this section suggest that the interviewees believe that religion has been on the receiving end of some unduly harsh (albeit unintentional) baronial treatment. This was evidenced in both relatively minor experiences, such as indifference at review meetings, and in bigger strategic decisions, such as the choice of head of department and the move to Manchester; all affect the department and its long-term viability.

From the previous sections in this chapter it should be clear that the interaction between BBC senior management and the DRE has changed in a variety of ways. In the

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<sup>35</sup> This tension between the centre and the regions is evident in the history of religious broadcasting. It can be seen for example in discussions of the Radio Missions in the 1950s and was described by one interviewee as "a cultural battle which has always been there" (Former Head of RBD, BBC Scotland). The same interviewee remarked that even today within the BBC, Scottishness is a "fossilized culture", narrowly seen as "a sort of heath and heather and tartan legacy". This view can be seen as part of a wider ongoing debate on regional representation (Broadcast, 2008; Linklater, 2007; Welsh, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Some previous historical (Hendy, 2007) and ethnographic work (Born, 2004) does give valuable insights into how management behaviour affects the decision-making, communication, priorities, motivations and use of power within the BBC.



past the relationship between institutional levels has been much less tense. In the early historical narrative outlined in Chapter Three, management and staff shared many of the same values and ambitions for religious programmes. To nurture this both the output *and* the department were given protection within the system. However, by the 1970s this protection was being scaled down to the point where in the last decade and a half this has been effectively removed leaving the department open to the forces of competition in an uncompromising new world (conditions most departments have experienced throughout their life). This has meant an increase in the pressure on the department to prove its worth and has coincided with the growth in influence of the independent sector, their rivals for commissions. Therefore, although most welcomed the removal of artificial protection, many of the complaints and ill-feeling detailed above by the respondents stem from the removal of this protected status.

It should be clear that this change in the relationship between organisational levels was not as a result of an intentional snub or vendetta against religion or the department but a product of the pressures the BBC finds itself under in an increasingly competitive broadcasting environment in which it balances a variety of viewpoints. This means there is greater pressure for areas of programming traditionally seen as part of a social responsibility (such as religion, arts, natural history) and which were previously sheltered under the umbrella of PSB, to now position themselves as strategically important to the Corporation. The overall result of this cultural re-ordering, away from protectionism to tactical planning is that the Department of Religion and Ethics must compete. However, as the unit currently stands (with few returning strands, further cost pressures, and limited internal power) many of the respondents argued that it is being put at a clear disadvantage and under threat of being disbanded permanently. The interviewees interpret this as a direct challenge to the continued provision of a specialist department to deliver this style of programming; therefore the main threat facing the department and the output is increasingly coming from within the BBC and its own institutional culture.

As this perceived threat is believed to permeate the culture of the BBC, it makes it difficult to defend against. However, there is evidence that the producers and those around the DRE are forming a response to defend against the way they feel they are being cast aside. This response takes three forms. Firstly, they argue internally and externally for the continued importance of the subject of religion to be covered in a variety of forms by the BBC. However, the effectiveness of this argument to colleagues outside of religion is unclear and would necessitate further study. Those involved in religion are also keen to respond to the threat in terms of content delivery and it is

clear they have revised their approach to provide the type of output which they believe is now demanded by audiences, commissioners and controllers (this will be discussed further in Chapter Seven). However, a more subtle but equally vital response is through the increased discourse of professionalisation which the producers used throughout the interviews for this study. While important for production staff in all areas of programming, in the broadcasting of religion and for the Department Religion and Ethics it takes on even more importance as they campaign for their continued existence in the BBC structure.

## Chapter Six: Professionalisation

The changing nature of society [...] made it inevitable that broadcasting should become as professional an area as any other.  
(Former Head of the Department of Religion and Ethics, 2007)

As discussed in Chapter One the drive to improve the professionalism of broadcasting has had an effect on both the commissioning and production process within the BBC and indeed in the wider production milieu (Born, 2004; Burns, 1977; Cottle, 1997; Crisell, 2006). Professionalisation involves the application of specialized knowledge and grants privileged status to an occupational role (Hesmondhalgh, 2006(b): 153). This status is characterised by greater autonomy, the development of an expert language, and the setting of norms and acceptable standards (Friedson, 2001; Gunnarsson et al, 1997; Hesmondhalgh, 2006(b): 153). The anticipated result is a better quality product. This is important as “Quality and excellence have also become the holy grail in business life, the solution to problems of competitiveness, motivation and innovation” (Mulgan, 1990: 5). Therefore, through professionalism and thus delivering quality, broadcasting companies believe that they can strengthen their position in the market.

In the context of this research the concept of professionalism was an important one. Throughout the history of religious broadcasting there has been a change in the way quality and specialisation have been judged. This is seen in areas such as recruitment where there has been a move away from using clergy to employing professionally trained broadcasting people, in the shift in aims from Christian evangelism to broad debate and openness and in the way the quality of a programme was deemed a better marker of the output’s success than the quantity of programmes transmitted. Today, professionalism takes on further meaning. Therefore, this section will discuss the concept of professionalism and how it is understood and articulated by producers and commissioning editors in the genre of religion. It unpacks the subjective labelling of particular programmes by respondents as emblematic of the quality the genre can deliver. It will then examine the current commissioning system as a process which emphasizes the occupational value of professionalism and which rewards new specialisations. Finally, it argues that the discourse of professionalism has a specific function for producers. First as part of their identity formation within a relatively open yet hierarchical occupational group. Second, it is used by religious producers as a specific response against the department and output being undermined (a weakened position which was discussed in the previous chapter). Therefore, this discourse

becomes an important tool in the fight against professional ghettoisation and in the arguments for the continued legitimacy of specialist programming in the BBC's in-house production structure.

### **The drive towards professionalism**

Burns (1977) was one of the first to recognize the currency of the concept of professionalism within the BBC. He acknowledged the way in which the concept was used strategically as a marker to judge people and their performance. Linking the term to the purpose and evolving culture of the BBC, he argues:

The increasing salience of such preoccupation is a further, and definitive, mark of the transition of broadcasting from an occupation dominated by the ethos of public service, in which the central concern is with quality in terms of the public good, and of public betterment, to one dominated by the ethos of professionalism, in which the central concern is with quality of performance in terms of standards of appraisal by fellow professionals: in brief, a shift from treating broadcasting as a means to treating broadcasting as an end. (Burns, 1977: 125)

Here, Burns notes that for many producers the rhetoric of professionalism displaced that of public interest and this highlights a significant change in the occupational culture of the Corporation.

Religious broadcasting can be used as a further example of this transition. As discussed in Chapters Three and Four it was clear that in the very early days of religious programming, producing quality television and radio output was not always at the forefront of programme decisions. Delivering programmes for the public good, as those in charge of the genre at the time saw it, was more important. This meant theological programmes, which provided understanding about the Christian faith and support to its adherents, were favoured over less demanding material. However, as this quote points out this was going to have to change:

There was a day when religious programmes were viewed with a certain fond tolerance by television controllers and exempted from the rigorous professional standards which applied throughout the rest of the television service. No longer. (Morris, 1984: 52)

Morris (Former head of the Religious Broadcasting Department) goes on to attribute some of the changes to the growing professionalism of broadcasting and the subsequent affect it had on the work of those in the genre. As this quote and other comments from the interviewees suggest, today religion is now technically evaluated on a par with other genres even if its institutional and social value are more contested.

Within the interviews the drive to professionalisation was apparent, often spoken about in terms of increased production values. These values included financial resources, more attention to aesthetics of the output and a greater concern with what works on the medium:

Respondent: There are much higher production values now than there were but I think that's probably true of television more generally anyway.

Interviewer: Why do you think there has been that push towards higher production values?

Respondent: I think because once the novelty of any media wears off, what you are left with is the quality of the product and if the content is not good, quality content, then people are going to be critical of it or not warm to it. (Series Editor *Songs of Praise*, 2007)

The drive to professionalism within religious output is most evident in the changes made to *Songs of Praise*. One of the first religious television programmes (developed from radio), *Songs of Praise* has seen a radical overhaul in its format and programme-making logistics in recent years. This was credited to competition in the schedules and in an effort to keep pace with developments in television aesthetics more generally. This had a knock-on effect on the logistics of making the series. Measures adopted to improve the programme included transmitting mainly pre-recorded programmes as opposed to live broadcasts, recording two programmes at a time in each location and paying greater attention to the quality of the music as this quote explains:<sup>37</sup>

[Y]ou got Jimmy on the piano; if you know Jimmy and you know he is a nice fella and you know his mum and dad, then you accept that his playing may not be terribly brilliant. If all you have to go on as a TV viewer is his playing, whether he is a nice man is totally irrelevant. You have to have the audience tune in for good music, so they can sing along so the quality has become increasingly better and better. (Series Editor *Songs of Praise*, 2007)

Though the tactics for recording the programme have received some public criticism (Richards, 2007), these measures have meant that according to its editor, *Songs of Praise* has gotten "better and better" and continues to hold its audience at a competitive level between three and five million. Furthermore, by making it more cost effective, the BBC can ensure that the programme is aired through most of the year making it an important returning strand for the output and the department. Therefore, the case of *Songs of Praise* demonstrates how the values of professionalism heavily condition the way religious programmes are made today.

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<sup>37</sup> For an account of the production context of *Songs of Praise* and the concerns with delivering a quality product see Appendix D: Research Diary and specifically entries between 29<sup>th</sup> October and 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2007 which outline the researcher's observations and experiences on set while recording the series.

## Quality in religious broadcasting

It was clear from the interviews that achieving a quality product was important to the programme makers and commissioning editors who informed this study. However, what they meant by quality was less clear and indeed the meaning of quality in television production more generally is not universal (Albers, 1996: 103). In this research the focus was on producer-defined quality (Mulgan, 1990) as it was they who defined it through the interviews.<sup>38</sup> For producers, quality is achieved through elements such as the aesthetic and technological aspects of production. Leggatt expands on this saying:

In the first case, their [producer's] concern was with technical excellence, with 'production values' or 'television values' as prerequisites of overall quality. In the second area of content, their concern was with (i) clarity of objective, (ii) innovativeness, and (iii) relevance - to viewers' current concerns. (Leggatt, 1996(a): 80)

Though this is not a comprehensive framework, many of the interviewees' talk of quality were discussed in these terms. For example:

Did you see the programme last week, which was one of the few in a decade, which I thought, wow, because that programme was definitely about what you can do [...] I was nearly in tears ... the producer remains faithful [...] It was well made, that was one aspect of it in my view, creatively, and technically it was a well-made film [...] There was respect. (Freelance Producer, 2007)

Here, this respondent singles out a programme for its technical competence and creative content; though he later makes a point of telling the researcher that this particular programme was made by a producer with no background in religious output. While aesthetics and technical capability do feature heavily, less overt elements such as the political, social and cultural value also feature in discussions of quality and these will be explored later in this section.

Furthermore, as the quote above suggests, the respondents tended to articulate their view of quality as individual perceptions of good or bad programmes. There were a few programmes, both on the BBC and on other terrestrial channels, which were given by individuals as exemplary of their view on quality output. Those seen as good included *Manchester Passion* for its risk taking; *Extreme Pilgrim* (BBC 2, 2008) for the authenticity of the performance; *The Passion* (BBC 1, 2008) for the calibre of its direction and writing, Channel 4's *The Cult of the Suicide Bomber* (C4, 2005) for its dramatic qualities, and *Tsunami: Where was God?* (C4, 2005) because of its high ratings

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<sup>38</sup> Mulgan (1990) categorises seven types of quality in relation to television production: producer quality, consumer quality, television aesthetics, effectiveness of the communication, addressing human needs, truth-telling and diversity. As this research is based on interviews with producers and commissioning editors this research focuses on the first of these categories - producer defined quality.

and the mass appeal it achieved. However, there was evidence that some standards of quality were shared between respondents and certain norms existed against which programmes could be judged. It was *The Monastery* and its less successful sequels, *The Convent* (BBC 2, 2006) and *The Retreat* (BBC 2, 2007) which best represent these shared standards and which were singled out as emblematic of the quality which religious programmes can deliver:

It [*The Monastery*] was very well cast and well produced; it should have won lots of awards. It was excellent at every level. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

Aired on BBC 2 in 2005, *The Monastery* drew on the conventions of reality television filming five men of varying levels of religiosity as they spent six weeks living with the Benedictine monks of Worth Abbey. It was a surprising ratings success for the BBC when it was aired. Drawing on the argument made by Mulgan that “quality tends to be defined by the community of producers involved in each genre or form” (1990: 9), here are just two of the comments attempting to rationalise the success of *The Monastery*:

[T]hey’re [makers of *The Monastery*] using the idiom of reality television in a way that casts some light on [...] what drives people spiritually; on a kind of search for meaning and packages it within a form that an audience recognises. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

What worked once magically, Worth [Abbey] was the right place, Father Christopher was the right abbot. They actually did an excellent job of casting. They were the right people. It was the right moment. People were looking for something different. No longer was religion a freak, there was a mix. There was a genre people trusted and were entertained by. So the genre and the format itself the viewer felt comfortable with, though the subject matter might have been alien to them. In many ways it’s finding what your market, your audience is prepared to accept and find comfortable. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

The interviewees felt that *The Monastery* combined many of the attributes outlined in relation to the other programmes but also included an imaginative and sensitive approach to the topic of personal faith. The responses to the series shared three criteria that producers used to judge the success of the programme. By using the conventions of reality television it was seen as pushing the output to a new level of creativity and innovation. The medium was used effectively to appeal to an audience, which may have had a narrow view of religious programmes, and to open up a new style of presentation for the output. At the same time it remained faithful to one of the production’s primary aims, the focus on the experiential; something which contributed to the authenticity of the programmes and was very important to those in this study who commented on *The Monastery’s* success. Finally, timing was key. According to the

interviews anticipating what audiences are (and will be) interested in and assessing what the BBC is prepared to invest in are occupational skills which are undervalued. These were used to the advantage of the production and this showed real skill. However, the limitation is that this combination of appropriate medium, authentic performance and timing can be ephemeral and replicating that mix can be difficult:

One of the problems is when something becomes formulaic and no matter what subject or genre you are in, the shock of the new goes and the appeal is lost. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

The success of *The Monastery* shows that you can make religious programmes which are very significant, very good and very popular. But you can only do that idea so often and it has run out of steam. They did the second one which was *The Convent* and it was not as good and then the one about Islam which was definitely not as good. They have run out of steam there. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

Despite these limitations the respondents agreed that *The Monastery* was a valuable resource when discussing the quality of the genre. In 2006 and 2007 there was a spate of articles reporting a “renaissance” in religious programming, particularly on the BBC (Brown, 2006; Hudson, 2006; McDonnell, 2006(a); Thomas, 2007; Turner, 2006, Watts, 2007). *The Monastery* featured heavily in these reports and was repeatedly used as indicative of the optimism and renewed creative interest the Corporation was having in religious themes. Furthermore, *The Monastery* was a major critical success with positive reviews appearing in many of the major newspapers before and after its transmission.<sup>39</sup> *The Monastery* has also become commercially important for the BBC as the format was sold to other networks, most recently to Discovery Channel in the US and ABC in Australia. These suggest that *The Monastery* was an important financial and symbolic resource to the BBC and its staff.

While the above discussions relate to good quality programmes and high professional values, programmes were also singled out for criticism:

[Q]uite clearly the current replacement of *Heaven and Earth* has taken the whole thing back 20 years in its style [and] approach, its just very sad. (Freelance Producer, 2007)

I haven't seen that [*The Protestant Revolution*] actually. I heard it wasn't very good, was it? ... I think Adam [Kemp, Commissioning Editor for Religion] knows that with commissions from us he will get the top quality. (Head of DRE, 2007)

The main criticisms levied at these programmes related to insufficient research and inappropriate treatment of the themes. However, judgements of poor quality were not

<sup>39</sup> For a comprehensive review of all the publicity generated by the series, its spin-offs and its format in the US and Australia see: [www.worthabbey.net/abbey/news\\_01.htm](http://www.worthabbey.net/abbey/news_01.htm)



restricted to programmes and even the BBC's main rival in the area of religion, Channel 4, came under scrutiny for its production values:

The thing with Channel 4 is that they do lots of religious docs but they don't grab big audiences. They grab young audiences but not big audiences and they tend to be quite cheaply made and not as good as we would do them; but they do cover a lot of stuff. (Head of DRE, 2007)

This points to a professional rivalry between the broadcasters and more generally across the "private world" (Tunstall, 1993) of religious broadcasting between suppliers of programmes. Although discussions of quality did not present an agreed set of standards which could be applied to all programmes, these references to quality and its criteria shows some of the professional decisions which are seen as important in the production of religious programmes and which ultimately define what is regarded as a good or bad programme from a production point of view.

So if quality is relatively ambiguous then how is it assessed and measured by the BBC in relation to religious output? There are a number of formal and informal mechanisms in place that have a significant bearing on the style of output produced. The most obvious metrics available to BBC decision-makers are ratings. The ratings are then supplemented with audience Appreciation Indicators (AIs) which ask viewers a series of questions about the quality of a programme, creating an artificial link between audience satisfaction and quality.<sup>40</sup> Particularly for producers within the Corporation these figures are a well-referenced resource:

Yeah, we debrief on the impact it had on the audience, AI and audience figures, feedback, we get some pointed feedback some times ... it's quite a good litmus test. The BBC has got some quite good ways of doing it, apart from just audience figures and AIs there is a thing called The Pulse [...] I can go on there and I can see what this *Songs of Praise* got and how this compares with all the other *Songs of Praises*' you have done this year. This is how it compares in the average for the slot. This is how it compares in the average for the genre ... It's using material that is driven from audience research from the demographic figures, overnights and the panel response. (Series Editor *Songs of Praise*, 2007)

All of these metrics are supported by a host of new technologies that purport to feed timely and important information back into the system to be then used by producers and decision-makers. However, within the context of the interviews conducted here, few producers (particularly those from the independent sector) were aware of the performance of their programme once it had aired but knew that they would get a reaction if it did not get the ratings expected for that slot.

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<sup>40</sup> For a discussion on the drawbacks of audience Appreciation Indicators see Mulgan (1990:7)

Assessments of quality were not restricted to the obvious elements of the production as the cultural, political, and social value of the output were also seen as important (though this was secondary to the tangible features of the productions such as aesthetics and technology). There was evidence of less institutionalised audience feedback to measure these elements and this became important for producers in giving them a greater sense of professional pride:

I think if we are honest, the work we want to do and put our careers on the line about, we want people to talk about them, the largest number ... to engage with the broadest number i.e. society in its widest make up, to try and get them to think about issues around religion, morality, [and] spirituality. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

I mean it's appreciated and when you're making programmes and you know that someone is appreciating them deeply, I mean they're not just flying over their heads. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

Any programme maker in factual [programming] wants someone to look at a programme and say that either challenges the way I think or the way I live and I will either reassess my life or parts of it in the light of what I have just learnt. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

This feedback is not something easily derived from the rigidity of the Als. During the interviews it was not clear how the respondents knew if the programmes were having the desired effect. Some mentioned receiving letters and emails in response to programmes they had made, though more veteran producers lamented that the output did not receive as much direct response as it had in the past; something which seems incongruous given the ubiquity of online comment pages and discussion forums which today compliment many television and radio programmes, including those in the area of religion.

In relation to this wider definition of quality and value, the power to assign 'quality programming' then moves from the producer to the audience or more likely to what is termed the "imagined audience". Elliott (1972) drew attention to the importance of the imagined audience in production contexts. This refers to the relationship between programme makers and those they envisage as their audience. It is usually informed by audience research but is largely a constructed visualisation rather than an actual account of audience behaviour. As discussed in Chapter One, researchers have argued that producers live in a self-serving culture so they need something to inform and legitimate their decisions (Elliott, 1972; Harrison, 2000; Matthews, 2008; Schlesinger, 1978). This means a picture of the audience is actively employed by producers and their teams to determine whom they are speaking to and to anticipate what an audience want. In the case of the comments above they believe it is to engage, talk to, challenge and teach their audiences and points towards a self-appointed pastoral

and informative role for producers. This in turn conditions and shapes the output produced as will be explored in the next chapter. This approach to audiences is not restricted to religious output and characterises the professional working conditions of other genres such as children's news, soap operas and drama (Born, 2004; Henderson, 2007: 169; Matthews, 2008).

Although ratings and audience feedback were important, many claimed that they were not their only consideration as many of the interviewees referred to other informal systems for judging the success of a programme:

Researcher: How do you measure the success of your programmes?

Interviewee: That's a really good question; a really important question. One is empirical, how many people watched. Did it do well in the slot?

Researcher: I would assume that's the language the commissioning editors and controllers want to hear.

Interviewee: I think two things ... Not even I, whose career is linked to religious programming, will deliver huge numbers. I don't think it ever will. But it also delivers noise. People write about it and I think the broadcasters, as we do, assess it in two ways. Ok, how many millions or hundreds of thousands does it bring in to viewing figures. You will break down demographically; Was it AB1, CD2s? Was it people under 35? You probably know that every programme is broken down like that. *Clash of Worlds* was around 1.5 million for the third one, it was up against *Strictly Come Dancing*; it did very, very well. We were pleased with that. Was it written about? Yes it was. It was written about in strong terms, it was previewed and reviewed very well. In terms of bringing understanding, it did what we wanted it to do. It was well received that way. Longer term that's as far as the broadcaster probably wants to go. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

Critics and peer appraisal are seen as important indicators of success along with the more traditional metric of ratings. Albers (1996: 102) suggests that television critics in newspapers and schedule guides do bring another perspective into how programmes can be evaluated; however, like producers they do not have a systematic or consistent view of quality but do help to build the public profile of the genre. This idea of a programme delivering "noise" is important as programmes, channels and broadcasters try to differentiate themselves from the crowd. Generating this build-up can be an effective way to attract attention from audiences and peers.

Overall, the comments in this section show that discussions of quality are an important part of the discourse of producers, staff and commissioning editors. As discussed in Chapter Five, though many of the respondents claimed that amongst senior management, religion is only tolerated out of some commitment to public service, the

producers who informed this study vehemently argued that they could produce programmes of equal quality to other genres and as important to the BBC as other areas of programming:

The religious appetite is perfectly strong and out there, what we got to do is come up with the types of programmes that will really grab audience so that it's not a public service box ticking exercise but audience grabbing propositions. And I think we can do that. (Head of DRE, 2007)

This means that one of the aims for these producers and commissioners is to make programmes that demonstrate their professionalism as broadcasters to their peers, bosses and audiences. They are keen to be thought of as strategically important and not simply as passengers within the BBC's decision-making; this goes back to the previous chapter's discussion of the need for religion to be thought of as important in this way and further demonstrates the truth in Burns' (1977) claim that PSB is being sidelined in favour of discussions of professionalism and the tangible and quantitative metrics it delivers. At the heart of this debate is the irresolvable tension over how to measure the success of public service broadcasting. Many of the producers who contributed to this study conceded that compared to many other genres, religion can find it hard to compete if a purely commercial approach is taken - one which they feel the BBC is increasingly concerned with as they fight to prove their worth and legitimate their continued public funding.

So why do producers talk in these terms? According to Mulgan (1990) producers have a set of valued standards, norms and expectations which they mobilise to assert superiority and difference between their rivals as the judgements relating to individual programmes and overall channel strategy demonstrate. In the interviews this discourse on quality was used not only to show that religion could be strategically important but also to assert hierarchies between suppliers within and outside the BBC. Most differentiated between the perceived creativity and responsiveness of the independents and the expert knowledge of the internal department; differences which become more important as both sides compete for commissions. To understand this hierarchy it is necessary to follow an approach advocated by Mulgan (1990: 8) and move away from focusing solely on individual programmes to examining the quality of the system which purports to standardize and encourage quality - the commissioning system.

### **The commissioning process**

The commissioning process is the system which best represents the professionalisation and demand for quality within broadcasting. In theory it maintains the standards of

programmes in a number of ways; for instance, it streamlines the commissioning system thus provides more effective administration and it is designed to glean the best ideas from the widest pool of providers. In this way the system pits suppliers from in-house against independent producers giving valuable insights into the priorities and values of the commissioning team and the wider BBC.

In 2006 the way in which programmes would be commissioned at the BBC changed leading to an even greater integration of the independent sector into the process. In the face of criticisms from the independent sector and in order to redress the largely failed policies of Producer Choice (outlined in Chapter One), the BBC itself put forward a proposal for an adjustment to the way programmes were commissioned, prompting what they believed to be the “most exciting creative competition we’ve ever held” (Bennett, 2005). As part of this arrangement the statutory independent quota would remain at 25 per cent with the BBC guaranteeing 50 per cent of output to its own production units; the rationale being that a 50 per cent production guarantee would allow the BBC to sustain its production base. The remaining 25 per cent would be made available within a Window of Creative Competition (WOCC) to either in-house or independent producers. Suppliers would be chosen on the merits of their ideas and ability to deliver. To deliver this new system of commissioning each of the genre commissioners would be relocated from their individual genre departments and placed into a single Commissioning Centre in London that would be distinct from in-house production. Programmes were now commissioned by autonomous commissioning editors supported by genre teams and they would handle the entire process - editorial control, finance and delivery.<sup>41</sup>

The core of the WOCC, like Producer Choice, was that it again ensured “a level playing field” (BBC, 2007(c)) between *all* suppliers but this time would “instil confidence [in the BBC amongst] the independent sector through a much more transparent commissioning process” (Deloitte and Touche, 2006). The independent sector welcomed the move while in-house producers (collectively referred to as BBC Vision, replacing BBC Production) and outside observers were wary, with many seeing it as another political concession by the BBC (Born, 2006). This fear was realised when in March 2008, the first anniversary of the system, it was announced that independents had produced over 40 per cent of all BBC broadcast hours outside of news (Rushton, 2008(b)). It seemed the BBC commissioning pendulum had swung in favour of the independents.

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<sup>41</sup> The main commissioning genres are drama, entertainment, factual, children’s, sport and programme acquisition (religion and ethics form part of the factual genre).

So how does the WOCC affect the commissioning of religious programmes? Two basic difficulties came to the fore during the interviews. First, in the new commissioning system the channel controllers and commissioning editors would become central gatekeepers. This meant that, along with all BBC in-house producers, the department was now “at the mercy” of the commissioning editor and the controller (Former Head of Religious Television, 2007). Secondly, the independent sector was given more opportunities to supply religious programmes and was already making considerable inroads into the resources available to the output and had scored some notable victories. For instance, the independent company Mentorn Oxford was commissioned to make the Sunday morning programme *The Big Questions* (BBC 1, 2007 - ) which replaced the in-house production *Heaven and Earth*. Both the consolidation of control and the growth in power of the independent sector deserve closer analysis.

Senior management has always played a central role in the running of the BBC but during the nineties their faith in entrepreneurialism (and its associated bureaucracy) gained primacy. It was argued by some of the interviewees that this shifted much of the power away from the producers and individual departments to the strategic objectives of the executive board, channel controllers and commissioning editors. According to Crisell (2006: 45) this development is not unique to the BBC as within the broader context of broadcasting power is quickly shifting from individual programme makers to managers in areas such as scheduling. In the case of the BBC the WOCC consolidated their power further.

Although all programme commissions are scrutinised by a small internal team purporting to speak on behalf of the audience, it is the commissioning editor who makes the final decision<sup>42</sup>:

There are different views and while you are in the position of a commissioner you are in a fairly elitist position in being able to determine that “I know this to be true, this is what I want”. (Series Editor, *Songs of Praise*, 2007)

This means that commissioners are in a privileged position both to decide content and decide who will supply it. While the in-house department has only one buyer (its commissioning editor), the commissioner now has a greater supply base to choose from with the increased input of the independents. The result is that according to the

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<sup>42</sup> Channels Controllers also have the power to commission programmes in the system. However, in the context of the interviews this was mentioned very rarely and the Commissioning Editor for Culture, Arts, Music and Religion was seen as a more important route for getting television ideas commissioned, with the Commissioning Editor for Specialist Factual responsible for radio commissions.

interviewees the power dynamic has shifted to the commissioners and that is a problem if earlier claims of management's disinterest in religion are taken into consideration.

Many of the interviewees expressed grave concern over this consolidation of control which they claim has repercussions for the provision of religious programmes, particularly on television. According to the interviewees decisions are being increasingly driven by demographics and audience ratings despite the fact that many acknowledged that religion may be largely a minority interest:

I think there is a preconception against religion. We have an extremely hard task, not just us but anyone who goes into this territory. You mention religion and the first reaction and it's not just the commissioning editors but the people sitting over them the schedulers etc. "Is this going to bring us in an audience". (Independent Producer, 2007)

This echoes Will Wyatt's (2003) comments in the previous chapter that religion is considered "less strategically important" compared to other genres as channels and broadcasters look to compete through their programme output. This means that the strategic element of the commissioning role, as influenced by demographics, is growing and becoming more crucial.

Focusing on the commissioning editor's role for a moment, a number of occupational conditions affect its execution. According to this interviewee discussing the editorial function:

It would be interesting to research how many commissioners of religion just had religion as their brief. You will find it is tagged on. It could be science. It just depends on who comes along. Often it has been current affairs. If you look at ITV over the last three appointments it has been tagged onto a current affairs brief. If you look at Five it was tagged onto an arts brief. Before that it was a youth brief. The BBC [...] Look at the background of the commissioners, again arts and a bit of history as well. (Independent Producer, 2007)

For this interviewee, two conditions affect the role. First, although each commissioning editor focuses on a single genre he or she still has a wide remit to cover. For instance, the commissioning editor, which the Department of Religion and Ethics mainly pitches its ideas to, also covers commissions relating to culture, arts and music as part of his brief. Second, these occupational conditions have an obvious knock-on effect on the style of programming they commission and other producers in this study argued that the background of the editor gives a certain inflection to the programmes commissioned. For example, they argued that editors with a current affairs background will likely focus on a journalistic approach to the topic, whereas one with an arts background will use that to structure ideas. The effect of both of these conditions was the perception

amongst the interviewees that some of the time the editors chose to play safe and avoid taking risks, mainly due to their lack of a thorough knowledge of the subject:

You can be taken for a ride or make the biggest howler and to stop doing that quite often you play safe, unless you know what you are doing. (Independent Producer, 2007)

(It is interesting to note that this particular producer is an independent but one of the few specialists in the area). The interviewees articulated a complaint which has resurfaced elsewhere (Rushton, 2008(b); Born, 2006) that in this new system of commissioning and in the levels of hierarchy created there is even less opportunity for risk-taking. One error of judgement can have serious professional repercussions for a commissioning editor. However, the commissioning editors interviewed for this study to a degree refuted this claim that they play it safe and cited the live broadcast of the *Manchester Passion* and *Liverpool Nativity* (BBC 3, 2007) as exemplary of their commitment to taking financial and creative risks. Indeed Mark Thompson, Director General argues:

I believe we've seen a remarkable creative revival and a new spirit of experimentation in religious programming at the BBC. Religion has come out of its box and today at the BBC, it's just as likely to mean *The Liverpool Nativity* live on BBC 3 as *The Daily Service* on Radio 4 LW. (Thompson, 2008)

As mentioned earlier editorial decisions are part of the responsibilities of the editors and as the public debates around trust in television in 2007 and 2008 suggest this is becoming an even bigger minefield for editors and more important to the overall confidence in the production process (Plunkett, 2007). The expectation amongst the majority of producers involved in this study was that the commissioning editor needed to be knowledgeable and passionate about the subject. However, during the interviews with the main commissioning editors in religion for both television and radio they challenged the claim they needed specialist knowledge:

Researcher: Considering your wide brief, do you need to be passionate about all those subjects or just making good TV?

Interviewee: Both. I don't have to be the world's expert, this is the interesting thing. The skill of commissioning is you can't do this without loving storytelling. The biggest thing is and I know it's a bloody cliché but you got to want, you got to have a journalistic, and I do, imperative to do something new. (Commissioning Editor for Religion, 2008)

I think to be really good to make a programme about anything you have to have a degree of passion for the subject. I don't think you necessarily need to believe in it. You can make a programme about the Coen brothers and you don't have to love all their films but you do have to have an interest in film and cinema and that kind of genre. You have to have an appreciation [...] We all have to commission programmes in genres which we don't like or which aren't our expertise or our personal passion [...] You are



commissioning programmes on behalf of the audience that's what your doing. (Radio 4 Commissioning Editor for Factual, 2008)

Here, these commissioning editors argue that specialist knowledge is but one factor of many which influence their decisions and that it is not necessarily the most important when deciding what programmes to commission.

It is interesting to compare the expectation amongst producers in this study in the need for passionate commissioning editors with work done on the commissioning process by Preston (2003). Through interviews with commissioners, Preston examines the culture and context of commissioning, and while knowledge (usually of the supplier rather than the actual topic) did feature, there was very little about the role requiring a significant degree of passion for the subject. She states that “commissioners are increasingly expected to cover a wider and wider brief, maintaining their editorial instincts while developing a much more commercial, corporate mindset” (Preston, 2003: 7). Through the increased professionalisation of the role instinct is prized over passion. There is currently no specific research that examines whether producers in other genres expect commissioners to be knowledgeable *and* passionate about the topics in their commission brief but in the context of this research they did expect this to be the case. Therefore, there is a large gap between the expectations of producers and the apparent skills of commissioners in the area of religious production.

This idea of a “commercial, corporate mindset” suggested by Preston has filtered down to producers. Although content and technical prowess were undoubtedly core to assessments of quality as discussed earlier, there were clearly new forms of professionalism which producers were aware of when producing output. At the forefront of these were business and selling skills. As the following producer explained, today producers (not only in religion) need to be acutely aware of the positioning of their programmes and how their offering adds to the channel's strategy and voice. This is encouraged and rewarded within the commissioning process. Talking about the things that need to be considered when entering the process, this producer says:

[D]oes it [the channel] have a feel for what it represents? It wants to get a certain audience and there is a certain feel about how you handle religion that has to fit in with that overall feel. It can't be out of sync or off message. So it has to be interpreted in light of how the channel wants to present itself. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

If producers position programmes at odds with this channel strategy (intentionally or unintentionally) then they are risking future commissions. One independent producer of a long running religious radio series told of the “danger of being radically different”.

He described how his co-producer would at times deviate from the established format and would try to achieve a more informal style of programme. This made it sound very different from the usual style and as a result did not have the strand's usual character. At times, according to the producer this worked really well but ultimately the company lost other tenders for programmes in the strand; something he attributed to the change in style. This producer was resigned to the situation saying, "I see it as my job to break the mould but to a certain extent not too much" (Independent Radio Producer, 2007).

To summarise, this section has shown the increased professionalisation of broadcasting through commissioning systems, like the WOCC and its predecessor Producer Choice. Associated with this has been a clear increase in the strategic role afforded to commissioning editors. Furthermore, the system brokers a new set of professional skills, in areas such as business development and sales. Therefore, in order to compete in this system producers and production staff need to respond to these demands.

### ***Saving Heaven and Earth: the threat of the independents***

One of the other effects, in addition to the increased consolidation of strategic power to the commissioning editors and related to the introduction of the WOCC, is the much bigger role that the independent sector is playing in the output of the BBC. The massive growth in independent production can be largely attributed to the deregulation policies of the 1980s. The creation of Channel 4 and the imposition of quotas on all the terrestrial broadcasters brought greater resources to the sector and an end to the dominance of in-house production units. In 2007 the BBC introduced a new factual commissioning structure splitting the commissioning process for that output into two parts (Holmwood, 2007). Now there is a commissioning editor who deals with in-house suppliers and another for independents (including in the area of culture, arts, music and religion) showing how seriously the BBC is taking its commitments to the independent sector.<sup>43</sup>

However, in contrast to most other genres there are few specialist independents in the area of religion. The reasons for this relates to the normal business model of independent companies which are sustained by a large volume of commissions. In religion this volume is falling and so "in the end if there is no appetite [amongst commissioners] you have to go and do something else" (Producer/Presenter, 2007).

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<sup>43</sup> At the time of the interviews for this research the announcement had just been made regarding this split and the BBC had yet to clarify how the new structure would work in practice. It was unclear to the interviewees, both in-house and independent, how this would affect their relationship with the BBC.

This means that for most independents religion is usually combined with other offerings such as entertainment or documentaries and so many non-specialist independents have produced programmes in this area.

As mentioned earlier, in-house and independents use a specific discourse to differentiate between the professional skills and qualities that they bring to a project. Those involved with in-house production tend to play up their experience, criticising the independents for their lack of knowledge. Though some of the independents that informed this study acknowledged they did not have the same depth of experience with religious themes, they felt that this was not a problem and in fact it ensured that they were not burdened by theology:

One of the biggest and most interesting moves that broadcasters have made is to take subjects like religion and throw them to the non-specialists. What does an entertainment factual indie make of the Passion? They won't be burdened down in one way by the intricacies and insight of a theology background. (Independent Producer, 2008)

The independents also argued that they had a unique set of skills which they could use effectively:

[Y]ou are not stuck with the people who were working on *Heaven and Earth*, you can get the people who are right to work on this show which might be completely different skills [...] you are able to make a mix of talents. (Independent Producer, 2008)

The independents continually highlighted the importance of bringing other expertise into the production mix for projects and felt this was key to maintaining any “renaissance” the output was to enjoy. This expertise included backgrounds in other genres, for example talk shows, reality television, and drama (the impact of this genre hybridisation will be discussed in Chapter Seven).

Other reasons were also suggested as to why there was a favouring of the independents. As implied above, they are seen “as light on their feet” (Presenter/Producer, 2007) because of the way they are staffed predominantly with freelance producers. This makes them a more cost effective proposition for commissioners compared to in-house which have a large amount of fixed overheads resulting from their staffing structures:

If you look at the indie sector you have to be keener and smarter and nimbler just to survive and secondly, the very nature of indies in the main which shrink down to a basic core of a few people so their overheads are small. (Independent Producer, 2008)

The independents were also perceived by the interviewees as more creative, more instinctive with regard to new opportunities and more prone to risk-taking than their in-

house counterparts. This was directly attributed to the competitive nature of the independent sector. Again, the success of *The Monastery* (a series made by the independent producer Tiger Aspect) was used as indicative of this independent spirit.

In terms of his supply base the commissioning editor looked on the current system, and the competitive situation that has arisen, very favourably. The opening up of commissioning to the independent sector has been used as both the carrot and the stick on the Department of Religion and Ethics. First and foremost it has been used as a way to encourage the department to innovate:

In-house religion team responded to the challenge and the threat if you like of the independents coming in, no question. They came back with *Extreme Pilgrim* and more series' will follow from that; and they have also gone for the super landmarks.

And later:

The interesting thing for religion is, I think, that they have had to respond to the challenge from indies and they have done so very, very quickly [...] I do believe competition does bring value, it raises everybody's game, there is no two ways about it.

Undoubtedly this dynamic between suppliers has had a knock-on effect on the religious department and its in-house production. This increased competition is clearly visible in the case of the BBC 1, Sunday morning programme *Heaven and Earth* which in September 2007 ended its 9-year run as an in-house production.

*Heaven and Earth* was produced as a magazine format where guests would discuss issues relating to faith, religion and spirituality, concentrating on a wide range of beliefs rather than exclusively Christian. The programme was made by the BBC's in-house Religion and Ethics department and was broadcast live from Granada Studios in Manchester. *Heaven and Earth* was one of the first programmes to go into the WOCC when it was fully introduced in early 2007. Eventually the slot was filled by two new religious programmes, *Big Questions* and *Sunday Life* (BBC 1, 2008 - ); the department would produce neither. According to the person responsible for commissioning them, BBC Controller for Daytime Television, Jay Hunt, these shows were "brave new ideas" and "creatively strong" (BBC, 2007(a)), again reiterating the perception of the independent sector as more creative than in-house.

On beginning the interview phase of this research in mid-2007 it was clear from the respondents that losing the *Heaven and Earth* strand was another critical blow and reflected much of the angst of the department in relation to its position within the BBC

and the threat it faces from the independent sector. Like discussions on the relocation to Manchester, this was a very emotive issue for those within and outside the department. The loss of *Heaven and Earth* was also a huge financial setback to the department and its in-house production team. Now, *Songs of Praise* would be the only regularly commissioned strand produced by the department taking up the majority of its 50 per cent production guarantee. The DRE would now be completely reliant on this to sustain the entire department. Many expressed the view that the Department of Religion and Ethics had been badly treated in the lead up to the announcement and the reason for this move was again politically motivated:

I could see as an outsider but knowing a bit about the process over the years that whatever they tendered was not going to get it. If they said we need a programme with a black man and a white background, the commissioning editor would have said "Oh well you know what we want is a white man against a black background". Whatever they said you just knew they weren't going to get it. I know a little about the effort they put in and it was a big effort; but then everyone else will have put in a big effort. But they just weren't going to get it, it's criminal really. (Freelance Producer, 2007)

*Heaven and Earth* was an in-house guarantee and that took us up to 80 per cent and we were supposed to be 50 per cent and so I can understand sort of why they did it, but what they hadn't noticed was that at the same time we were transforming *Heaven and Earth*. We were bringing in Gloria Hunniford and it was really high-class production values, great features, A-list celebrities, it was an amazing show. The AIs went up, the audience went up and we were told it was going in the WOCC. And I knew even back then before I became head of religion that actually we were going to lose it, there were no questions, it was a political decision. (Head of DRE, 2007)

The perception that this was a political decision was found amongst a large number of those in this study as they again suggested a significant ideological gap between 'us' (those in and around the department) and 'them' (commissioners and senior management). The outsourcing of *Heaven and Earth* added further to what came across at times as a siege mentality amongst supporters of the department. For instance, one interviewee described the DRE as "it may have been a ghetto but at least it had its territory". Through decisions like this one, the territory of the DRE was being steadily eroded and it was the independents which were gaining ground.

With the loss of one of its main strands and producing very few regular strands, the Department of Religion and Ethics now depends heavily on big budget 'event' pieces such as *The Bible* (due for transmission in 2009 and representing the biggest single commission the department has ever won (Thompson, 2008)), and *Son of God* (BBC 1, 2001) for commissions. It has also been successful in producing critically acclaimed work such as *Extreme Pilgrim* (this will be discussed at length in the next chapter). However, in the past few years independents have been equally successful (in ratings

and critical acclaim) for a number of their documentaries, such as *The Monastery* which was screened over a number of episodes and had a series of follow up programmes. *The Passion* (transmitted BBC 1 during Easter 2008), the most recent big budget event TV, was also produced by an independent so the threat from the independent sector is not confined to any specific area or programme style.<sup>44</sup> It seems in neither big budget pieces nor one-off documentaries the department has a monopoly and so it must compete.

On what terms does the Department of Religion and Ethics compete? According to the interviewees the main reasons for having specialists is the knowledge and expertise they bring to the subject area. This intellectual self-confidence is in a range of areas:

I do think that religion and its observance, and its history, and its complications and confusions and its own internal problems are sufficient of a specialism to merit trying to employ people specifically to cover that specialism. (Commissioning Editor Specialist Factual, Radio 4, 2008)

[I]t seemed to me that religion is a specialist subject. It's as much a specialist subject as sport, or art, or science or anything else and you have to have people who know something about it ... it has a whole theology, it has history, it has a whole kind of knowledge about the way churches work. A lot of the department's broadcasting was from churches and you had to know the difference between this church and that church; how to keep an ecumenical balance. A whole series of semi-political issues as well as technical issues that made it important that you had someone who was a specialist in religion. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

Respondents were clear that this knowledge was important if the BBC were to avoid making mistakes and causing unnecessary offence to viewers and listeners. Exercising editorial judgement was at the heart of this and although the commissioning editor is seen as having ultimate control, the producers also have a responsibility. It was also argued that the DRE provide a bigger safety net because of their experience and knowledge of the area:

[I]t's like any specialist area, you got to appeal to the wider audience but you got to maintain the trust and confidence of the specialist audience. I think that's absolutely vital and I think in a specialist area like religion there is the scope for a real howler. (Independent Radio Producer, 2008)

I have heard programmes on religious topics where people have made fundamental errors. They just don't know the subject enough. It's important that the producer does otherwise they'd be seduced by contributors who come along with some sort of specious claim and they can't see through them. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

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<sup>44</sup> *The Passion* was credited as a co-production between the BBC and Deep Indigo (an independent owned by Nigel Stafford-Clark, the series director) though it appears that the BBC, specifically the DRE, only advised on production. While this points to the possibility of some coexistence and cooperation between independents and in-house this appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

This area, perhaps more than any other, where you do need to know what on earth is going on and terminologies because you can make mistakes which trample on the stuff of people's souls. (Independent Producer, 2007)

They also pointed to other advantages of having specialist departments to the production sector more widely, particularly in relation to the development of new talent and improving the sector's skills base. Many of the interviewees recited the names of key figures in broadcasting (such as Mark Thompson, current Director General and BAFTA winner Norman Stone) who learnt part of their trade through specialist departments like the Department of Religion and Ethics. In smaller departments like these new staff are given more autonomy and hands-on experience compared to their peers in areas such as journalism. To the interviewees departments like the DRE had an important and often overlooked value within the wider occupational milieu of broadcasting:

The whole point about having specialist departments and having a public service broadcaster with its own production facility is indeed about nurturing talent, developing specialization, is about ensuring quality, is about hopefully sustaining their creativity, developing and innovating. That's not to say that the independents can't do any of those things, of course they can, but you won't find independents who specialise in anything in subjects terms. (Former Head of Religious Television, 2007)

This points to the value of the BBC to the sector more widely, particularly in terms of its training and development of staff, which is seen as unrivalled in the industry.<sup>45</sup> This is something which the interviewees feared would be lost if cost-cutting measures and department restructuring (not just in religion) continues.

However, the distinct value of a specialist department was not unanimously accepted amongst the interviewees. Returning to the earlier discussion of decentralisation, numerous questions were raised about where the in-house unit refreshes its pool of creativity, particularly as no other BBC television department is currently based in Manchester:

I think the problem is, yes it is vital to have a specialist but they have to find ways of renewing themselves internally and I think because of the pressures I don't know what's feeding them. I don't know where the kind of cross-fertilization is to renew what they are doing. Yes, we need them but there has to be a way to keep the output fresh and very current and I'm not sure if that's what I always hear. (Independent Radio Producer, 2008)

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<sup>45</sup> In 2003/04, the BBC spent £40 million on training for BBC staff and freelancers attached to BBC projects on radio, television and new media. A further £13.4 million was spent on training to support other areas such as leadership, IT systems and health and safety. (BBC, 2005(c): 72). This makes the BBC one of the largest investor in training for the broadcast industry.

I think with any creative industry and that's what we got here, creativity and the gene pool of creativity always needs refreshing. It's easy to get into a comfort zone in a department. (Independent Producer, 2007)

This again underlines the need for critical mass discussed earlier as a way of bringing in new ideas and challenging existing ways of doing things.

To sum up, this research argues that competition and rivalry are part of the discourse performed by both independents and in-house producers as part of their strategies of self-interest. However, both parties locate their skills and professionalism in different ways with knowledge and experience the cornerstone of the in-house offering, while independents emphasise their creativity and cost effectiveness. The final section of this chapter examines further the function of this discourse.

### **Conclusion: avoiding professional ghettoisation and promoting specialisation**

The discourses outlined above in relation to professionalism, quality and the commissioning process all serve a purpose which is “to construct, reinforce and critique social roles, social behaviours and social practices” (Candlin, 1997: ix). In other words, it is through this discourse that problems are framed by individuals and responses produced. As a result, it is clear that the discourse uncovered in the previous sections has a number of valuable functions for those within religious broadcasting.

First, taken in conjunction with the production research outlined in Chapter One, the discourse surfaces collectively for *all* producers and commissioning editors' (including those outside religion) and forms part of their occupation identity. Production is a group effort and takes place within a relatively open yet hierarchical structure. Although there are relatively few formal barriers to entry or occupational membership there is an informal system of acceptance judged through shared standards of programme quality. Through the interviews we see how producers and commissioners try to gain acceptance from other levels in the organisation, underscoring the legitimacy of their role and position themselves in relation to their peers in drama, news, current affairs, comedy, etc. This function is vital to any occupational group as they demonstrate their collective professionalism.

Specifically in relation to religious output this discourse of professionalisation is used as a response against the genre being undermined (as discussed in Chapter Five); in effect to try to stimulate institutional support and to prevent the further ghettoisation of the



output. In the past, the work of specialist producers has been protected and so they were not subject to the same rigours and professional judgements as their colleagues in other departments. Today, this protection has been removed. Although the producers admitted that it might be a minority interest in some cases, they were adamant that this programming should be as professionally delivered as any other programme genre and should be judged accordingly. They widely criticised any return to special provision for religious programmes arguing that protection (through arrangements like the closed period and programme quotas) was bad for the output as it limited its appeal to the mainstream and gave it a ghetto status within the Corporation.

Therefore, in the interviews conducted here the discourse of professionalism was used as a direct response against the threat of ghettoisation. This concern with professional ghettoisation is not limited to religion. For instance, Cottle's (1998) work on ethnic minority programme makers uncovers "the professional abhorrence of the stigma attached to ghetto programming" (1998, 304). Professional ghettoisation is associated with poor quality, small audiences and artificial protection and Cottle found that there were real fears within the Multicultural Programme department that they were being overlooked within the BBC, not only in the competition for resources but also within the BBC hierarchy - a dangerous risk for any producer's future career prospects.

The discourse of professionalisation was used by both programme suppliers in-house and those from the independent sector. However, it is used in subtly different ways in terms of where they locate their professional skills. For the independents it is used as a way of cementing their place further in the system by playing up their creativity and showing they can be relied upon to meet the expectations and requirements of the BBC, at a time when trust is vital. Professionalism is also used by those involved with the DRE as they fight for the continued legitimacy of specialist programming in the BBC's in-house production structure. This claim of religion as a specialist body of knowledge and therefore warranting a dedicated unit is important as it is one of the main reasons used to argue for a specialist department; a case tentatively supported by Barnatt & Starkey:

[F]unctionally departmentalised organization may actually be a prerequisite for the preservation of the creative space necessary for the quality in cultural production. (Barnatt & Starkey, 1994: 259)

However, one of the key ways in which media companies are increasingly competing is in the area of flexible specialisation (Barnatt & Starkey, 1994; Shapiro et al, 1992). According to this model the most effective way to organise production is in small interlinked, specialised firms, which are flexible in organisation, work processes and output. By introducing more flexibility to their structure and operating models,

programme producers can respond quickly to the changing demands of broadcasters and their audiences. In the case of broadcasting, this style of production is in the best interests of the buyer (in this case the BBC) as they can dictate the nature of the programming (including editorial control and transmission formats) and benefit from the cost efficiencies associated with such a competitive supply base.

Therefore, how programme suppliers mobilise this flexibility will be vital. For the Department of Religion and Ethics their structure and organisational model mean they are more restricted, though the increase of their brief to cover not only religion but also moral, ethical and spiritual themes in different formats mean they are becoming slightly more flexible in output. Furthermore, their continued focus on the BBC website and iPlayer show a variety of outlets with which to reach audiences. Independents on the other hand are not only advantaged by their creative ideas (the DRE can argue they can do that too) but in the flexibility they can deliver through introducing new skills and talents to suit the project thus bringing new specialisms and in effect create a more cost efficient way of assembling 'critical mass'. Therefore, in the long term the independent production model may be a more cost efficient way of assembling production. This means that combined with the organisational culture described in the previous chapter, the reasons for a specialist in-house department in the area of religion (irrespective of the quality of its output) are becoming increasingly redundant.

This competition between suppliers in-house as they fight for their continued existence and the independents as they seek a greater share of the commissions will undoubtedly have an affect on the style of output produced. In order to see how this has a practical bearing on the actual output, the next chapter examines the content and form of output today and how that contributes to an overall strategy for religious broadcasting.

## Chapter Seven: Producing Religion

[D]ealing with big stuff in a beautiful way with interesting people.  
(Commissioning Editor for Religion, 2008)

This is how the commissioning editor for religion described the BBC's programmes in this area. It may seem flippant but it also captures many of the key ingredients of religious output today. On review of the output's history, one could argue that it has always been about these things; however, this chapter will argue that the BBC's approach to religion has and is changing in response to the challenges detailed in the previous two chapters. First, it will unpack what the producers who informed this study saw as "big stuff" in the area of religion; in other words what the interviewees felt were the key objectives for religious programming today. Here the focus is on a greater journalistic engagement with religion as a site of social and political debate while at the same time revealing the human aspect of religion. The research will then examine the styles of programming used and whether these contribute to a viable long-term strategy. This chapter concludes by arguing that the current form of religious programming has evolved in response to the way in which producers and commissioning editors have to balance public and commercial interests. This evolution means that today a form of output has emerged which places increased value in spirituality over institutional religion. This has major implications for the future of religious broadcasting and those working within it.

### **"Not a museum piece" (Independent Television Producer, 2007)**

[T]he idea that you took it and make religion and morality almost like a museum piece and you looked around it was always the wrong approach to religion. It was actually at the centre. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

The first thing that was clear from the interviewees was that religion as a topic for broadcasting was, in their view, too important to be neglected. As suggested in the quote above and in previous comments, they saw it as central to many social, political and historical matters and so producers (not only in the religious department) had a duty to engage with it. Indeed this view seems to permeate to the top of the BBC with even the current Director General of the BBC acutely aware of its centrality saying:

Many people worry about the marginalisation of religion in modern life. Let me tell you, from where I'm sitting it's front and centre stage: dynamic, complex, potentially explosive. (Mark Thompson, 2005)

Its importance on so many levels is a key argument for producers as they make the case for its continued legitimacy within broadcasting and the BBC. Primarily there were two sources of "big stuff" which the interviewees felt the BBC should engage with. These were to facilitate debate on the current socio-political agenda surrounding religion and to provide a better understanding of the human aspects of religion as it is lived.

The topicality of religion within various arenas of public debate has taken many by surprise. The tide of secularism, which predicted the decline of religion, has turned leaving tensions between both sides and religion as "the great issue of our time" (New Statesman, 2006). This focus on religion as the problem rather than the solution is particularly seen in discussions in the public sphere surrounding fundamentalism and extremism. Unsurprisingly, those involved with broadcasting religion saw one of their main roles as mediating these debates about the place of religion in society; a long way from the protectionist stance the BBC took towards religion in the past.

Those interviewed were quick to highlight their contribution to the current debate and to claim their authority within the realm of broadcasting. Principally they felt they had a part to play by educating society on the intricacies of various religious traditions and histories and also providing a forum for debate where *all* voices could be heard - a role which they have developed over previous decades. This focus on inclusion (a goal contested throughout history) was important and the producers attributed any failures in this area to logistics outside of their control, such as the failure of certain groups to engage with the media or provide suitable material.

They were also keen to reiterate their autonomy from any religious authority and outlined the way in which this was being achieved:

So we could be critical of the churches. We could subject the church and other religious leaders to rigorous interviewing and investigation or as you might say investigative reporting. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

They stressed at length that religious broadcasting should not be relegated to the soft issues of religion and the majority felt more could be done in the area of journalistic reporting. This respondent's view is typical of the feeling amongst those interviewed:

I'm glad that we are doing that but that's knowledge, core knowledge stuff, library stuff; something else to put into the library. What the BBC doesn't do very much of, and I think Michael [Wakelin, Head of DRE] is right, we

should be doing more about, is when those belief systems come into contact with how people live their lives which is the whole area of ethics and current affairs. (Series Editor, *Songs of Praise*, 2007)

What was very clear was the frustration that producers felt, particularly those within the DRE, in terms of being restricted from fulfilling their journalistic role. The perceived reason for this restriction was that they had neither the skills nor financial resources which are needed to cover this brief and commissioning editors saw the Current Affairs Department as a more proficient originator of these programmes. A lack of skills was refuted in most of the interviews where respondents agreed that although resources were stretched they felt they could do the job effectively, provided institutional support was forthcoming.

The interviewees repeatedly pointed to a perceived paradox within the BBC strategy. Although religious issues are increasing in importance within the public sphere and the BBC acknowledges this (as Mark Thompson's earlier comment suggests), the total amount of time dedicated to covering them is actually decreasing, particularly during peak-time viewing. This claim was supported by Ofcom (2008) which reported that the number of hours of religious programmes in peak time on BBC 2 had fallen, while BBC 1 did experience a slight increase between 2003 and 2007, though not enough to offset the overall fall. This can be seen as a wider trend across terrestrial television where the Ofcom quota for religious broadcasting of any style has been removed and the overall time dedicated to religion has fallen to its lowest ever (*ibid.*); the BBC responded to these figures by reiterating its strategy for 'few, bigger, better' pointing to the specials, high profile occasional series and landmarks which they have transmitted and which underlines their historical approach to religious output of quality and not quantity (Thompson, 2008).

However, according to the interviewees the main casualty of this 'few, bigger, better' approach has been in the area of current affairs programmes dedicated to exploring religious themes. As this respondent points out:

[A]t precisely the time when we need people who understand religion and where you need a forum for people of different religious faiths to come together and where you need to educate all of us about the other, precisely at this moment, it is a central purpose for what the BBC would now define as one of its purposes, citizenship and community, precisely at this moment, What's it doing? Slashing jobs in the religious department ... no core output ... it's a scandal and a failure. (Producer/Presenter, 2007)

Significantly, it would have been the current affairs programmes *Everyman* and *Heart of the Matter* which would have fulfilled this brief before their demise. Here, it is also

clear that it is not only the fall in the number of hours dedicated to religion which is alarming producers but the structural changes taking place at the BBC, the centre of religious production in UK broadcasting. As part of its restructuring plans in 2007, the BBC announced that the net number of job losses would be approximately 1,800 across the BBC. News and factual programming would face the biggest cuts in staff and resources (Sabbagh, 2007). It is expected that a number of these jobs will go from the Department of Religion and Ethics.<sup>46</sup>

Of course religion is not the sole preserve of religious producers and the contribution of the News and Current Affairs Departments very much impacts on their journalistic aim for religious content. Following events such as the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the London bombings in 2005 and the global protests over the publication of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in Denmark, religion was back on the agenda for many of those outside the specialism of religion. According to the interviewees this had a direct affect on their work; now news and current affairs were treading on their patch:

[I]t was a bit of a paradox because suddenly everyone was interested in religion and in a kind of ironic way it made the job much harder because suddenly current affairs producers, documentary producers, art producers, everyone was suddenly very interested in religion. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

It's getting harder because everyone is getting interested in religion; it's the global agenda. The *Today* programmes are chasing stories that we traditionally were the only ones particularly interested in. (Radio Producer, DRE, 2007)

Interestingly, although they wanted to do more in the area of journalism, religious producers were keen to distance themselves from the traditional news approach to stories relating to religion. They were critical of the approach of their colleagues and felt few reports adequately contextualised the religious element within the story focusing only on a specific type of coverage:

I mean current affairs do religion brilliantly well at the sharp end but there is no back-story, there is no deep analysis and ... religious current affairs has become the preserve of the extremists. (Head of DRE, 2007)

As described in Chapter One concerning the context of this research, in 2006 the BBC's Charter Review Committee echoed this argument. Within the genre of news, their report reminded the BBC that objectivity and contextualisation are key to effective news reporting. Specifically it criticised the BBC for failing to provide sufficient

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<sup>46</sup> At this stage is difficult to tell the exact number of jobs cuts that the department will face. A number of key staff are in the process of taking retirement but it is likely that over the coming years the net number of staff will decrease. Furthermore, with the continuing development of the Corporation's digital strategy the department are keen to get in new skills and so for instance in April 2008 advertised a job vacancy for a Head of Development with online and multi-media skills an essential requirement for the job. This shift in focus is likely to affect the department's technical and production staff.

background to religious stories, particularly conflicts between religious groups. Resolving this failure and improving the competencies of reporters were its main recommendations in this area, though it did not outline any practical measures it wanted to see enforced.

As a result of this failure many respondents felt that specialist religious producers could add their own contribution to such news stories and within the Corporation they had a unique vantage point:

[I]n other words what they [current affairs] are looking for is religion as news and controversy. They are not looking at those other aspects of religion, which occupy an awful lot of the time of a religious department. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

It shocked, I think, some Christian people that we could treat the church rather roughly at times. On the other hand, a lot of people appreciated that it was doing a truthful and professional job, it didn't particularly mean we were anti; we were just detached. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

[T]he challenge now is how do we remain unique, how do we deliver something about religion that other people aren't [...] other departments like current affairs are getting interested in it and that's a challenge for us because we are not the only people interested in our subject anymore. What we have is an expertise. We got a lot of people who know what they are talking about. (Radio Producer, DRE, 2007)

This "expertise" is at the core of their unique offering and was used by many of the interviewees as a way of legitimising the in-house department's continued existence while the BBC was still committed to public service broadcasting, an argument outlined in Chapter Six.

In terms of actual output that adopts a journalistic approach to religion there are a small number of outlets for topical debate produced under the remit of religious programming. At the moment, *Sunday* (1970 - ) on Radio 4 is the only religious news and current affairs programme on network radio.<sup>47</sup> According to one of its producers, the role of *Sunday* is to:

I would say, and I said it before, to get under the skin a bit of stories maybe more than other news programmes have, particularly when it comes to religious stories. (Radio Producer, DRE, 2007)

Producers describe the format as a mix of serious discussions and "quirky stories" featuring both national and international religious topics. Features include interviews with senior religious officials, coverage of the major faith conferences, and debates on

<sup>47</sup> However, on regional radio a number of discussion programmes do deal with topical religious debates including *All Things Considered* (BBC Radio Wales), *Sunday Sequence* (BBC Radio Ulster) and *New Every Morning* (BBC Radio Scotland).

topical religious stories. Despite *Sunday* being relocated several times within the schedules it eventually settled into a slot on Sunday mornings at 7.10a.m. The audience for the programme and the worship that immediately follows it sits at approximately one million listeners - a figure the BBC are reported to be content with (Wakelin, 2007). The BBC Listen Again function adds to that also, though figures are less readily available.

The success of *Sunday* as a topical current affairs programme is partially due to the production ideology of the programme which, like other news services, has placed impartiality and objectivity as its guiding principles. These well established tenets of the BBC's approach to news play a distinct role, allowing *Sunday* to remain independent of all views without commitment to any one denomination or group. It also allows it to remain free of any claims that it advocates certain values or beliefs. As this respondent describes:

It allowed all sorts of voices to be heard many of which were very hostile. Of course it's a generalistic programme for the BBC so it has to retain an impartiality, but in my time I always felt that *Sunday* didn't duck, you know the whole debate about gays in the Church of England, I think we took it pretty much head on. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

This puts *Sunday* in stark contrast with another religious programme on Radio 4 that purports to add comment on the day's news stories - *Thought for the Day*. Unlike *Sunday*, *Thought for the Day* (despite its place in the heart of the *Today* programme (Radio 4, 1957 - ), one of the mainstays of BBC news) does not adhere to any major principles of impartiality and objectivity. While *Sunday* takes a more critical stance towards religious institutions and their policies, *Thought for the Day* does not. The theme is always associated with religion and many of the contributors refer directly to religious scripture in support of their view.<sup>48</sup> Aside from restricting access to agnostics and atheists, the programme itself regularly provokes debate on its content, contributors and future (Mitchell, 1999). By placing *Thought for the Day* in the hands of religious groups and simply giving it over to the slot, the BBC essentially distances itself on some levels retaining its professional journalistic conduct for programmes like *Sunday*.

*Sunday's* credibility as a religious current affairs programme is further enhanced in two ways. Its presenter, Roger Bolton was the editor of a number of high profile current affairs and topical news programmes including *Tonight* (1978), *Panorama* (1979),

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<sup>48</sup> It is important to point out that *Thought for the Day* is not produced by staff with *Today*. Logistically it is co-ordinated by the Department of Religion and Ethics and narrated by outside commentators, making it one of the only regular contributions to *Today* from outside the news department.



*Nationwide* (1981) and *This Week* (1986) and although not directly involved in the production he does challenge production decisions often posing questions on “Why we are doing something?” (Radio Producer, DRE, 2007), thus acting as an additional gatekeeper within the production process and adding a further level of credibility. Furthermore, *Sunday* has significant value amongst the religious press who will often report on stories or interviews with key clergy. As a result of this integrity as a current affairs programme, Hendy (2007) points out that for a number of producers in the religious department, *Sunday* was used a stepping stone to the production of other documentaries for Radio 4 showing that its professional standing is secure.

The contribution of television to the area of religious current affairs is far less clear. Television is an important creative vehicle for presenting topical debate on religious issues. Like many other areas of factual production, religious television of this style has its battle scars, losing key current affairs strands along the way. None were so bitterly lamented by the interviewees as the topical programme *Heart of the Matter* and, even more so, *Everyman*.

Both of these programmes began transmitting in the late 1970s, though the decision to commission them involved fraught negotiations. Colin Morris, head of the religious department at the time, tells how the decision eventually came about:

I recruited a number of very talented filmmakers [...] These were young producers, interested in religion, but not in the least bit interested in doing studio discussions with four bishops and Malcolm Muggeridge. And so it became clear if we spent money, and it would take a significantly bigger budget to produce documentaries rather than these huge studio programmes, we would have to persuade the controller to put the money in. But also its audience was very very limited and this team were desperately anxious to get in to the mainstream of broadcasting. They wanted to be tested against *Panorama* and *Horizon* and *World in Action*. They didn't want to be tested against another studio programme on ITV [...] So that's how *Heart of the Matter* and *Everyman* became part of the mainstream. But it did not survive ... everything depended on the support of the controller [...] If we hadn't had that team I don't think we would have gotten away with it. [...] But because of their quality and their dedication they made some superb programmes and they won prizes. And so *Everyman* was established. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

This view of *Everyman* and *Heart of the Matter* as “superb programmes” was reiterated by many of the other respondents and indeed it can be gleaned from the interviews that many saw this as a ‘golden age’ for religious debate on television.<sup>49</sup> However, as Morris

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<sup>49</sup> This idea of a ‘golden age’ for religious programmes is challenged in a speech by Mark Thompson, Director General of the BBC and one time researcher with the programme *Everyman*. He remembers that “At the same time I couldn't help noticing that one thing that *Everyman* didn't seem to do very often was actually to make programmes about religion. Each year there would be a handful of programmes on conventional religious subjects [...] But most editions of *Everyman*

suggests above, this would not last and both programmes would eventually be cancelled. Some of the reasons for their demise included cost and politics:

[T]here was a period when *Everyman* was working wonderfully well but it was a match between the freedom to pursue ideas which were not necessarily going to get huge audiences but were going to be significant. *Everyman* costs huge amounts of money, had a comparatively small audience but were really important programmes to do. We were given freedom to do that. You just wouldn't be given the freedom to do that any more. The equation between cost and audiences would come into play ... The BBC should have had more freedom than anyone else because we weren't tied to getting specifically big audiences we had the public service remit but all the television controllers that I worked with were constantly anxious to know what size of audience were we going to get. How much money it was going to cost and the money factor really began to kick in in the mid-'90s. There was much less freedom to take an *Everyman* budget over 18 programmes but we are going to spend a lot on this one and very little on this one. The controller would actually be anxious "Well why are you spending all that money on this one if it's not going to get a big audience". (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

As a result [of the move to Manchester] there was a massive brain drain, we lost some of our top *Everyman* directors, so *Everyman* then went into a flat tail spin because they brought in [...] people who had absolutely no interest in religion what so ever. Killed it dead. Because basically they weren't enthusiastic about its USP [unique selling point] and the whole tenor of it changed. That coupled with the arrival of Jane Root as controller of BBC 2 because *Everyman* used to be on BBC 1 and was then bumped onto BBC 2 and Jane Root just didn't want it. (Head of DRE, 2007)

As discussed in Chapter Five having someone to champion religion is a key factor in the successful commission of many programmes. Here, as the quote suggests, there was not a natural leader to fight for its importance and so it was cancelled despite relatively good ratings. Many argued that this was a "loss" to television particularly with the current debates around religion and they felt a revival of either or both programmes could make a significant contribution to the debates. However, it seems this view is not shared amongst senior management at the BBC:

We used to have *Everyman* which could respond to any situation quite quickly but it could also tell the longer story of what was going on in the world and I am constantly frustrated that we don't have that, but as I have been told several times down in London there is just no appetite for a resurrection of that [shakes head]. (Head of DRE, 2007)

However, there are some outlets for religious debate on television today. Over the years *Heaven and Earth*, aired on a BBC 1 on Sunday mornings, sought a "harder edge" (Radio Producer, DRE, 2007) to its programmes. This was eventually replaced by *The Big Questions* which as its Executive Producer describes is a "moral, ethical and faith programme [...] I don't think of it as just being a religious programme". This is

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were only "religious" in the broadest possible sense. They'd deal with topics in the hinterland between science and spirituality - cryogenic suspension, for instance, as a hoped-for route to immortality". (Thompson, 2008).

exemplified by the choice of debates. For instance, in one programme aired in January 2008 areas for debate included whether some faiths were becoming increasingly physically ghettoised leading to 'no-go areas' in Britain, whether we should (as opposed to whether we can) contact the dead and whether lesbians should be able to receive IVF treatment to have a baby. This disparate range of popular topics may be partially accounted for in the entertainment backgrounds of those involved in producing the show. In relation to the way this impacts on the format of the programme the executive producer says "we are slightly like a cross between *Question Time* and *Kilroy*" (Independent Producer, 2008). To this end the programme is a mix of specialists and lay people from a variety of faiths, some with no discernable faith. All form part of a live studio audience. Debates (sometimes heated) between the specialists and the lay audience are encouraged, though moderated by the host, Nicky Clark. Although the specialists are described as experts they are not beyond reproach by the audience or the host and it is only the week's celebrity guest who is physically set apart from the audience (lay people and experts).

This section considered how producers of religious programmes see their role as journalists addressing the current socio-political debates on religion. Frustrated by the narrowness of their remit, the shortage of necessary resources and competition from Current Affairs and News departments they have become critical of their current contribution in this area. Nonetheless, their expertise can be seen in some output namely *Sunday*, and to a lesser extent, *The Big Questions*. However, where the interviewees saw more success was in the output concerning the experiential aspects of religion.

### **Representing the human aspects of religion**

As detailed earlier, those interviewed feel religion is at the heart of many experiences and they therefore had a duty to connect with it and to show the way religion engages with the human aspects of life in contemporary society. Religious programmes have been, and they argued should be, less concerned with the theological and institutional aspects of religion and should, in general, focus on the less contested elements so as to inspire, help and guide individuals. For instance, when asked about the aim of their own programme or other programmes of this style, these interviewees responded:

For me its inspiration, it has to be inspirational music and inspirational stories. (Series Editor *Songs of Praise*, 2007)

[I]f you break religion down, in one way it is a guide to behaviour. It's a moral code, a way you live your life. I think those elements lend themselves very well to the experiential. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

[T]o give thinking space in our crowded lives about the spiritual things in our lives, it's not just for church goers, it's for people who have probably stopped going to church or who are totally immersed in the frenetic business of 21<sup>st</sup> century life ... it's an opportunity for them to be prompted gently about something philosophical or spiritual. (Independent Radio Producer, 2007)

[T]hey're actually stimulating people to think and look at themselves and understand the world, perhaps sometimes in a slightly different way. That's huge. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

These are not essentially different from the increasingly broad aims recounted in the history in relation to the BBC's adopted duty to speak to both believer and non-believer. These quotes suggest that at the heart of their programming is a concern with the personal; a focus on the individual's relationship with faith as opposed to religious doctrine or theology.

It was widely believed by those interviewed that there was an "appetite" for religious programmes amongst British audiences (again here there is evidence that producers evoked the concept of the "imagined audience" introduced in the previous chapter). 'Spiritual' and 'spirituality' were terms that re-merged again and again during conversations in conjunction with discussion of this appetite. Many of the interviewees articulated a specific move away from an overtly religious approach and this was replaced by a concern for the spiritual, a less contentious way of talking about this area:

I like there to be a really strong human aspect to the programmes ... I would call it spiritual more than religious, but it is about religion. (Independent Radio Producer, 2007)

This move needs to be contextualised within what is happening in the wider society. Sociologists of religion such as Wade Clark Roof (1993), Grace Davie (1990) and Steve Bruce (1995), all theorize the changes to the way religion is practised and valued. Clark, for instance, first coined the term "spiritual marketplace" regarding religiosity in the US in which Americans are undertaking a project of self-reflexivity with an emphasis on personal choice, happiness and holistic well-being at the centre. Spirituality, as opposed to religiosity, more accurately captures this change as it involves "pastiche styles of belief and practice" (Clark, 1993: 165). Davie and Bruce look specifically at changes in religious affiliation and identity in post-war Britain. "Believing without belonging" is how Davie describes this phenomenon in the British context where religiosity exists but there is now less affiliation to the churches and religious

institutions.<sup>50</sup> Again people draw on various images and beliefs to form their faith identity and as a result of this Bruce argues that in particular “the Christian churches have lost their ability to shape popular thinking” (Bruce, 1995: 71) thus he argues the influence of the church in everyday life is waning.

This shift in the practice and value of religion seems to have influenced respondents in this study who often talked in terms of a less ostensibly religious audience and an audience more interested in spirituality:

[R]eligion was always viewed with deep suspicion. I mean there are high points where you feel actually something is going on here. As that suspicion deepened within the commissioning editors and broadcasters, society started to actively seek out the spiritual dynamic in life. You look at the '80s, the rise of mind, body, and spirituality sections in places like Waterstones. Once religion in the mind of the people was freed from established constraints about how you should think [...] Society has quite clearly shown an appetite for the spiritual. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

This focus on spirituality is also driven by research on audiences who are found to want a broader definition of religion encompassing morality and ethics for instance (Ofcom, 2005). Even in recent meetings of the BBC Governors (now the BBC Trust) they confidently report that “In Britain the religion package isn’t doing well, but spirituality’s market share is growing” (BBC Governance Unit, 2005(b): 2), which seems to justify producer’s approach to this area of output.

Institutionally the BBC has also embraced this spiritual worldview. For instance, in 2000 the Religious Broadcasting Department was renamed the ‘Department of Religion and Ethics’ and would have the aim of developing “a cross-media editorial strategy” (*Ariel*, the BBC staff newspaper, 2000 cited Holmes, 2000: 69). The reason for this rebranding was unclear to many of the interviewees, though one did suspect the change to be politically motivated to remove certain named positions within the department. Despite this, it is likely that the new title was intended to capture the increasing amount of non-religious material produced by the department such as *The Moral Maze* (a live debate on Radio 4 examining the moral issues behind one of the week’s news stories). Indeed, some respondents saw the term ‘religious programming’ as limiting their aims:

We are not just a religious programme, we are a moral, ethical and faith programme so its all three things which come under that commissioning [...] so it isn’t just a religious programme that’s the point and I don’t think they

<sup>50</sup> Wolffe takes a similar view when he describes the ‘silent majority’ (1993: 307) and Piggott when he points to the private spirituality of ‘fuzzy fidelity’ (2008: 43).

were looking for something which was a religious programme in the brief and I think that's one of the reasons why *The Big Questions* was commissioned because we would have had a wider appeal on the moral and ethical, bringing other people in and also make some of the faith issues understandable to people who might not be members of that particular faith. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

By moving away from the label of religious programming, producers are hoping to widen the appeal both to audience (and commissioners). This features as part of a "mainstreaming strategy" (Cottle, 1998) where religion is not seen as a minority interest but something which can appeal to a larger secular audience. Something that those at the top of the BBC advocate:

Programmes like *The Monastery* or more recently *Extreme Pilgrim* and the audience reaction to them suggest to me not just a persistence but a sharp revival of interest in the spiritual potential of traditional religious practice and belief, while the way the public have embraced programmes like *An Island Parish*, the resilience of titles like *Songs Of Praise* despite vastly more intense competitive pressures, imply that interest in religion as lived in communities and between people continues to feel relevant and valuable to millions. (Thompson, 2008)

Chapter One of this thesis outlined the way in which audiences directly criticised traditional religious offerings as too narrow. This quote shows that there has been a concerted effort (from the very top of the organisation) to widen the appeal of the themes of religious broadcasting. However, while spirituality is definitely seen as more audience-friendly it is still not necessarily commission-friendly, as the earlier quotes regarding the suspicion of the commissioning editors and broadcasters suggest. Therefore an internal conflict may exist between what is being claimed and what is actually being commissioned.

The move towards spiritual as opposed to religious programmes has not gone unnoticed by external observers, as the public campaign against the BBC by Nigel Holmes and the General Synod of the Church of England in 1999 demonstrated. The move has also caused a ripple of discontent amongst producers interviewed in this study:

For a listener to say I didn't realise that was a religious programme what does that say? What it says is that they don't realise that it was a programme made by the Religious Broadcasting Department. (Independent Producer, 2007)

In response to the problems surrounding the definition of religious broadcasting the parameters of the programming have been widened to the point where the question can be raised is it still relevant to even talk about religious broadcasting? If religion is difficult to define then spirituality is even more so as this comment suggests:

Spirituality divorced from the context of specific tradition [...] becomes in the end vacuous. (Buxton, 2005)<sup>51</sup>

As a result of this difficulty with effectively defining spirituality and what it is about some have criticised programmes in this area for their vagueness. For example, Channel 4's unsuccessful *Spirituality Shopper* (C4, 2005) where participants were given the chance to sample four quasi-religious faiths was described by one critic as "a last-gasp lucky dip for the feckless and the fickle" (Fraser, 2005).<sup>52</sup>

So far, this chapter has addressed the broad aims for religious producers and has found that these are heavily conditioned by developments in the wider society, such as the socio-political debates on religion and the growth in the "spiritual marketplace". These aims are achieved through first, engaging with religion from a journalistic viewpoint, and secondly connecting with it as part of the human experience. According to the interviewees the latter aim is being achieved to a certain degree by programmes such as *Moral Maze*, *Something Understood* (Radio 4, 1995 - ) and *Songs of Praise*. More worryingly, according to the producers in this study, is that the first goal is not being sufficiently achieved. They argue that although the BBC says it does want to fulfil this journalistic remit it is not putting in place the mechanisms to do this. According to the participants in this study the Corporation's public commitments to religious debate are becoming increasingly undermined in practice. As far as the interviewees were concerned their professional expertise was being squandered as their limited resources were increasingly diverted away from religious current affairs and into popular, historical and landmark programmes dealing with religious themes. The implications of this will be examined more closely over the next sections which examine the content of religious programmes and how they relate to the BBC's strategy for religion. It recognises that there are three main styles of programming - worship, factual and landmark programmes. It outlines the conventions of each and asks whether these produce a viable religious programming strategy in the long term.

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<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Buxton (2005) was one of the participants in the BBC 2 television programme *The Monastery*.

<sup>52</sup> Each of the three episodes of *Spirituality Shopper* (2005) looked at four different religious and non-religious practices that were tested by participants to see if they would bring inner peace and happiness to their lives. Practices included Sufi Whirling, Buddhist Meditation, Christian Lent, Jewish Shabbat, Gospel singing, Sikh langars, Hindu yoga, Pagan drumming, Quaker contemplation and Islamic prayer.

## Worship: the end of an era?

[T]he linchpin of religious broadcasting was the church service in one form or another. (Morris, 1984: 101)

The first pillar of programming is the area of worship. It is a by-product of the history of religious output as many of the programmes stemmed from the earliest days of religious broadcasting and were some of the first to make the transition from radio to television. Programmes such as the *Daily Service*, *Sunday Worship* and *Prayer for the Day*, though also *Thought for the Day* and *Songs of Praise* are included in this style of programme. They are most easily recognised as religious programmes by audiences; though they are not necessarily valued (Gunter & Viney, 1994; Ofcom, 2005; Svennevig, 1988), being seen as too traditional (though supporters regards this as their nostalgic value). These programmes are characterised by the direct inclusion of the Christian church and other religious institutions either through the broadcasting of actual services or through the use of vocationally skilled presenters, such as clergy and religious leaders. Crucially these programmes assume a religious commitment on the part of their audience.

In recent years, radio has been the main home of this style of programming due to the cost efficiency of the medium in relation to outside broadcasts of church services, the nature of the medium and the “special nature of the radio audience” (Contributor to *Thought for the Day*, 2007):

I think it has something to do with the medium. Religion has adapted much better to radio than it has to television. Part of that has to do with costs. There is very little worship on television apart from high days and holy days. I think that’s a direct equation between the number of people who tune in and the cost of doing it. Worship on radio has been enormously successful. It can be done economically, quite cheaply. I think radio is also a medium to discuss ideas, radio is so much better than television. When you look at the radio output today it is enormously successful. Television constantly struggles to find formats that will work. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

[Television] can’t sit still, it’s a kind of attention deficit disorder really and I don’t think that religion is very well suited to that kind of manic pace and flitting around and grasshopper mentality. Religion requires deeper thought and greater patience and it requires some kind of personal connection and I think radio is fantastically good at that. Speech radio is fantastically good at somebody connecting through the airwaves with a person. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

For radio there hasn’t been the same desperate search for popular programming. (Former Head of Religious Programmes TV, 2007)

This underlines the different experiences between the provision of religious programmes on television and radio; a feature which was clear in the history detailed in



Chapters Three and Four. The consensus amongst the interviewees was that radio's nature as a more intimate and mature medium makes it a better vehicle for religious worship. Therefore, for television audiences, outside of *Songs of Praise*, televised services are restricted to special coverage of events of national significance such as war commemorations, royal weddings and funerals and the funeral service of certain high profile individuals.<sup>53</sup>

Worship programming is most easily recognisable as contributing to the BBC's commitment to public service. According to the commissioning editor for religion on Radio 4 speaking about the minority appeal of certain types of religious output particularly worship:

This is something they [the audience for worship programmes] hold very dear in their lives and frankly if there isn't room in the BBC for something as frankly eccentric as the *Daily Service* that means an awful lot to a smaller number of people, then we might as well pack up our bags and go home.<sup>54</sup>

However, the continued existence of regular worship on television and network radio is under threat. While the UK is a predominantly Christian country, as noted by the latest census in 2001 (Office for National Statistics, 2003), the BBC can legitimately argue that broadcasting church services is a link to citizenship and "a common cultural experience" (Whittle, 2002), even if this is regarded as historic nostalgia. However, with changes to the religious make-up of the country and the growth of multiculturalism that argument is less effective. Despite these arguments, worship is likely to remain on radio at least in the short-term for two reasons; first, it is important not to underestimate the value of heritage to an organisation like the BBC which can be slow to change and whose audience can be loyal and conservative, especially for Radio 4 where the bulk of worship broadcasts are scheduled. Secondly there are a variety of semi-political reasons why it would not be removed and the BBC does not want to have to enter into a battle with the churches and religious leaders regardless of their weakened position. However, in the long term, worship in broadcasting is unlikely to get a reprieve and with the removal of the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC), the last direct link between church and Corporation, the wheels are slowly being put in motion to likely remove this area of output.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For the death of Cardinal Basil Hume, Archbishop of Westminster, BBC Television decided to carry the funeral mass which according to Mark Thompson (BBC DG) was "a decision which provoked some internal debate and which was certainly not expected by many to appeal to the typical BBC 1 daytime audience. Far from it. More people watched it than watched the normal schedule and we know, because they told us, that they greatly appreciated it. In the same vein, across TV, radio and the web, there was immense interest in the final days and funeral of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict" (Thompson, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> This interviewee went on to admit that if the BBC was starting afresh it probably wouldn't include "traditional stuff like that but there are some things we do and we do them because they matter".

<sup>55</sup> The BBC (2008(a)) revealed in its annual report that it was dropping the Central Religious Advisory Council (CRAC). The annual report says: "The Trust considered the future of CRAC at the end of 2007, and agreed that it did not sit well with the new governance arrangements. The only formal advisory bodies that the Trust has under the Charter are the four

One vital reprieve for religious worship may be on BBC local radio where there still continues to be a rich offering of local church services. Furthermore, one of the draws of the worship services for many listeners and viewers (even when it first started) was the quality of the choral music it provided. This may find other outlets, not specifically religious ones. For example in 2008, BBC 4 screened their biggest classical music series to date exploring the evolution of western religious music in *Sacred Music*. According to the BBC “it was very well received” (BBC, 2008(a): 36) and likely to be replicated in the future. This may hint at some of the ways in which worship output will be broken down and elements appear in other mainstream secular areas.

### **Performing religion: specialist factual programming**

The second style of programming, which is seen as more contemporary, often enjoying more audience support (on paper at least (Ofcom: 2005)), relates mainly to specialist factual programmes, in other words programmes on the themes of religion which use many of the conventions of factual, documentary and reality television genres. As it does not assume a religious commitment on the part of audiences it may try to explain belief through narratives, visuals or presentation. There is a wider range of programmes in this category and include titles such as *The Monastery*, *Heaven and Earth*, *A Country Parish* (BBC 2, 2003), *A Seaside Parish* (BBC 2, 2004 - 2006), *An Island Parish* (BBC 2, 2007 - ), *Humphrys in Search of God* (Radio 4, 2006), *Extreme Pilgrim*, *Clash of Worlds* (BBC 2, 2007) and *The Protestant Revolution* (BBC 4, 2007). While these deal with themes of religion and faith they have not been immune to the ways in which factual programmes, on television in particular, have been “restyled” (Hill, 2007). Hill describes a number of ways in which this restyling takes place and it is clear that there is an increased use of these tools in the styling of religious output today.

One feature of this restyling includes an emphasis on personalities and performance and this can be clearly seen in the current approaches to religion which are characterised by celebrities and ordinary people:

It used to be like politics, you interview the PM or the cabinet, now it’s much more interesting to call on real people. There is a lot more to be done with individuals whether they be historians or psychologists or ordinary people in every aspect of life, whether they be footballers or pop stars dealing with religion and religion becomes a living thing rather than a sort of museum piece. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

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Audience Councils; and under the new consultative model of the Trust, all stakeholders can have their say through consultations on purpose remits, service reviews, public value tests and other matters”. The CRAC may continue as some reduced form of advisory services to programme-makers but it was not clear at this stage how prevalent this service would be. This move received very little response in either the religious or secular press.

As this comment and indeed many others illustrate, the approach and format of the shows are heavily influenced by the choice of presenter and contributor. Here, the producer juxtaposes the staid traditional approach with the vibrancy of integrating celebrities and ordinary people; in other words, it comes alive and thus becomes interesting on screen when these ingredients are included.

In relation to the choice of presenter, as illustrated in Chapters Three and Four, one of the key issues, which emerged from that history, was the question of control. Who controlled the form and content of religious programmes - the BBC or religious groups? Initially it was hoped by the BBC that the churches would take responsibility for the output. However, tensions quickly erupted over the style of address and choice of persons presenting. In the early days it would be vocationally skilled people (i.e. clergy and religious figures) who would present and produce these programmes and so many of these programmes were akin to lectures or sermons. Over time, and with the increasing professionalism of broadcasting and the pursuit of ratings, the focus turned to broadcasting skills. Bennett (2008) distinguishes between these two forms of performance by presenters - televisually skilled and vocationally skilled performers. He goes on to state that the “authenticity of the character [on screen] is tied inextricably to the credibility of their professed skill” (2008, 36). Looking across the schedules it is clear that the emphasis for religious output is on televisually skilled performers often imbued with an aura of celebrity from earlier non-religious work. For instance, *Songs of Praise* (Aled Jones, Sally Magnusson, Pam Rhodes), *Sunday* (Roger Bolton), *The Story of God* (Robert Winston), *Something Understood* (Mark Tully), *Belief* (Joan Bakewell), *Good Morning Sunday* (Aled Jones), *Sunday Life* (Colin Jackson, Louise Minchin) and *The Big Questions* (Nicky Clark) all rely on presenters known in other areas outside of religion and although all the programme presenters profess interest in matters of faith, none is vocationally skilled nor has a theological background, coming from a range of backgrounds such as news journalism, academia, sport and music.

The significance of non-vocationally skilled presenters and celebrities in religious programmes is not confined to BBC as Channel 4's *The Bible Revolution* (Rod Liddle), *Root of all Evil* (Richard Dawkins), *The Fundamentalists* (Mark Dowd), *Spirituality Shopper* (Jonathan Edwards) *Quest for the Lost Ark* (Tudor Parfitt), *Inside Hamas* (David Rosenberg) along with a range of celebrity fronted programmes (presented by Keith Allen, Johnny Vegas, Jayne Middlemiss and Amir Khan) suggest. There are now fewer and fewer of the senior representatives of any of the major faiths appearing regularly on factual television (especially outside of current affairs and news programming). They are being sidelined in favour of celebrities. Compare this to other specialist programming, for example history where programmes are usually fronted by historians

and indeed the author-presenter is a figure central to enhancing the authority of this style of programming (Bell & Gray, 2007: 147). This feature demonstrates further the BBC's increased consolidation of control over religious broadcasting secured through specific production decisions which populate programmes with non-religious presenters.

There is also an increased use of "ordinary people" (Bonner, 2003) in religious programmes. The term "ordinary" is used to describe contributors who are from outside the profession of broadcasting but who have a specific role to fill (ibid.: 213). It must be stated that this use of ordinary is not limited to religious programmes and broadcasting, particularly television, has embraced the use of 'ordinary people' in a wide range of genres with the aim of reducing the gap between viewer and viewed suggesting the existence of a real bond between performer and viewer (Bonner, 2003; Lury, 1995).

The producers who informed the present study were clear that this style of ordinariness was central to creating a wider appeal for audiences and that this integration of the ordinary is a regular part of the production decisions on how programmes are arranged:

They might want to put their spokesperson up but we actually want to hear the human story behind it so have you got somebody in the community who has had this experience who you can put us in touch with. (Radio Producer DRE, 2007)

We also try to mix the personal experience, you know people who will have been in a situation and that's why they are there. (Independent Television Producer, 2007)

There is new audience research on BBC 3 which shows that that's not the case, they are not interested in religious figures but very interested in people. (Head of DRE, 2007; speaking about the claim that audiences are not interested in religion)

As these comments illustrate, in each of these the vision for the format of their respective shows is influenced by the integration of the contributor. Particularly in the last of these, it is clear that the producers in this area see it as a response to a specific demand from audiences. By using ordinary people and presenters this output evolves away from the traditional, institutionalised concern with 'authenticity-from-above' (Coupland, 2001) gleaned from the inclusion of senior religious figures. Instead it works to generate 'authenticity-from-below' based on the experiences of 'real' people, a dichotomy borrowed from Nickolas Coupland's (2001) discussion of the stylisation of news reporting.

The use of ordinary people in programming is heavily conditioned by the conventions of factual television and a third feature of the restyling of factual programming relates to the use of emotions as spectacle. Here the narrative demands a transformative journey populated with authentic feelings and sentiments. Dovey (2000) writes about the narrative conventions of what he calls “first person programming”:

Now we have confession as an open discourse, de-ritualised, one in which intimate speaking is validated as part of the quest for psychic health, as part of our ‘right’ to selfhood. (Dovey, 2000: 107)

When participants are faced with emotional situations (for instance, questioning their faith in God or understanding another’s faith), they often reveal their “true” selves and it is this true self which is valuable to producers. According to van Leeuwen:

[T]he impulsive immediate answer is seen as more valuable and truthful than the carefully thought-out answer. (van Leeuwen, 2001: 394)

This means stories and formats are contrived to bring out the ‘true self’. For instance, one of the key moments of *The Monastery* was the apparent onscreen conversion of one of the men to Christianity. Through the camera work and editing, the drama of the spectacle and emotion of the moment was effectively relayed to the audience. These techniques are used in religious programmes in order to deliver what is seen as a natural ‘lived’ expression of faith. By humanising stories and experiences producers hope to achieve a more natural expression and therefore a more authentic style of output.

Obviously this idea of the “true” self or natural expression is contentious. Hill (2005) argues that audiences actively look for the moment of authenticity of popular factual programmes. However, delivering this is not always feasible in a production context and this meant that the authenticity believed to be associated with the ordinary was contested by some of the interviewees:

I think you’re missing authenticity. You are not really getting for those with faith what religion really means to them and for those without faith what is involved in their kind of struggle for meaning and purpose. You’re contriving situations rather than following real situations. You’re not doing things that many people both with and without faith would recognise. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

Many of the interviewees referred to the nature of the medium of television, which is heavily dependent on aesthetics and limited in resources (time and financial), questioning whether the medium was capable of capturing the authenticity of belief at all. This contemporary approach is in stark contrast to the advice that Roy McKay, Head of the Religious Broadcasting Department (1955-1963) gives about the best way to use people on television:

[T]he only way to guard against a superficial treatment was to choose the right people and make sure that they had enough time well in advance of the programme to think out together the main points to be covered. In this kind of programme [a chat show called *Meeting Point*] it is essential to achieve a proper balance between spontaneity and a thought-out position. (McKay, 1964: 860)

Here, significantly McKay uses the word “superficial” taken to be the antithesis of authentic, as something that producers were keenly aware of. This shows the historical change in television production, including religious programmes, where there is now an emphasis on liveness, naturalisation and thus perceived authenticity.

There are a number of examples of how this restyled form of factual television is impacting on religious output. For instance, at present there are a number of highly successful programmes dealing with religious themes taking on the conventions of reality television. Examples include *A Country Parish*, *An Island Parish*, *The Children of Helen House* (BBC 2, 2007) and most successfully *The Monastery* which made a “profound impression” on both the participants and the audience (Buxton, 2005). However, one of the most effective recent examples of this contemporary style of factual television is the BBC’s in-house production *Extreme Pilgrim* and its main star Reverend Peter Owen-Jones.

*Extreme Pilgrim* (BBC 2, 2008) is a mix of travelogue and reality television. It is about how Owen-Jones, a former ad executive turned vicar, goes to experience some of the orthodox religious traditions that use physical hardship as part of their expression of faith. Produced in-house by the religious department, the three parts of *Extreme Pilgrim* follow Owen-Jones’ journey as he goes to China, India and Egypt to live as a monk, a sadhu and a hermit and, as he describes it, to “test” their beliefs. The journey becomes more and more extreme physically and emotionally. For example, the viewer sees the physical toll of this pilgrimage on him and his pieces to camera show him struggling with personal problems, separation from his wife and anxiety about the future. Interestingly, during his monologues he replaces much of his talk about religion with talk about spirituality and the benefits of this, thus supporting the earlier argument about the pervasiveness of this style of discourse in the realm of religious programmes.

The use of the Reverend Peter Owen-Jones to front many of the BBC’s programmes on religion is significant. It is clear that the choice of presenter is imbued with an intended set of meanings which again point to the primacy of broadcasting over

vocation. Although Owen-Jones is part of the traditional religious institution his occupation as reverend is underplayed after his initial introduction. A number of scenes from across the series show that he is both within and outside the institution. His role on the programme is as 'one of us', as an ordinary person and throughout the series the authority of religion is undercut (both Christian and non-Christian faiths). For instance, in one scene he talks about the limitations of his church and how it seeks to actively suppress religious debate.

The BBC has used Owen-Jones in a number of religious projects. For example, he has also fronted *The Lost Gospels* (BBC 4, 2007 repeated BBC 2, 2008) and appeared on *The Battle for Britain's Soul* (BBC 2, 2004) with plans in place for further projects. Indeed, the BBC hope "his "maverick" style will do for religious programmes what Simon Schama, Niall Ferguson and David Starkey have done for history on television" (Morrison, 2003). This "maverick" style includes abandoning his clerical collar, chain smoking and declared scepticism about some of the features of his faith particularly the institutional parts (BBC, 2004 (b); O'Hagan, 2002).

The programme and particularly its presenter were regularly lauded as "great television" (Commissioning Editor Television, 2008) and the department was undoubtedly proud of the final outcome. Audience share was between 6.3 per cent and 8 per cent across the three episodes, a very respectable level considering that the BBC had taken the decision not to trail it heavily in the weeks prior to its airing. However, significant publicity was received by the show in various newspapers and it was singled out as the critics' choice in many of the newspapers for that day including *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Mirror*, and for that week in *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer*.

To conclude this section, Bennett (2008) asserts that the people chosen to present or appear on programmes have a specific economic, ideological, textual and cultural importance and that their performance is imbued with various meanings. This section uncovers some of the ways in which performers from within and outside broadcasting may contribute to a specific type of factual programming relating to religion, as the case of *Extreme Pilgrim* demonstrated. It has also pointed to some of the meanings around the choice of people in religious programmes examining what role these people play and how their performance achieves the style of output that producers and broadcasters are looking for. It appears that in factual religious programmes the restyling of the output has two specific functions; first, to further emphasize the BBC's

authority over the church in this area and secondly to enhance the authenticity of religious output.

### Landmarks, super landmarks and event TV

The final pillar of programming is the landmark programme that is generally a historical drama. The most high-profile in recent years have been *Son of God* (aired on BBC 1 in 2001), *Manchester Passion* (live on BBC 3 during Easter 2006), *Liverpool Nativity* (again broadcast live on BBC 3 in December 2007) and *The Passion* (aired on BBC 1 in 2008). These are expected to be followed by a dramatic retelling of the Bible, due for transmission in 2009. They are seen as landmarks in the BBC schedules for three reasons. First, because of the production values associated with them. For instance, the three-hour series retelling the story of the crucifixion, *The Passion*, was co-financed by the BBC and HBO Films, costing approximately £4 million to make (Bowder, 2007). Secondly, achieving a substantial hype is also a major goal for landmarks. The team of Nigel Stafford-Clark and Frank Deasy both with a background in drama was heralded as a coup for religious programming with Stafford-Clark hoping that “the techniques he had used to update *Bleak House* could work here too” (Wilson, 2008: 14). Finally, landmarks are supported by what the BBC term “360-degree commissioning” which provides additional output across multiple platforms.<sup>56</sup> In the case of *The Passion*, the series was able to grow its own audience on the web before its original transmission through the use of its own dedicated website ([www.bbc.co.uk/thepassion](http://www.bbc.co.uk/thepassion)). The site included clips and images from the series, space to leave comments, a question-and-answer session with the producer and writer during the week of its transmission, and articles about the history of the Passion story and the production of the series. This, combined with the iPlayer function, meant that the programme continued with an online life well after its TV showing. This was further supported by a cover story in the *Radio Times* and heavy trailing on television and radio in the weeks leading up to Easter.

The landmark strategy is the centrepiece of the BBC’s new wider commissioning strategy of ‘fewer, bigger, better’ for factual television and one which is problematic for the future provision of sustained factual programmes. Indeed many of the interviewees were aware of the limitations of this strategy:

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<sup>56</sup> 360-degree commissioning describes how broadcasters are adopting a range of supplementary material across other platforms to enhance a programme’s brand. By maximizing the strength of each medium, the goal is to develop a deeper relationship with audiences. As a result of this demand and the development of the technical capability to meet it, suppliers are increasingly being asked to consider how their programme ideas will play out across various platforms. However, how these ideas can be implemented effectively is part of an ongoing debate (see Parker (2007) for a discussion of the contested nature of 360-degree commissioning).



It seems to me to miss a point which is how many people notice these so called events; Are these events worth it? (Former Head of Religious Television Programmes, 2007)

This concern about impact is borne out in relation to *The Passion*, the most recent of these landmark programmes.

*The Passion* (2008) was transmitted in four parts over Easter week. The second 30-minute episode drew 3.2m viewers (12.9 per cent share of the audience) making it level with the slot's average audience share; it is hardly the impact the BBC had hoped for although it was competing with ITV's *Coronation Street* and the AI (the qualitative measure of how much the audience liked the programme) reported it as above average for a drama series. As discussed in Chapter One this concern about the lasting affect and impact of landmarks was highlighted in a BBC Governance Unit review of religious output on the two main BBC channels in 2005. It stated unequivocally that:

[T]he landmark approach has failed to deliver higher impact religion on BBC 1 [...] The increased investment in these landmarks in 2003/4 did not guarantee a greater reach amongst the audience or more impact in terms of post-broadcast memorability. (BBC Governance Unit, 2005(a): 7)

Therefore, although the landmark strategy may seem advantageous on paper, the actual long-term benefits of it are not clear. So why are the BBC continuing to follow this approach?

The interviewees were aware of the advantages of such an approach for telling religious stories, for example:

[T]he big resource one-off programmes are great and they've had to fight for them. You know you have to persuade the controller because they do take a lot of resources and so on but they come and they're gone. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

These programmes, therefore, become an important source of guaranteed funding for a supplier. Furthermore the rationale for such a move is clear from television's commissioning editor for religion:

[B]ecause of the license fee cuts we are going towards a different sort of era whereby fewer programmes being made but those we make are bigger and have more depth because you have the new media attached to it so it can be a different sort of experience that you can have [...] it's true for everybody. It does make sense. If we put lots of one-hour one-offs all over the place no one is going to know they are there. Literally no one is going to spend hours of their weekend tracking through the *Radio Times* to find them. It doesn't work and that's a sort of basic law of the jungle [...] We did have to make less programming anyway but of course it's tough because it's associated with big job cuts and the like, this is tough, tough stuff. (Commissioning Editor for Religion, 2008)

Here, even religion becomes part of the wider move of scheduling 'event' programming. According to Caldwell the value of event and landmark television to broadcasters like the BBC is that "they typically provide marquee points of entry that entice viewers to sample more commonplace products in the programmer's store" (Caldwell, 1995: 162). In the case of *The Passion*, the first two episodes of that series were preceded by the BBC 1 soap, *Eastenders* (BBC 1, 1985 - ) benefiting from the inherited audience of the soap and were followed by other big name dramas such as *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC1, 2008) and *Waterloo Road* (BBC 1, 2006 - ). All of these programmes bring an established audience to alleviate some of the risk of a peak-time religious landmark.

However, other than the hope that it will attract a sizeable audience, the other main advantage relates to its ability to be sold in international markets.

One of the advantages for the BBC is they can sell them to America and so on, Australasia and so on and get some of the money back. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

This is something traditional religious programmes due to their national specificity will not always achieve but is an area that is increasingly important in the competitive broadcasting market. This ability to be sold abroad adds prestige raising the profile of the producers and makes it an attractive proposition both financially and professionally.

### **A strategy for religious broadcasting?**

Having examined the conventions and rationale for each of these programme formats, how do these three styles of programming (worship, factual and landmark) come together to make a cohesive strategy for religious broadcasting? Over the course of this research many of the interviewees criticised the lack of formal strategy for religion. Although the BBC does set targets for the number of hours of religion that it will transmit (on BBC 1, BBC 2, Radio 2 and Radio 4) there are no formal plans available setting out how this should look or what it should represent.<sup>57</sup> This was therefore a pertinent question when it came to interviewing the commissioning editor for religion:

Researcher: Is there a formal strategy for religion?

Interviewee: There always is [laughs uncomfortably] ... Very loosely it is about ... identifying the different multiple layers of creative opportunity.

<sup>57</sup> Briefly compared to the strategy followed by Channel 4 where according to its dedicated Commissioning Editor "Channel 4 Religion is more inquisitive, more diverse, and we keep religion at the core of our output rather than try to hide it. We don't wallow in historical nostalgia nor do we shy away from tough areas" (Ahmed, 2008). For example, as part of this strategy in 2008 he oversaw a week of programmes on Islam, including a two-hour documentary *The Quran* and *The Seven Wonders of the Muslim World*. This is not to say that the approach of Channel 4 is best practice in this area but to demonstrate the alternative approaches available.

We want to refreshen our strands in everyway [...] BBC 2 is a mainstay for religion and what we have there are, the ambition is to grow our landmarks because they have been too small, (three or four parts) and we have done that and so the next one is a big eight-parter building on *Extreme Pilgrim*. So it's to create the most innovative modern interesting religion landmarks for 9 o'clock, that's the next stage [...] And the third strain is actually the kind of spiky [...] a current affairs think piece and on BBC 4 that writ large. Where we did the story of Protestantism, it didn't have much bite but it's getting big experts, big thinkers saying important things on particular aspects of religion and doing them in a BBC 4 way. Then finally, that's the factual, beyond there, (this is where it gets more exciting) is make alliances with drama. We have taken two ideas from there; *The Passion* is one and the Anne Frank diaries are another. They [Drama Department] are doing the Anne Frank diaries as a strip and we are doing some factual programmes around it. So absolutely it is to keep ... yeah the strategy is to get religion, more than noticed, but use drama as a very powerful ally.

Although this appears quite a tenuous strategy it does give clues to the future form, style and content of religion on the BBC. BBC 2 and BBC 4 will be the main vehicles for religion; though BBC 4 has currently no formal target for this style of output. It was also felt that by relegating items to BBC 4 the Corporation are effectively ghettoising the output further as this interviewee speculated, "Will they [the BBC] be brave and keep it on [BBC] Two or will they throw it to [BBC] Four; and if they throw it to Four you just lop off two noughts at the end [of viewing figures]" (Independent Producer, 2007).

In terms of the content of these programmes, landmarks (though not exclusively historical stories) will continue to appear and these are the only items actively scheduled for peak-time. Factual programmes using many of the conventions of reality television, akin to *Extreme Pilgrim* or *Island Parish* will still be on the menu. In these, personalities in the form of "big experts, big thinkers saying important things", will continue to be an important element to widen the appeal of religious broadcasting. While, it seems worship and traditional material are off the menu or at least down the list of priorities for television in any case.

Alliances with other departments will be key, particularly drama, comedy and current affairs as the examples given here show. It was unclear how successfully this would work in practice as all of these departments are based in London and the religious department is in Manchester. This strategy for non-specialist alliances also raises the question what is 'religious' about these programmes (for example the plans for programmes to coincide with the screening of the Anne Frank diaries) and whether specialists in the area of religion are needed to deliver this diet of programmes.

The strategy outlined above is broadly repeated in this comment by Mark Thompson (the Director General of the BBC):

[T]his is a moment to raise our sights. We need the big cross-media ideas which are transforming other specialist subjects. We need more confidence in mixing genres and in particular drawing on drama and comedy techniques. We need more boldness in what we cover. (Thompson, 2005)

These comments by the commissioning editor and director general suggest that there is a broad strategy amongst senior executives with regards religious output. While it is ambitious, this plan is largely undocumented in the BBC strategy reports. This lack of effective communication may partly account for why many of the respondents in this study felt that there was not a viable strategy for the religious broadcasting at the BBC.

### **Conclusion: mapping religious production**

The purpose of this chapter has been to map current religious output on television and radio and show how the production conditions and philosophies (discussed in Chapters Five and Six) are tied to programme identity and strategies. To this end, this chapter raises three key issues.

This chapter began by discussing how religious programmes are informed to a considerable degree by the surrounding cultural politics of religion and developments in religious attitudes. Both of these elements have conditioned the kind of themes that producers in this area feel broadcasting should deal with. However, one can argue that these external elements are not the only factors affecting production. Religious programmes are also conditioned in important respects by the internal professional culture and institutional demands on programme production. This filters through to the formats and styles used, for example the use of one-off series' with celebrities and ordinary people to achieve greater appeal and authenticity. This shows that the private world of production is permeable to a range of external and internal influences and these have a direct effect on the programmes that are commissioned and how they are produced.

The second issue is that like all areas of programme making, religious output is characterised by a variety of complex decision-making layers. This involves continued negotiations between competing aims and agendas. However, religious programming decisions are further complicated by direct commitments to the public (and to the regulator) and the increasing demands from within the Corporation to respond to

commercial pressures. This chapter discussed the different styles of programming which have emerged from this situation and argued that the increased use of popular and landmark programmes, at the expense of serious documentaries and worship output is emblematic of the tension, suggesting where priorities for the BBC as a whole lie. This research argues that although there does not seem to be an official widely shared strategy for religious broadcasting there does seem to be an informal one which seeks new ways of engaging with the themes of religion therefore trying to balance commercial demands (by favouring programme styles which appeal to mainstream audiences) and the public interest (by retaining the Corporation's religious brief). This balance is not easy to achieve but, according to those interviewed for this study, is vital if religion as a distinct output of broadcasting is to remain.

The last argument relates to the BBC's specific approach to religious programmes. In the history the term "BBC religion" emerged; a term which denoted the specific style of non-denominational conservative output in which this style of programming developed. This style was not inevitable and was the product of many conscious and unconscious decisions about what religious broadcasting should look like and represent. While the term BBC Religion is still valid in some cases (e.g. programme conservatism compared to its nearest rival Channel 4 which has taken a more controversial stance), the style of programming has undoubtedly evolved. Specifically, the concept of BBC Religion is being quickly replaced by the term "BBC Spirituality", a feature particularly prevalent within factual programming. In this form of output institutional religion is largely sidelined and the focus for programme makers is on appealing to both believers and non-believers. It is concerned with lay people's experience of faith and belief (conventional and unconventional) and is increasingly told through the narrative of the transformational and confessional journey adopting the broad rhetoric of spirituality and well-being. BBC Spirituality depends on a style of performance that is not easy to achieve nor replicate - as the case of *The Monastery* and its less successful sequels suggests. The interviewees claimed that this is in response to audience demand though there was evidence to suggest that the diluted religious brief was not wholly appreciated by those in this study and beyond (Bolton, 1999; Holmes, 2000; Twisk, 1999). Again, here the tensions between PSB and commercial interests come to the fore as minority interest and mass appeal collide.

# Conclusion

The aim of this research has been to examine the occupational challenges of media production. It has used religious broadcasting and its treatment within the BBC to understand some of the wider issues affecting contemporary broadcasting. This thesis has considered the work of those involved in this area and uncovered a variety of complex, and at times contradictory, forces influencing the output of these professionals. These factors range from institutional culture to occupational values, from commercial pressures to social responsibilities.

To conclude the study, this final chapter is structured around three specific themes that underpin this thesis. The first theme is the bond between public service broadcasting and religious output, and the reimagining of this bond in today's competitive broadcasting ecology. The second section considers the challenges and opportunities for religious output in an increasingly digital landscape, one that opens up a variety of potential new outlets. Discussion will then move to the delivery of religious programmes and the dynamics of their supply. Here, speculation is on the future of the Department of Religion and Ethics at the BBC and on the prospects for in-house production more generally at the Corporation. This chapter concludes by outlining the contribution of this thesis to our knowledge of the media and other directions in which this research may develop from here.

## **PSB and religion**

The concept of the public interest has been central to the inclusion of religion in broadcasting from the earliest days of the medium of radio. Religion was, and continues to be, part of broadcasting's commitment to the public. However, this affiliation between PSB and religious broadcasting is changing as a result of the way the definitions of both have evolved.

Chapter One of this thesis discussed some of the ways in which the concept of PSB has changed and in Chapter Five it was clear that this change has had a direct impact on the culture of the BBC and the decisions it has made. The BBC's mission is no longer solely about addressing a social need but about competing in the marketplace and delivering value for money to licence fee payers. Strategically positioning the Corporation is now a major concern at all levels of the organisation. This means there is now greater pressure for all areas of programming to position themselves as delivering on this

strategy for the Corporation. Even programming traditionally seen as part of their social responsibility (such as religion, arts and natural history) are not immune to this change and they too must be viewed as strategically important if they are to be commissioned.

This research has found that this change in the way the Corporation has interpreted its PSB obligation has been difficult for those in the area of religious production as in the last number of years the protection given to this style of programming has been removed. This has been particularly difficult for the Department of Religion and Ethics which has also had to negotiate wider policy decisions, such as those around decentralisation and the inclusion of the independent sector as its rivals for commissions. The result overall has been an increase in tension between various levels of the production system. Therefore, changes in the Corporation's definition of the public interest and its subsequent change in organisational culture are at the heart of many of the disputes within religious broadcasting.

This study has uncovered some of the tangible effects of the change in PSB provision and highlighted some of the ways this can be seen in the output relating to religious themes. Those who informed this study have adopted a subtle discourse of 'professionalism' articulated through the judgements they make about programmes and in their concerns with delivering a quality product. In religious production this discourse is used to underscore the value of creativity, experience and knowledge to the BBC. Furthermore, it is used to stimulate institutional support, something that the respondents feel they do not currently receive. Therefore, the overall goal of this professional discourse is to prevent religious broadcasting being further ghettoised in the production hierarchy of the Corporation.

Evidence in this study also indicated a definite move by producers to take religious broadcasting beyond its categorisation as a minority interest and make religion a central element of popular broadcasting; in other words broaden its appeal to the mainstream. Those interviewed have ambitions to reposition religion away from its narrow associations with traditional programmes such as *Songs of Praise* and *Thought for the Day* towards a new style of entertainment-based output. According to the research outlined in Chapter One (Svennevig et al, 1988; Gunter & Viney, 1994; Ofcom, 2005), producers have long held such an ambition but realising it has been difficult, as audience attitudes about religious programmes remain negative for the most part. This means the first step in achieving mass appeal for the output, and thus ensuring its

viability, is to overcome the negative preconceptions surrounding this style of programming; hence the appearance of articles in the press citing a creative “renaissance” (Brown, 2006; Watts, 2007) within religious broadcasting. These reports function as part of an overt attempt to reposition the output within the minds of the audience.

While this redefinition of religious broadcasting has its advantages, this research has found that this has been largely at the cost of (a) traditional worship formats, (b) serious journalistic approaches to religious themes particularly on television and (c) institutional representations of religion. The cumulative effect of this is that although certain religious programmes may still be viable it is from an increasingly narrow range of entertainment-based formats. Although entertainment and PSB are not mutually exclusive, certain styles of programme like those listed above which command relatively small audiences are obviously PSB material and this aspect of PSB seems very much under threat. It seems that PSB’s role to inform, educate and (especially) entertain remains, but it is now for the biggest possible audience rather than meeting minority interests.

### **Religious broadcasting and the digital landscape**

There has been much public debate and a variety of predictions made about the future of religious broadcasting (British Library, 2007; Holmes, 2000; Ofcom, 2005). This thesis argues that like many other areas of production it faces both challenges and possible opportunities. While the shifting interpretation of public service in broadcasting is one factor affecting the future of religious broadcasting, one of the other most important factors is the growth in digital platforms.

The BBC and other broadcasters are mindful of technological developments and changes in consumption and so digital strategy in the form of ‘on demand’ television and radio content feature heavily in its plans (BBC, 2008 (a)). For instance, the BBC’s iPlayer and website (including a dedicated section for religion and ethics: [www.bbc.co.uk/religion](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion)) are now major vehicles for the Corporation designed to increase audience reach and appeal to the next generation of technologically proficient viewers and listeners. Both the website and the iPlayer allow the BBC to increase its dialogue with various audiences and the BBC hopes that it will help silence some of its critics (Economist, 2007) that it is out of touch with various sections of society, particularly young people. However, investing in the infrastructure to deliver this strategy means that savings must



be made elsewhere, most crucially in programme provision. Undoubtedly this is a concern for religious broadcasting as it already faces a downward pressure on its budget.<sup>58</sup>

Many of the respondents to this study saw digital delivery as key to the future of religious output. While most saw the value of the internet and 'on-demand' services, there were also some suggestions that the future of dedicated religious output may not be on terrestrial television or radio at all, but on niche channels such as God TV and Premier Television and Radio. However, a number of the interviewees used the American phenomenon of televangelism as a warning of the problems that this could bring (such as the exploitation of vulnerable members of the public) and argued that a move like this would further ghettoise religious broadcasting in the long-term. Therefore, the majority of the respondents to this study did not support religious broadcasting being confined to dedicated niche channels as they felt it should remain a responsibility for *all* terrestrial broadcasters.

While developments in on-demand services and dedicated websites do offer new challenges and opportunities for religious broadcasting, radio and television continue to be crucial outlets for religion and have to contend with their own operational issues. A recurring theme of this research has been the different experiences of radio and television broadcasting in relation to religious material; on reflection television has had a much more problematic relationship with religion compared to radio. This is seen, for instance, in the way that religious programmes have largely lost their foothold in weekly primetime television schedules. The interviewees attributed this to the commercial and aesthetic characteristics of the medium which, compared to radio, make producing successful television programmes much more difficult. The economics of television broadcasting demand successful returning formats, while the output needs to be perceived as original and authentic if it is to break through onto the crowded airwaves and achieve its aim. Undoubtedly, there is even greater risk for religious programmes as their appeal may be low (Ofcom, 2005; Ofcom, 2008(a): 78).

Radio, on the other hand, is characterised by a different set of production conditions. Due to the lower costs of production it can afford to take greater risks with the styles of

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<sup>58</sup> In terms of programme provision recent cuts to factual will prove problematic to those in areas of specialist programming such as natural history, arts and religion. The total BBC factual budget will be reduced by £63 million over the next two years and by £300 million over the next six years. Furthermore the number of factual hours commissioned is expected to be cut by 11 per cent over that time (Curtis, 2007). This has been partially offset by the BBC's further commitment to the strategy of landmark factual programmes and £8 million is expected to be invested in this style of programmes, though according to observers science and history are the likely beneficiaries (Rushton (a), 2008).

programming it employs and therefore outside broadcasts, interviews and discussion programmes feature regularly in the radio diet. Furthermore, radio gives the Corporation the opportunity to speak to its local audience to a greater degree than television. BBC local radio and specialist channels such as the Asian Network can engage with local issues and community activities in a more effective way. They represent a vital opportunity to reclaim some of the ‘lost’ aspects of religious broadcasting such as local religious services and in-depth debate on important issues; in effect local radio could be a key way of continuing the PSB legacy of meeting minority interests.

How do these different production conditions relating to religion affect our theoretical understanding of the media? This study demonstrates that despite the prevalent discourse of media convergence there is still clearly a difference between both types of media as each has its own production conditions which inform the pace of institutional and aesthetical change, and the way in which each engages with its audience. Radio is much more deliberate and slow to change and through the eyes of those working in broadcasting has a much more intimate bond with its audience; however, this means that making significant adjustments to the schedule or output can be difficult. Television, on the other hand, is seen as constantly finding new ways to express itself but this makes it a “fickle” (Independent Television Producer, 2007) medium to work in according to one interviewee as its formats and interests are constantly changing. This means that weighty themes have little time to grow and develop on the medium. This research argues, therefore, that while there are a number of shared characteristics between television and radio, they still retain a great degree of specificity in the way they are produced and consumed, suggesting that discussions on the nature of convergence and cross-platform genres need to be more nuanced and perhaps sensitive to the differences between various media.

### **The end of BBC in-house production?**

[M]aybe something needs to die for something new to emerge.  
(Independent Radio Producer, 2008)

Turning attention to the supply of religious programmes this research has highlighted the competitive dynamic between in-house production, in the form of the BBC’s Department of Religion and Ethics, and independent production companies such as Mentorn Oxford, Tiger Aspect, Tern Television, CTVC and Loftus Productions who increasingly share the spoils of religious commissions. While the loss of monopoly has

caused much angst for the department and its supporters, this thesis has highlighted a number of encouraging signs for the DRE (such as the major prime-time projects which it will deliver in 2009, the further decentralisation of other departments to Manchester opening up a new pool of talent, and recent critical and ratings successes with programmes such as *Extreme Pilgrim*). On the other hand, as the opening quote of this section suggests, the department still face a number of major challenges to its viability.

This negative view is underpinned by factors largely outside the department's control; these include further cuts in resources and the increased power of the independents within the commissioning process. The following comments point to some of these concerns:

I think there's a question for Michael [Wakelin, Head of Department] about whether the department is viable on its own or whether it will have to combine with another factual area [...] I don't know how the new cuts are going to affect the department, it can't be good news. I just wonder how viable they'll be. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

I think that probably the factual output will get more and more spread amongst different suppliers. I think that trend will continue [...] I think that a specialist department may well get isolated hence but I think the trend is against them. I'm not convinced religious broadcasting within a religious department has a long-term future. I hope I'm wrong because I think there is a value in having a group of specialists who know their subject but I'm not convinced that specialisation has a great future in television. (Former Head of DRE, 2007)

Many of the respondents felt the future of the department was in danger as a result of the drive towards greater efficiencies in programme production and running costs of the BBC following on from the 2006 Charter negotiations. They argued that if the BBC needs to make up for the shortfall in cash it might undertake a further set of cuts to non-essential areas. They worried that specialist departments that are not central to the economic and strategic needs of the BBC may be disbanded - this includes the Department of Religion and Ethics whose audience appeal has traditionally been perceived as limited. All of those interviewed agreed that there would not be an abrupt move to get rid of the department, as it would not be "politically expedient" (Freelance Producer, 2007) and would likely meet with some resistance from religious groups and their supporters. However, they revealed other moves that could be used by management to skim resources from the department and make their long-term position untenable. The loss of returning strands that guarantee income and allow the department to retain its critical mass (an important feature for programme-making departments in the Corporation) was something that drew much criticism; this was discussed at length in Chapter Five.

In addition to the direct cost pressures imposed on the department from above, there is the threat posed by independent producers who, even amongst the interviewees, were associated with more cost effective and innovative production. Companies like Tiger Aspect, with credentials in a variety of genres, are already gaining a reputation for producing well made and, more importantly, popular programmes in the area of religion.<sup>59</sup> Independent production companies are making inroads into this style of output (once dominated by in-house producers) and reaping the rewards of new commissions as their flexible structure and wider range of skills can be a more attractive proposition to commissioning editors now looking for more entertainment-based religious output.

This hints at a more significant threat to the future of in-house production, which comes in the form of an ideological shift in television. One respondent in this study surmised that specialisation in television is “out of fashion” (Former Head of DRE, 2007). This means that the department faces a major challenge to its legitimacy, which stems from the occupational culture of production that is increasingly favouring flexibility over specialisation. Companies with a flexible staffing structure can pick and choose the skills they need to suit their current commission from the large freelancing pool which is a major feature of the media industry in the UK. This means producers in areas of specialist production need to keep reiterating arguments for permanent expert departments not just in terms of production, but in terms of the wider value they add to the Corporation.

This ideological shift away from specialisation and the managerial response of using non-specialists to produce output is not restricted to the Department of Religion and Ethics as the future of in-house production in other genres is also under threat (Conlan, 2005(b); Hutton et al, 2005). While some key areas such as news and current affairs are more likely to be retained due to the prestige and political collateral they give the Corporation, other programme genres may find themselves increasingly out-sourced; in effect an extension of the current WOCC commissioning process. Although resistance to the BBC becoming a Channel 4-style publishing house is likely due to the political implications and commercial repercussions (for example, the loss in revenue from rights sales because they would be owned by an independent), there are suggestions of other ways in which the BBC could overcome these objections. For instance, the acquisition by BBC Worldwide (the Corporation’s commercial arm) of 25 per cent stakes in three independent production companies sets an uncomfortable precedent for in-house

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<sup>59</sup> Tiger Aspect produced *The Monastery*, *The Convent*, *The Retreat* and *A Seaside Parish*, and currently produces *An Island Parish*.

producers (Garside, 2008). It raises the question that if the BBC is investing in production outwith the Corporation, why does it need to support programme making units internally? This points to a crucial time for in-house production and within the context of this research, the future of specialist in-house production looks decidedly insecure.

### **The contribution of this research**

As outlined in the introduction to this study, this research has contributed to a number of debates circulating on the role and functioning of the media.

- It has uncovered further insights into the occupational values held by producers and their everyday responses to changes in the broadcasting ecology. This thesis has shown that balancing the various factors and stakeholders that influence production is at times a difficult act and has revealed how producers are often caught between policies designed to support the wider industry and the internal pressure to compete.
- As the earlier section outlined, this study has also provided more insights into the complexities of public service broadcasting and allowed discussion to move it away from being an abstract concept into something more routine in the lives of media professionals. In doing so, it reiterates that PSB is an “imperfectly realised” idea in practice (Born & Prosser, 2001: 671) as media workers bring their own understanding of the concept to bear on the way they fulfil their role. This research has also uncovered some of the factors affecting the future of PSB and, like Elliott (1972), finds that one of the greatest threats to PSB is the ubiquity and unwavering belief in the concept of professionalism within the sphere of broadcasting.
- The organisational culture of the BBC was a key feature of this study and in particular its evolving and often-troubled relationship with its internal and external programme-making units. There has been a fundamental shift in the structure of the production industry in the last two decades to include the independent sector. The way the BBC has accommodated this has been at times paradoxical. While on the one hand it has introduced more competition by allowing a wider pool of ideas and talents to surface, this has been largely at the expense of the BBC’s own in-house suppliers and their long-term security. There is little to suggest that this contradiction is likely to be redressed in the near future.

- Finally, this study addresses some of Corner's (1999) calls for more research into production experiences beyond news and drama. It provides insight into an area of programming which had been largely overlooked in academic inquiry and adds another level of history and aesthetics to the wider study of genre and canonical texts. By mapping religious output it is clear that a specific style of programming emerged as a result of the historical and occupational conditions in which it grew. It is clear that it shares characteristics with other styles of specialist programming, such as arts and natural history, particularly in the use of new formats to widen their appeal. However, in other important respects religious broadcasting is unique, especially in the way its social value is so vehemently debated.

A number of other avenues for research emerge from this study. While this study has focused on a specific institutional context relating to production, there are a number of rich areas for research both within and beyond the walls of the broadcasters. In order to assess the impact of the latest approach to religious broadcasting by media professionals an empirically-based audience study would be timely. This could investigate the effectiveness of new commissioning and scheduling strategies and whether their objective of generating greater appeal (and thus sustaining the output) has been achieved. Any further study of the effectiveness of the strategies employed would also need to include both the BBC's website and the iPlayer as they now play an even bigger role in the output of religion at the Corporation.

Another possible area of study relates to the way societies have become more pluralistic and social cohesion seems more problematic. As a result of this change European societies are struggling to re-define the notions of national identity and citizenship. Nevertheless, public broadcasters have an obligation to reflect national culture and often times the broadcaster finds itself in the role of arbiter (McDonnell, 2006(b): 2). Religious identity and values play a key role in this cultural identity mix. Further research is needed to understand the forces behind this debate. This was touched on in this research in relation to local identity and how this is mediated. For instance, the tense relationship between those at the centre (invariably based in London) and those in nations such as Scotland as they tried to interject their identity within a UK broadcaster featured prominently in the chapters relating to the history of religious broadcasting. Scotland has its own established church, a significant programme production community and its own issues relating to political devolution. The treatment of the topic of religion in this context would make it a unique case study with

which to investigate terrestrial broadcasting as a site of socio-political struggle and identity negotiation.

To conclude, this research argues that despite some substantial concerns, religious and faith-based themes will still be covered on terrestrial television and radio. However, these programmes will be in a different guise from their predecessors. There will be new themes (i.e. more themes of spirituality and well-being) and the generic reach of religious broadcasting will continue to extend (i.e. themes increasingly conveyed through personal testimony and celebrity with fewer religious representatives appearing outside of news coverage). As has been the case in the last number of years there will be few fixed points in the schedules and religion and ethics, as a style of output *and* a department will have to compete like all other areas of programming. Digital technology will present new opportunities for delivering religious content (for instance through the BBC website and iPlayer); however, ensuring that television remains a viable outlet for religion in the future continues to be one of the most pressing objectives for producers in this area of output.

It is much more uncertain whether a substantial part of this output will continue to be delivered by the BBC's specialist production unit, the Department of Religion and Ethics. The move to incorporate entertainment-based formats as part of the religious offering means that a question mark remains over whether a team of religious specialists is needed to deliver this or, whether different skills will be needed to give the output mainstream appeal. As this thesis has shown, the unit at this turbulent time is not offered any protection or special treatment in the current system irrespective of its role in delivering on the Corporation's public service commitment. This is something that has, at times, caused considerable angst within the department. Its location in Manchester and the political value associated with this may save the unit in the short to medium term but its long-term viability depends heavily on its ability to argue for its strategic importance and the institutional politics of the BBC.

## Appendix A: Research Participants

### BBC

Name	Title	Place of Interview	Date
Adam Kemp	Commissioning Editor Television (Arts, Culture, Religion & Music)	BBC Television Centre, London	28 <sup>th</sup> Jan 2008
Andrew Caspari	Commissioning Editor, Radio 4 (Factual)	Bush House, London	28 <sup>th</sup> Jan 2008
Michael Wakelin	Head of Department of Religion and Ethics	BBC offices, Manchester	12 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2007
Hugh Faupel	Series Producer, <i>Songs of Praise</i>	BBC offices, Manchester	15 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2007
Jennifer Daniel	Producer, <i>Sunday</i>	BBC offices, Manchester	16 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2007
Alan Bookbinder	Former Head of the Department of Religion and Ethics	Sainsbury Trust, London	6 <sup>th</sup> Nov 2007
David Winter	Former Head of the Religious Broadcasting Department	Telephone	21 <sup>st</sup> Nov 2007
Ernie Rea	Former Head of the Religious Broadcasting Department/ Presenter <i>Beyond Belief</i>	Telephone	21 <sup>st</sup> Jan 2008
Colin Morris	Former Head of the Religious Broadcasting Department	Telephone	20 <sup>th</sup> Nov 2007
Stephen Whittle	Former Head of Religious Television	BAFTA, London	5 <sup>th</sup> Nov 2007
Bob Dickinson	Radio 4 Producer (Music and Factual)	BBC offices, Manchester	16 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2007
Roger Bolton	Presenter, <i>Sunday</i> / Chairman, Flame Group	BAFTA, London	5 <sup>th</sup> Nov 2007
Andrew Barr	Former Head of Religion, BBC Scotland	Telephone	4 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2007



### Independent Production Companies

Name	Title	Place of Interview	Date
David Strachan	MD, Tern Television	On location, <i>Songs of Praise</i>	Mar 2008
Evelyn Paterson	Assistant Producer, Tern Television	On location, <i>Songs of Praise</i>	Nov 2007
John Forrest	Freelance Producer/Director	BBC offices, Manchester	15 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2007
Nick Stuart	CEO, CTVC	Telephone	3 <sup>rd</sup> Dec 2007
Bridget Cass	Jerusalem Trust	Email	30 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2007
Nigel Acheson	MD, Loftus Productions	Loftus Productions, London	7 <sup>th</sup> Nov 2007
Eley McAinsh	Producer, Unique	Telephone	30 <sup>th</sup> Jan 2008
Jill Robinson	Executive Producer, Mentorn Oxford	Telephone	16 <sup>th</sup> Jan 2008

### Others

Name	Title	Place of Interview	Date
Gordon Landreth	Former Chairman of the Churches Advisory Committee on Religious Broadcasting	Email	Oct 2007
Richard Steel	Religious Programmes Producer, Radio Trent 1987-1992	Telephone	23 <sup>rd</sup> Oct 2007

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

Name

Title:

Department / Company:

Date:

Place:

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General introduction to the research with reference to: the aims of the research, dissemination of results, anonymity and consent.

### Background Questions

- Interviewee's background
- Description of the department and their role?
- A typical day at work

### Specific Production

- Run through a specific project
- [Prompt: idea generation, pitching, funding, commissioning process, pre-production, production, post-production, intended audience, scheduling, and evaluation]
- What constitutes a good idea / Judge success of a programme
- Religion to compete in the schedules? (Does it have to compete?)

### Aims of the department? Aim of Religious Programming for BBC?

- Aims changed? [Prompt: Religion AND Ethics]
- Bi - medial? Differences? Why?
- Role in wider debates

### Output Overall

- 'BBC Religion' - Expectation for certain programmes? Where from?

- Educate, inform and entertain [Prompt: PSB, conscious of this?]

Future output? [Prompt: funding, talent, and format]

#### Relationships

- What relationships are important for the department and you as a producer?
- Dealings with outside groups? Changed? How?
- [Prompt: Other internal departments, other external producers, CRAC, religious groups, audience members, other broadcasters, and Ofcom...are these critics/supporters?

#### The Institution

- DRE in relation to other departments? BBC Vision? Affect on radio and online output?
- DRE in comparison to other departments in the BBC
- Move to Manchester affect (a) the structure of the department and (b) the output it produced (c) commissioning?
- Commissioning Policy?
- Independents contribution to the output / value of a specialist department
- Window of Creative Competition and religious output

What is the future of religious broadcasting?

- Issues facing the BBC?
- Most important challenges?
- Religious programmes within (a) British broadcasting and (b) specifically at the BBC?

Before concluding the interview, time is allowed for further discussion of points not covered in the questions above. Finally, once consent forms have been signed, the interviewee is thanked for their time and input.

## Appendix C: Interview Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to contribute to this research on the factors affecting the production of religious broadcasting in Britain. Over the course of the interviews I will be asking questions related to religious broadcasting and/or any other topics that relate to this field. Due to the nature of my research, I will be asking some specific questions and then allowing time for discussion of any themes or issues which may emerge. The interview may be recorded and transcribed at a later date. Information obtained in this interview will then be used in my doctoral research and may be used in further research, which may be published. You have the right to withdraw or amend your contribution before the completion of my thesis.

### Data Protection Statement

This data is being collected as part of a research project concerned with religious broadcasting for a PhD thesis in the Department of Theatre Film and Television of the University of Glasgow. The information that you supply and that may be collected as part of this research project will be entered into a filing system and will only be accessed by authorised persons of the University of Glasgow. The information will be retained by the University and will only be used for the purpose of (a) research, and (b) for statistical and audit purposes. By supplying such information you consent to the University storing the information for the stated purposes. The information is processed by the University in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

<b><u>Consent to being interviewed</u></b>	
Name _____	Organisation _____
<p><b>I hereby give consent to any information discussed in this interview being used in Caitriona Noonan's research.</b></p> <p>Yes/No</p>	
<p><b>I hereby give consent for my name to be cited in Caitriona Noonan's research</b></p> <p>Yes/No</p>	
Signature _____	Date _____

If you have any questions or concerns regarding these processes or this form I am contactable on:

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## Appendix D: Research Diary

12<sup>th</sup> October 2007

*Today I travelled to central Manchester to the BBC's office. The office is located in a busy area near the university with a number of theatres and art centres in close proximity. The building itself is an unattractive 1960s monstrosity with a light blue modern refit inside. At reception the headline of Ariel, the staff newspaper, reads 'Are We in Crisis?'*

*The Department of Religion and Ethics itself is mainly open-plan with a quiet atmosphere. Michael's [Wakelin] office is big with a spacious seating area. Dotted around the office are small religious icons, including a crib in the corner. Throughout our talk Michael is relaxed and enthusiastic about both this research and the programmes we discuss. He dashes off to get various promos and taster tapes of next season's offerings including Extreme Pilgrim. We watch them together; he is captivated throughout and proud of the result, though they are "half finished" by his accounts.*

*As I leave I notice in the hall the individual staff photos for the Department of Religion and Ethics. Each person's photo is taken at their desks and they seem relaxed. There are no titles on the photos and it is difficult to tell in what order they have been arranged.*

15<sup>th</sup> October 2007

*My second day at the BBC and I have been invited to have lunch with some of the staff. Conversation at our table (and the next table) rarely leaves the topic of work. The focus of the conversation being Thursday's announcement on budget cuts and its implications. There was a general feeling that they (the department) would be "ok". Speculation centres on the World Service and its future. I'm told that Salford Quay has been ring-fenced for funding so that will still go ahead.*

*I am quizzed about BBC Scotland and their move to Pacific Quay. Someone jokes that Salford will be a budget job compared to that. The conversation then moves to BBC Scotland more generally and I'm asked how they are doing at the moment in light of recent changes in government. My companions are sympathetic but defensive about what devolution would mean to the BBC.*

29<sup>th</sup> October 2007

*I have been invited by an independent production company to the filming of Songs of Praise in Edinburgh. I will be runner for the weeklong production. I meet the team at Buchanan Bus Station in Glasgow where we will be interviewing Brian Souter, founder of Stagecoach (a national transport company). At this stage, along with Sally Magnusson who is presenter there is the executive producer, producer, camera man, sound technician and researcher. Brian is best known for his outspoken comments against homosexuality, his evangelical beliefs, and his successful business. He is questioned by Sally on the latter two. The interview is recorded with Brian and later shots are taken of the buses, the station and Sally's nodded responses to Brian's answers. In the final edit these will all appear seamless.*

*We then travel back to Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh where most of the music will be filmed. This week we will be filming two episodes; one for St Andrew's Day 2007 and the other to be transmitted around Burns' night 2008. In the car the details for the week are recapped. The music will be filmed over the next two and a half days with the interviews for the first episode done later this week. The pieces for the other episode will be done early next year.*

*Between these discussions we talk about the current cuts in the BBC ("the BBC is too fat"), who is 'poaching' staff from who, the state of Scottish broadcasting and the recent crisis of trust within television.*

*Each programme will comprise 4/5 musical pieces each from a different musical style, in other words a large congregational choir, a folk group, the Dunedin Consort, Edinburgh Singers and a school choir. The sound element is recorded first and then the cameras move into place to take the visuals. This process is very slow and necessitates many takes of both sound and visuals in order to get each part right. I am told by the BBC director coordinating the filming that trying to get both right at the same time would take even longer. He also tells me that over the years they have put greater emphasis on the musical element of Songs of Praise so it is important that it's the best it can be.*

*This process takes its toll on both the production team and contributors. The hours are very long and little time is given over for breaks. The pace amongst the crew is fast as*

*props and equipment need to be moved about to get the next shot. For those being filmed the initial intrigue and excitement wears off as they repeat the same verse over and over. Finally the last takes are done and there is a collective sigh of relief as its time to go home (for the congregation). The team begins to set up for tomorrow and many will be there late into the night.*

30<sup>th</sup> October 2007

*The next day sees the Series Producer for the BBC arrive to oversee the production. There is a palpable tension in the air. As the day goes on I find out that this is for two reasons. Over a quick break I am part of a conversation between the senior members of the crew discussing the additional BBC arrival. There is resounding agreement that the BBC should trust the indies and just let them get on with it (this is in stark contrast to the discourse taking place in the media at the time over the Queengate scandal where many commentators are arguing for more policing of the independent sector in relation to their production practices). Someone adds that they have been doing this long enough and should have shown by now that they can be trusted to do the job right. I wonder who will be in charge once BBC man does arrive and who will have the final say on the whole thing?*

*The second reason I feel there may be tension is with the choice of the folk band as part of the programme. The group are undoubtedly talented but also young and glamorous - not your typical Songs of Praise contributor. The producer mutters to me as they set up that having them on is a gamble. Songs of Praise producers, but most importantly its audience are very traditionalist and not afraid to voice criticism with something they feel is inappropriate. Any break from tradition is brave, no matter how innocuous it seems. Following the filming of the group tensions dissipate slightly. There are smiles all round, including the BBC executive.*

*The rest of the day is taken with visuals of the congregation singing. I sit with the director for a while before filming and we talk about what he will be looking for from the group, how he will arrange the shots, how best to light them and any bits which will look good on screen. Later in the gallery I see both the BBC man and director chose shots (“close up of the children”, “we need more men on screen”, “less of that person”). As the lighting is arranged to get the best from the church, each note is synchronised perfectly with the visual and the camera moves to capture the tempo of the music. There is a huge amount of equipment and technology used but I am struck*

*by how many skills and talents (creative and craft) are relied on to shape the final programme and give it a particular look and feel.*

31<sup>st</sup> October 2007

*Wednesday is another full day but despite the long hours most of the crew are going on the following day to other work, most of which is south of the border.*

2<sup>nd</sup> November 2007

*Today was very different. As part of the same programme, a small number of the crew are going to film at a local charity called GalGael to highlight the work they do for community regeneration in Govan, Glasgow. The producer has picked up on the analogy of a journey for those who are helped by the charity and so they want to film one of the participants taking this journey both figuratively and metaphorically.*

*We first meet John in his flat on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor of one of the most notorious blocks of flats in Glasgow. He hasn't had time to be briefed much (as he is a back up plan when the first person pulled out that morning). In the lift he asks us what this is for and recoils in shock and horror at the idea that it's for Songs of Praise. In the end he concedes that at least only his mum will see him. We film him walking to the workshop and later go back to take shots of the tower block through barbed wire.*

*Inside we then set up to interview John. The interview begins and John is visibly uncomfortable. He is asked questions about his life, how he ended up needing help and who he hurt. He answers as best he can though has to repeat the same emotional pieces to camera a number of times as outside noise interferes with the microphone. In the final piece he will be alone on screen talking, this means the viewer won't see who is interviewing him or the questions that are asked.*

28<sup>th</sup> January 2008

*Today I am in TV Centre to see the commissioning editor for religion and later to see his counterpart at Radio 4 who is currently seconded to the World Service. TV Centre is busy with producers darting in and out and visitors milling about. On the 6<sup>th</sup> floor where the executives reside, each of the genres has an individual closed off space with an open plan arrangement within. The floor is modern but quiet. After my meeting I make my way out through the maze of circular hallways. I am surprised at the amount*



*of BBC artefacts which line the cabinets on the way out. Some are awards and others commemorative. The office of the World Service is very different with an art deco styling. The lobby is dominated by a large screen television playing BBC News 24 and a slide show celebrating 75 years of World Service. This is the only BBC marketing I see while I am there.*

April 2008

*Since February I have been back working again with the independent company on Songs of Praise. We filmed the music for two programmes in October and November and I have been brought back in to do the interview features for the second episode to be transmitted later in April.*

*My first job is to research ideas for each of the four x 2minute slots that we have to fill. My only guide is to have a mix of historical, contemporary and human-interest stories. Place is significant as the editor of Songs of Praise insists that Edinburgh's Royal Mile be the backdrop for the pieces. This severely limits the scope of stories available and is contested throughout the production as the Scottish based crew are keen to get more than the usual 'tartan and shortbread' pieces. Eventually four specific stories are selected and get the editors seal of approval: the history of the Covenanters, an interview with the presiding officer of the Scottish parliament, a feature on the work of the Eric Liddell Centre and another on the work of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA).*

*Retelling the history of the covenanter movement in two and a half minutes was always going to be a challenge though the focus will be on telling an engaging account rather than a comprehensive one. The feature is to be narrated by Lord David Steel whose ancestor was martyred during the conflict. It was felt that this would add a more personable slant to the story. Lord Steel had also been publicly critical of the relationship between contemporary politics and religion and so provides additional comment on this; though the editor suggests that the piece not be too political and alienate the audience.*

*As a balance to Lord Steel, we also interview Alex Fergusson, Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament. He was suggested because of his religious faith (a prerequisite for most interviewees) and his articulate nature. Discussion between the producer and the press office of the Scottish Parliament for access would be ongoing and concessions had*

*to be made on both sides. Eventually the parliament concedes to some of the time required. Alex is sincere and articulate about his work and beliefs.*

*The final piece was about the work of the SSPCA. Getting access was not a problem. The SSPCA are funded by donations from the public so any exposure of the work they do is good for them. Getting an officer to speak about his or her faith to camera was more difficult and this took a number of attempts to find the right person and the right words.*

*There was an ever-present focus on quality and at various times the producer reiterated how high the stakes were. Any fall in quality would give the BBC a reason to go elsewhere and although it was not a huge commission for the company, it was big enough. Furthermore the prestige of a network production watched by between 3 - 5 million loyal viewers was enough to make everyone on the crew anxious that it would be the best it could possibly be. The producer was also aware of the politics of the situation as the Scottish Government at that time was putting a lot of pressure on BBC to deliver more network production from the nation. Therefore this production was important on a number of different levels.*

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