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**The production and reception of discourses  
concerning religion in fictional broadcasting**

**Vol. 1**

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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**September 2002**

## **Author's Declaration**

**I declare that the contents of this thesis are all my own work.**

**Ailsa Marion Hollinshead**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the production and reception of discourses concerning religion in fictional broadcasting. It argues that the representation of religion in fictional broadcasting is a neglected area in the sociology of mass media and that this neglect contributes to a lack of understanding regarding the importance of religious identity.

A quantitative methodology was rejected in favour of a multi-dimensional qualitative and hermeneutic approach. Sociological analysis was facilitated using conceptual tools developed by Bourdieu, notably doxa, habitus, field and symbolic capital. The reception of discourses of religion in fictional broadcasting was investigated through the use of focus group interviews, throughout Scotland. Focus groups were chosen based on participants being television viewers who were part of naturally occurring groups, which were either overtly religious or non-religious. The religious groups included Christian denominations, Muslims and Sikhs. Official representatives from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Buddhist religions were also interviewed. Interviewees consistently identified limited and negative representations of religion in fictional broadcasting. Explanations, by the interviewees, for these representations referred to secularization generally and a secular attitude on the part of broadcasters. There was also evidence that religion was elided with ethnicity, and reference to 'repressive Islam' as an explanation for the very limited presence of all non-Christian religions.

Production was investigated through interviewing broadcasters who were responsible for some of the most frequently mentioned programmes in the focus group interviews. A smaller number of broadcasters who were involved with religious broadcasting were also interviewed, with the intention of exploring the broadcasting ethos in relation to religion. Broadcasters confirmed that a secular ethos dominated but they also identified a number of constraints, which affected decisions to include or exclude religion from programmes. The elision of ethnicity with religion was also evident and much of this was related to broadcasting policy in relation to cultural diversity, which emphasised race as the most important factor.

The relationship between religion and broadcasting since the start of broadcasting was examined through an analysis of letters and articles in *The Radio Times* and *The Listener*. This analysis demonstrated the increasingly secular attitudes on the part of both audiences and producers. It also provided an historical contextualisation for the contemporary part of the research. Academic arguments concerning secularization generally and its relationship to broadcasting, specifically, were examined. Although there are debates about the legitimacy of the secularization thesis, within academe, this study suggests that within broadcasting the argument has been won and religion is seen as far less relevant than race, gender or disability. The conclusion of the study is that representations of religion should be taken more seriously by academics and broadcasters because they do have an effect on attitudes that affect social inclusion and exclusion. Whilst this is problematic for Christians and Sikhs the findings of this study suggest that it is particularly problematic for Muslims.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century broadcasting as a cultural institution, which is now an integral part of most people's lives, did not exist. A set of cultural institutions, which had far greater influence in the daily lives of most UK citizens, were the Christian churches. These institutions are in very different positions at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The vast majority of UK households possess a television set (often more than one) and through it can access broadcast, satellite and cable programming. Viewers are able to 'visit' any country in the world and can access now what would have seemed an almost unbelievable range of lifestyles and cultures at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is also no genre of programming that they can not access. To continue in a positive vein, hitherto unimagined doors have been opened and people have access to as much programming as they desire or can afford.

The churches, on the other hand, have gone from a position where their views and their office holders were seen as being at the pinnacle of society to being questioned about their relevance and right to make social comment. They also exist in a state of faith diversity, which would have been unimaginable at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a complete reversal of the state of play when broadcasting was in its infancy. However the Christian church specifically, and religion more generally, is not yet dead and they continue to play a significant role in the lives of many people in the UK. It is the relationship between these two fields, the broadcast media and religion, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that is the focus of this study.



## **Research gap and researcher subjectivity**

Since the 1970s there has been a growing interest in the way different groups are represented in the media. As van Zoonen notes, 'Cultural studies nowadays appears in many different disguises that share among other things a concern with manifestations of popular culture and issues of representations and collective identities, such as national, ethnic and gender identities' (1994:6). The aim has been to contribute to an understanding of 'power relations and social exclusion'. What is interesting, and surprising, is that an examination of mass media (and cultural studies) texts reveals an absence of religion (Corner & Harvey, 1991; Curran & Gurevitch, 1991; van Zoonen, 1994; Hall, 1996; Turner, 1996; Hall, 1997; Liebes & Curran, 1998; Philo, 1998; Lacey, 1998; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999 to name but a few)<sup>1</sup>. It is surprising because the work of Durkheim and Weber acknowledged the importance of religion in the social scientific study of society. Durkheim (in Bocock & Thompson, 1985) argues that religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations, which express collective realities. The similarity between the role of the mass media and religion as far as representation is concerned is clear; and yet, the importance of considering religion in relation to the mass media appears to have been forgotten. It seems that the impact of secularisation has extended to academe. Within the British context, every aspect of society has been examined in relation to the mass media, with the exception of religion. The aim of this research was to fill that gap and to re-establish a link with the concerns of the early sociologists.

### **A personal note**

Apart from the obvious gap why did I decide that this was an area worth studying? It is necessary at this point to break with conventional academic writing and become personal because it is essential to be aware of what motivates social scientists in their individual research projects. Individual researchers are as much a product of their social background as the subjects that they research and, without self-reflexivity, biases and prejudices, which may affect methodological choices, can remain unexposed. As Stanley & Wise comment:

... we suggest that the researcher's own experiences are an integral part of the research and should therefore be described as such. The kind of person that we are,

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<sup>1</sup> Wandering round the bookstalls at the BSA Conference (2002) proved to be no more fruitful than earlier library and Internet searches. Every new book I found, which purported to be addressing media and society, excluded religion.

and how we experience the research, all have a crucial impact on what we see, what we do, and how we interpret and construct what is going on. (1985:50)

As someone who has grown up with television (my parents were given one as a wedding present in 1952) I am one of the first generation who had daily access to televisual images. The impact of television on my life can not be underestimated. Certainly there were many other influences – family, school, geographical location, literature to name but a few, but television was important for a number of reasons. As a child it provided inspiration for role playing games. Serialisation of classic novels provided the motivation to read the books. As for the importance of watching *Top of the Pops* during my teenage years... it enabled conversations with class mates (and the categorisation of people according to their musical preferences), fashions could be scrutinised and favourite groups could be fantasised over. As someone who had been obliged to move, in my mid-teens, to a part of the country that seemed to be twenty years behind the times, television widened my horizons. It also contributed to my socialisation as a girl and a woman. It informed my understanding of the world. In short it had an effect on my life.

When I was growing up with television I was extremely uncritical. If it was on television (and especially the BBC) it must be true. However by the time I embarked on academic study, as a mature student, I was much more critical. Nevertheless I was still of the opinion that television was a powerful medium as far as representation was concerned. As a feminist I was critical of representations of women. As a Christian I began to question the way religion was represented in fictional broadcasting. Although I had conducted research into religious broadcasting I was not particularly interested in that genre. I rarely watched it myself – it was the province of the boring and elderly as far as I was concerned. Rather it was the area of fictional broadcasting that interested me – soaps, sitcoms, drama and comedy shows. None of the characters in this kind of programming reflected my own experience of having a faith. They were either fools or charlatans and this applied equally to laity and clergy.

### Ontological divisions

I was also aware that some Christians, particularly those I knew who were part of the more fundamentalist end of the Church (I will address fundamentalism in more detail in Chapter Six), were beginning to withdraw from mainstream broadcasting on the basis that it was ungodly and that there was scant respect for religious sensibilities. The programming that they were moving into was specifically Christian and generally right-wing. I began to



wonder about the potential for serious social division based on this kind of self-exclusion and the concomitant effect that could have on relations with those outside the inner sanctum. As Kepel's study into Islamic, Jewish and Christian fundamentalism notes, there is a common theme of rejection of secular values. At the same time, there is a mastery of science and technology, which are used in the furtherance of their theological aims. His informed conclusion articulates with my inchoate concerns:

But, in the medium term, it is the logic of conflict which underlies the parallel development of different religious movements setting out to reconquer the world. Such conflict is ultimately a war between 'believers' who make the reaffirmation of their religious identity into the criterion of truths that are both exclusive of others and peculiar to themselves. (1994: 203).

I wondered also, what impact the fictional, televisual representations had on the social perception of religion. My concerns were related to moral panics about the effects of the media. What is apparent is that the way in which the term 'moral panic' is used within common parlance is far removed from academic understandings of the phrase and it is important to note that when I was considering this problem (along with others who had expressed similar concerns) initially it was from a common-sense understanding of the phrase. Media usage of the term, to express fears about media effects, contributed to a widely held view that the media were extremely powerful in influencing people. Not only were they promoting secular values but they were also promoting a derisory and negative view of religious values. It could be argued that these fears were just one in a long list of fears about technological developments.

The introduction of the printing press raised fears about the masses being able to read the bible without being educated to understand it, and the subsequent development of heretical ideas. Thompson (1995) describes the situation of an Italian miller from the 16<sup>th</sup> century who was interrogated, imprisoned and put to death for the expression of a cosmological view which was at odds with the orthodox view. Thompson argues that it was the variety of books that the miller read that enabled him to formulate his 'heresy', justifying the fears of the authorities. Whilst contemporary concerns might seem to be a long way removed from this story nevertheless there is a similarity, which is based on ontological understandings of the world. There is a divine law and its erosion must be resisted. The 'misrepresentation' of religion by broadcasters contributed, in the eyes of some, to a negative perception of religion across the whole of society. I wondered if there was any

truth to this. Was there a possibility that some viewers would opt out of mainstream broadcasting and opt in to specifically religious broadcasting? If so, does this create a problem in terms of social exclusion and inclusion? This question needs to be considered in the context of technological developments as well as identity formation and affiliation.

### **Social inclusion and exclusion**

At the Guardian Edinburgh International Television Festival (2000) the key topic running through the majority of the debates was the issue of multi-platforming and the personalisation of programming with the advent of TiVo and intelligent Electronic Programme Guides (EPGs). In this brave new world the consumer ruled. Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) was seen as being able to provide audiences with exactly what they wanted without having to be disturbed by things outwith their ken. What was NOT addressed, at all, was what happens to a society that is so fragmented? If people do not have direct experience of different groups but can at least watch them on television (no matter how flawed that representation is) is it going to be better or worse if they have no knowledge of different groups because now they need only watch exactly what their EPG has selected for them? There is an argument for saying that at the same time as the world is becoming smaller, due to technological advances (the media in all its forms provide almost immediate access to events and places that in former times would have taken days, weeks or months to reach us), those technological advances are enabling people to live in a smaller and more constrained world.

Technological advances and their linkage with globalisation also fit in to debates about identity formation and affiliation. As Southerton (2002) remarks, an interest in how people identify with others and their sense of belonging to social groups is the subject of much academic and popular debate. Whilst class continues to be seen as relevant in identity formation there are those who see it as one amongst a number of influential factors, notably race/ethnicity and gender according to Anthias (2001). Equally there are those like Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and Bauman (1988) who argue that the impact of globalization has led to a fracturing in social relations and that individuals are in the position of consumers, free to choose their lifestyle and mould their personal identity (Southerton, 2002). However, there are two points to be made here. The first is that however identity is formed – through structure or consumption – the distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’ seems to be an integral feature of that identity formation. The second is that for some people religion is more important than race/ethnicity as far as self-identity is concerned. Anthias (2001) argues that class, gender and ethnicity are the primary divisions



as far as social stratification is concerned. Whilst she accepts that there may be other divisions she argues that these three are the most important. I would argue that religion can, in some circumstances, impact upon identity formation and thence social stratification just as strongly as gender and ethnicity. My position here depends upon the use of the word 'praxis' rather than 'practice' to describe religious involvement. Gill provides a useful explanation of the difference, which can be applied to all religions, not just Christianity:

Whereas the term 'practice' simply refers to any form of observable action, the term 'praxis' is reserved for those forms of action which flow from and contribute directly to theory. Such an understanding of 'praxis' maintains that Christian beliefs necessarily involve Christian action and that this action moulds one's understanding of the beliefs. 'Praxis' implies that critical reflection is not some optional extra which can be left to those who teach academic theology. (1988:6)

Religious praxis in this case will have a powerful impact upon identity formation, affiliation, social stratification and therefore, dependant upon the society, upon social inclusion or exclusion.

The importance of distinction should not be underestimated when it comes to social interaction. At its most positive it enables individuals and groups to identify those who are similar and facilitates that social interaction. At its most negative it facilitates the identification of enemies. The articulation of religion and identity can be seen to reflect these two extremes. McGuire argues that religious cohesion at one level can lead to social conflict at another (1992). People can be united religiously but it can also put them at odds with the surrounding society. The centrality of religion to identity formation (and inter-group conflict) is well argued by Seul (1999). With reference to the distinction between 'us' and 'them' he believes that religion '...speaks[s] more deeply to the identity impulse which underlies Connor's 'us-them syndrome' than do other potential focal points for group identity, including ancestry' (1999:565). In part this is due to the eternal aspect of religion – '[it] frequently provides individuals a sense of seamless continuity between past, present and future' (1999:561). He concludes by saying:

Religion frequently serves the identity impulse more powerfully and comprehensively than other repositories of cultural meaning can or do... The peculiar ability of religion to support the development of individual and group

identity is the hidden logic of the link between religion and intergroup conflict.  
(1999:567)

To return to the broadcast media my interest was in whether or not those people for whom religion was an important (if not the most important) part of their identity saw themselves as socially excluded by the media. If so would they withdraw into specifically religious broadcasting which would further reinforce a negative sense of 'them' and 'us'? In the following section I will explain how these different concerns were melded together to produce a coherent research project.

### **Focus of the study**

The focus of the study was in developing an understanding of the way that the broadcast media affect people's perceptions of different groups in society. More specifically it was concerned with examining the effect of representations of religion, in fictional broadcasting, on public attitudes towards religion and religious people. Do representations affect the way religion is perceived and if so is that effect positive or negative? If the effect is negative does this contribute to social exclusion – either self-imposed or externally imposed? However, a study which only looked at audience reception would be unable to say anything about the processes of production, which clearly affect what is available for audiences to watch. Equally those processes of production have been shaped by historical events – some specific to broadcasting organisations and some related to wider social events. What were the factors that affected the production process? The answers to these questions were explored in a number of ways, which are outlined in the following paragraph.

The empirical research focused on the production of programmes and the audiences for those programmes. Within production, there were four distinct, but not discrete, areas that addressed the following questions:

1. Archival research – what were the historical factors which influenced the way broadcasting developed and how did earlier audiences respond to that broadcasting?
2. Interviews with producers of fictional broadcasting – why did they represent religion in the way that they did and what were the constraints that affected their decisions?
3. Interviews with more general broadcasters – what were their experiences of attitudes to religion within broadcasting and what were their subjective explanations?



4. Interviews with members of regulatory bodies – what were their experiences of dealing with concerns about religion?

Within audiences, there were two distinct but not discrete areas, which addressed the following questions:

- Focus group interviews with audiences – what did they think of the way religion was represented in fictional broadcasting and how did it ‘fit’ with their own experience?
- Interviews with representatives of mainstream religions – did their respective religions have a policy for dealing with the media generally and fictional broadcasting specifically?

I will explain the method in more detail in a later section as well as in specific chapters.

In order to address the wider, social issues that have affected broadcasters as well as audiences, and to recognise the truth of Miller et al’s statement that television ‘...does not operate as a single force in a hermetically sealed ideological conspiracy’ (1998:211), it was important to examine secularization as part of the research. A short explanation will be found later in this chapter and a more expanded discussion comprises Chapter Six.

In order to locate the empirical research academically the history of media studies was examined generally and work on media and religion was examined specifically. Accordingly, I decided that the most useful way of explaining my findings sociologically was to draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and particularly his concepts of doxa, field and habitus (1998). Again, this will be explained in more detail in a later section. To summarise, audiences and broadcasters were interviewed. Archival documents were examined. The influence of secularisation was considered. The history of media studies, and work on media and religion was examined. The sociological crafting was facilitated by borrowing conceptual tools from Bourdieu. Although this section has given primacy to the empirical work I want to discuss in more detail the history of media studies before I explain the methods employed throughout the empirical part of the research. This discussion will provide a background explanation for and justification of the methods used to answer the questions this research was asking.



## **The history of media studies**

When looking at the history of media studies it is important to remember that although there is a chronological development, with one approach following on from another, it does not mean that a previous approach ceases to exist. Instead new approaches exist alongside previous ones and sometimes they either incorporate or modify features of that previous approach. Having said that, Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998) have argued that there have been three phases to audience research, which I think provides a useful way of categorising the developments. First there is the Behavioural phase. Second there is Incorporation/Resistance. Third there is Spectacle/Performance. However, their third category is more of a projection for the way media studies could/should progress based on audience diffusion. Therefore rather than using each of these categories I will concentrate on the first two. It is also important to note that this is not a comprehensive survey of the history of media studies. Instead the intention is to locate my own research within the tradition whilst demonstrating why I have rejected some methods and chosen others.

Behavioural Phase. Early studies in to the media were concerned with its effects upon the audience and were predominantly American. McQuail (1997:5) notes that early writing about television emphasises its addictive pull, its ubiquitous invasion of social and cultural space, and its seeming passivity and emptiness as a leisure time activity. The impact of the Second World War on media studies was significant. During the war members of the Frankfurt School took refuge in America. Their experiences of propaganda in 1930s Nazi Germany gave them cause for concern about the manipulative potential of the mass media. Although they did not actively research the media, they were influential thinkers and writers.

Whilst many of the concerns about the effects of mass media were related to the susceptibility of the masses to media messages it is important to remember that much of the work generated by researchers in America was concerned with the social-psychological impact on individuals, as opposed to the mass – selective exposure, perception and retention as a function of attitudes to name but two (Nowak, 1997:32). That caveat notwithstanding early Effects work had its roots in Behaviourism with an emphasis on the stimulus-response model. What is significant about this ‘hypodermic effect’ of the media – the viewer is passively injected with the message – is not so much the academic debates about whether or not this simplistic model was ever really the basis of research, or whether it is sustainable as a view of media effects. Rather it is the way it has seeped into public consciousness in much the same way that responses to moral panics (to which I referred

earlier) have. Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998:4ff) make the point that within public debate it is still quite influential. They cite Walser (1993) who showed how attempts to censor rock lyrics in the USA have been based on a direct-effect model of how audiences respond to music. It is the stuff of tabloid headlines whenever there is a tragedy involving the young or deranged. Context is irrelevant. It was the media that made them do it<sup>2</sup>. As Nowak remarks, 'there is a culturally deep rooted idea of a more or less unequivocal causal relationship between the contents of texts and pictures which are made publicly available in society and thought processes and beliefs in the population' (1997:35).

The comments in the previous paragraph referred to the negative effects of mass media but it is important to note that early broadcasters also saw the possibility of positive effects. Lord Reith, at the BBC, (who will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter) saw religion within broadcasting as being enormously beneficial to the listening public. Ang (1996:5) quotes an American television producer who, in 1946, enthused about the integrative power of television. His view was that through an afternoon cookery programme housewives across the country could be cooking their husbands the same meal. The benefits of this to the government hinged around economic stability. Particular crops could be emphasised in the meal, ensuring that women went out and purchased them. When there were shortages alternatives could be suggested. Of course, at the heart of this integrative vision was a view of the audience (particularly women) as susceptible to media influence to such a degree that they could be relied upon to maintain economic stability.

#### *The Effects Approach*

Cultivation Analysis (Gerbner et al 1980, 1986; Morgan & Signorielli, 1990) is another example of research that falls into the Effects approach. The focus of Cultivation Analysis is on the long-term effects of cumulative exposure to the media. It hypothesises that people who watch larger amounts of television will be more likely to think that the real world is like television. One of the key concepts for identifying media effects is 'mainstreaming' whereby 'heavy viewing may absorb or override differences in perspectives and behaviour that ordinarily stem from other factors and influences' (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990:22). Although attention is paid to the audience and media content I share Silverstone's view that it is inadequate because it fails to consider the social dynamics of television viewing (1994). I take the view also that it is overly quantitative and its findings are therefore overly determined by researcher definitions.

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<sup>2</sup> I belong to a discussion list on Media, Religion and Culture and there has been heated debate over the effects of the film, Harry Potter. Some list members have argued that because it has witchcraft and magic at



The next approach to media studies came out of an interest in the uses that audiences made of the media and what gratifications they got from them. Herzog (1944) for instance looked at the way women used radio serials (the original soap operas) in their daily lives. In the words of Katz & Foulkes (1962) the focus was no longer on 'what the media do to people' but on 'what people do with the media'. The focus of much Uses and Gratifications work has been on the individual's psychological needs and has been perceived as neglecting the social processes shaping media expectations (Reimer, 1997:43). As Buckingham argues whilst Uses and Gratifications might seem to posit a more 'active viewer' than Effects studies allowed (and is possibly why Uses and Gratifications has sometimes been characterised as demonstrating the powerlessness of the media), ultimately the viewer is seen as the passive respondent to behaviour-determining needs (1993:16). It also shares some of the methodological problems of Cultivation Analysis in the preference for quantitative over qualitative methods. According to Rosengren, Uses and Gratifications research that is based on the same assumptions guiding the physical and biological sciences will bring about the only 'true' social science (1983, cited in Lull, 1997:15). Whilst Rosengren's work in Sweden has taken into account social structure, social position and gender, the limitations of quantitative research (notably structured interviews and questionnaires) mean that the 'how' of viewing is ignored as well as the overall 'what' of viewing.

Incorporation/Resistance. The work in this phase moves along a continuum from the Dominant Text to the Dominant Audience. The most significant body of work at the Dominant Text end of the continuum has been *Screen* theory, which was the dominant paradigm within Media Studies in the 1970s. Unlike Effects and Uses and Gratifications *Screen* theory was not interested in the audience. Instead the focus was on the text and developed out of literary criticism. *Screen* theory sought to define the ways in which film text 'produces' the subjectivity of the spectator, by constructing 'subject positions' from which it is to be read (Buckingham, 1993:17). The structures of the film (narrative, editing, mise-en-scene) 'sutured' the audience into the dominant ideology of the film. The work of Laura Mulvey on women as the object of the male gaze (1974) is just one example of a textual analysis that deploys psychoanalysis to reveal ideological structures.

Whilst the majority of work in *Screen* theory focused on films Judith Williamson's book, *Decoding Advertisements* (1978), provided an analysis of the way in which advertising interpellated people into consumerism. The problems with *Screen* theory can be seen in Williamson's book. Not only is there an absence of empirical work with audiences but there is an assumption throughout the book that there is only one way of reading an advert.<sup>3</sup> There is also an important epistemological problem – that of truth and knowledge. If interpellation is so successful how is it possible to expose ideology? As Barker notes, 'Althusser's answer, that the rigours of science (and of his science in particular) can expose ideology, is both elitist and untenable' (2000:58). *Screen* theory, with its absence of audience studies, conflated the intended reader with the real reader and exemplifies the limitations of media research that fails to talk to the actual audience.

Drawing on the work of Parkin on class inequality (1972), Stuart Hall, in a paper called *Encoding/Decoding* (1980), argued that whilst the dominant ideology is typically inscribed as the preferred reading (aimed at the intended reader who was the focus of *Screen* theory) in a media text, there are alternative stances that viewers might take based on their social situations – negotiated readings and oppositional readings. Dominant readings are produced by those whose social situation favours the preferred reading; negotiated readings are produced by those who inflect the preferred reading to take account of their social position; and oppositional readings are produced by those whose social position puts them into direct conflict with the preferred reading (Chandler, 2000). Morley's *Nationwide* (1980) study was the first attempt to operationalise this approach and saw a move away from the Dominant Text towards the audience end of the continuum.

There have been many criticisms of this study (Morley being one of his own critics). Nevertheless, the importance of the study was that it attempted to uncover the way in which a popular text produced certain subject positions, through interviewing the audience. Despite the limitations of the study it did demonstrate that it was possible for viewers to reject the preferred reading and to adopt either a negotiated or oppositional reading. Stevenson makes the point though, that this doesn't mean the audience is able to read anything into the text (a point that will be demonstrated when I address the work of the

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<sup>3</sup> The following is a good example of this point. In one of my undergraduate seminars we were discussing beer adverts. A couple for Tennants were being enthused over by the lecturer. I had puzzled over these adverts for some time because it seemed to me that the message was, "Only the seriously stupid drink this brand." I couldn't understand why an advertising company would want to send that message. Apparently I had got it wrong! They were appealing to 'lads'. Not being a 'lad' and not knowing any 'lads' there was no way that I could read it 'correctly'. I could only read it in the light of my own cultural experience, which meant that I had avoided interpellation!



Glasgow Media Group), 'The text acts as a structured polysemy that while never achieving 'total' ideological closure can open up certain meanings while closing down others ' (1995:79).

In terms of the history of media studies this turn to the audience opened the way for numerous studies which focused on the ways in which different audiences viewed different kinds of programming (Wren-Lewis, 1985; Richardson & Corner, 1986; Corner et al., 1981; Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1987; Liebes & Katz, 1990, to name but a few). This work came to be known as reception studies. The value of many of these studies lay in their engagement with popular broadcasting, especially soap operas. Whilst addressing ideological constructions they provided a space for viewers to talk about their own responses to these programmes. The negative aspect of this research development has been a focus on the context of viewing (what has often been described as audience ethnography) or the incorporation of viewing into daily rituals, to the exclusion of what it is that the audience(s) are viewing (Moore, 1995; Lull, 1988, 1990; Leichter et al., 1985; Bryce, 1985; Collett, 1986; Palmer, 1986). This is not to say that there are not valuable insights to be gained from understanding how domestic situations impact upon people's viewing habits because there are. The main difficulty is with research that falls into the Dominant Audience end of the continuum.

Whilst *Screen* theory was seen as being overly deterministic as far as the text was concerned, work at the Dominant Audience end can be seen as being over-celebratory of the activity of audiences. The work of John Fiske (1989) is indicative of this valorisation of the power of media audiences to subvert media texts and to create their own meanings. Popular culture is equated with resistance or opposition to the dominant ideology. The problem with this approach is that there is an assumption that the popular is always in opposition to the dominant when in fact the two might be in total accord. It also fails to take into account the influence of television when audiences are faced with information, groups or situations about which they have previously had no experience. Equally, there seems to be a simplistic binary opposition between the dominant and the dominated. However, there is not only a definitional problem – who are the dominant and who are the dominated? There is also a structural problem. Are the dominated a homogeneous group? Would the oppositional viewing of a middle class, black adolescent be the same as the oppositional viewing of a working class, white pensioner? And what difference would gender, religion or sexual orientation have? As I noted earlier whilst there might be a degree of polysemy within media texts they are not totally open-ended. Equally, work that



celebrates audience resistance fails to address the issue of what is available for the audience to watch. A very simple example here should suffice. Is it sufficient for audiences to identify with the black villain rather than the white hero if the most consistent portrayal of blacks is as villains? Where does that leave positive portrayals of blacks and challenges to stereotypes?

Miller, Kitzinger, Williams & Beharrell (1998) comment on the focus, in the past ten years, on the active audience and the diverse readings that people make of texts. They argue that the question of media power as a political issue has slipped almost entirely off the main research agenda. They also make the point that a 'resisting' reading is not necessarily the same as a 'progressive' or 'liberating' reading. It is possible for the preferred reading to be resisted in order to maintain prejudice<sup>4</sup>. Miller et al are (or have been) part of the Glasgow Media Group and at this point I want to refer to some of the work of the group because it addresses precisely the concerns about media production, content and reception. It could also be seen to occupy the middle-ground in terms of the Dominant Text/Dominant Audience continuum.

The early work of the Glasgow Media Group (1976, 1980, 1982) focused on content analysis of media news coverage. Their conclusions were:

...that 'facts' are situated in dominant story themes, that such themes build upon basic frames of reference – basic assumptions about society viewed in particular ways – which often hinder the full and proper coverage of the events in question.  
(1976:9)

The work in *More Bad News* (1980) and *Really Bad News* (1982) reinforced, for the Group, the importance of attention to language, story and visuals rather than just focusing on the audiences' ability to decode messages. By 1990 the group had moved on to audience studies. Through the development of a new research method (the 'news game'), which asked interviewees to create their own news stories about events that had been in the media, they found that key explanatory themes were remembered. This first audience study referred to the 1984/5 Miners' Strike. It demonstrated the importance of direct/indirect experience that was not only 'corporeal but also geographical'. Whilst media coverage

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<sup>4</sup> At a public screening of *Romper Stomper* (a film about a neo-Nazi gang in Australia, which is brutally honest but hardly sympathetic) there were members of the far right in the audience who laughed at a

suggested that picket-line violence was predominant those experiences enabled people to question the veracity of that media coverage. Subsequent studies throughout the 1990s have continued to utilise and expand upon the 'news game', content analysis and research into the production process. The significance of the Group's work is their recognition that 'each message thus interacts with people's personal experiences and structural positions' (1998:190). However, the activity of the audience is not all-powerful:

We have shown how messages can structure understanding, how they can be discounted by 'positive' experience in some cases but in other examples how reactions, even to fictional portrayals, can overwhelm experience. In these relationships we can see the media as a crucial variable, not merely for reinforcement, but as a powerful influence in the development of beliefs, attitudes and emotional response... Philo (1996:104)

As Kitzinger remarks, '...the complex processes of reception and consumption *mediate* but do not necessarily *undermine*, media power' (1999:4).

Through this outline of the history of media studies I have shown the different ways in which different researchers have approached either audiences or media texts. In some cases texts have been privileged and in others it has been audiences. Neither of these approaches is satisfactory. Philo outlines what he sees as the core elements of a critical social scientific approach to media: '[Sound bite theories] are no substitute for the work of analysing media content, the processes of its production and the responses of actual audiences' (1999:288). I would agree with that statement. The evidence from the history of media studies shows that whilst focusing on one of those elements can produce interesting and informative work it is only partial. It also demonstrates the importance of multiple methods and, through the use of archival work, and research into reception and production processes, this research has avoided some of the limitations of previous media research. It is also important to note that much research into the mass media fails to make a clear distinction between effects on behaviour and effects on attitudes. There is often an assumption that effects on the latter will lead to observable effects on the former. This is not necessarily the case. Work in the field of social psychology has repeatedly demonstrated the significance of time and motivation in transforming attitude change into behavioural change (Petty & Cacioppo (1981) provide an excellent overview of social psychological approaches to attitudes and

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particularly vicious attack on some Vietnamese youths. The appropriate responses were shock, horror or



persuasion). Media effects are complex and attempts to support the stimulus-response model are flawed. It was my intention to explore the self-reported attitudes of viewers and to contextualise those attitudes, not only in relation to their own experiences of religion but also in relation to the programming that was available for them.

### **Religion and broadcasting**

I have previously referred to the absence of religion in academic texts that deal with the media. I want to return to this point briefly. In the introduction to *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* Turner refers to the way pioneers in cultural studies broke with literary tradition's elitist assumption in order to examine the everyday and the ordinary, 'those aspects of *our* [my emphasis] lives that exert so powerful and unquestioned an influence on our existence that we take them for granted' (1996:2). Yet nowhere in this book is there a reference to religion. It is as if religion can not be an influence on our existence but as I showed in a previous section religion is very often a powerful influence on our existence. Perhaps the answer to its exclusion lies in the use of the pronoun 'our'. Perhaps it is not as inclusive as it would suggest. Perhaps it only includes those for whom religion is not an influence. The others are irrelevant – which, of course, is relevant to the question of social inclusion and exclusion. As Smith points out:

Our most influential images of authority today derive ultimately from television, usually from television fiction; from this we register at various levels of our minds the status of police, cabinet ministers...; we learn to judge the relative measures of respect we offer to soldiers, *priests* [my emphasis], business leaders. (1995:4).

My argument is that religion is still an important part of our society and is as subject to media representation as any other aspect of society. It should not be confined to the sociology of religion or to faculties of divinity. Instead its representation should be seen as importantly as issues of race, gender, disability or sexual orientation; and the consequences of representation(s) should be considered seriously by media sociologists.

At the Conference on Media, Religion and Culture (Edinburgh, July 1999), Professor Stewart Hoover spoke about the converging worlds of religion and media. He highlighted the emphasis placed on texts, messages, images and object, by establishment religious thinkers. I am in agreement with his view that this approach has had little relevance to

audience reception. In a very telling statement (which relates to the points I have already made about the absence of religion in the sociology of media, and media and cultural studies) he comments on his fascination with the way discourse about media and religions has been so much on the margins of the rest of scholarship:

I have been very critical of the tendency of media scholars to ignore religion. At the same time, though, religious thought about the media has been blind to developments in secular media studies. This blindness has allowed dualism and elitism to continue in religious study of the media while these ideas have come under withering criticism in the broader scholarly context.

It is my view that the problems highlighted by Hoover can be seen through a review of literature, which deals with religion and media.

Any overview of the literature is inevitably limited but the important point is to identify particular themes and absences. In order to facilitate this I identified five key areas in to which work on religion and media fall:

- Studies which deal with audiences
- Studies which deal with the media
- Religious/functional use of the media
- Ways of seeing the media as religious
- Opinion

There is occasionally a degree of elision between some of the categories. Whilst this is inevitable when trying to categorise disparate works I have explained (when this happens) why I thought a particular work was more suited to the chosen category.

Audiences. This is one of the smallest categories reflecting Hoover's observations on the paucity of work, which actually engages with the audience. The first two studies in this category were conducted on behalf of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and the Independent Television Commission (ITC) in the UK. Svennevig, Haldane, Spiers & Gunter (1988) produced *Godwatching: Viewers, Religion and Television*, which demonstrated the existence of an audience for religious broadcasting. In a follow up study, Gunter & Viney (1994) examined whether audience definitions of religious broadcasting were the same as broadcasters' definitions; and whether the term 'religious broadcasting'



was a disincentive to viewers. The studies were based on a combination of questionnaires and focus group interviews. One of the interesting points to emerge from the earlier study (and was confirmed in the later study) was the inclusion of programmes, which were not obviously religious, within the definition of religious broadcasting. Svennevig et al concluded that 'religious' related to concepts of morality and codes of behaviour rather than faith or creed. Whilst both studies dealt clearly and adequately with the issue of religious broadcasting they did not deal with the way religion was treated in fictional broadcasting.

Two studies from the United States also investigated audiences of religious broadcasting, but this time in relation to the electronic church and televangelism. Fore (1987) and Hoover (1988)<sup>5</sup> both provided empirical evidence to support their research. Hoover's work focused on the social sources of the electronic church, partly in response to what he concluded were unsubstantiated claims about the size of these congregations. Fore was more interested in the way faith, values and culture were shaped by the electronic churches. One of Fore's findings was interesting in that it challenged elitist assumptions about the inadequacy of broadcast religion – one in six heavy viewers of religious broadcasting said that it contributed more to their spiritual lives than their own churches did. Of tangential interest is the finding that committed viewers were already involved in community churches and viewing the electronic church did not lessen their commitment to it. However, like the UK studies, the focus was solely on religious broadcasting.

Moving away from religious broadcasting Zimmerman Umble (Signorielli & Morgan, 1990) studied the impact of television use on Mennonite communities in the United States and Canada. Her methodological background was Cultivation Analysis and consequently her research tool was a quantitative questionnaire. Through analysing the effects of television on a subculture, which had very clear religious and social values that were at odds with the content of the media, Zimmerman Umble concluded that she had found evidence of mainstreaming amongst heavy viewers of television. There are however some problems with the study. As she comments in the introduction, liberal Mennonites are more likely to own television sets (though not exclusively so) so there is no way of knowing just how much their views were affected by television rather than their liberalism. She also points to the fact that there is convergence of views between the elderly and

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<sup>5</sup> Recent work by Hoover and Clark continues to concentrate on the relationship amongst audiences, media and religion – *Practising Religion in the Age of Media: Explorations in Media, Religion and Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002.

young adult heavy viewers – two groups were there would be an expectation of divergence. However, because of the method she employed she had no way of ascertaining whether or not there was a familial relationship between these groups. An equally plausible explanation for the convergence in the case of familial relationship could be a similarity of liberal outlook. Interestingly she also finds evidence of resistance to televisual representations of sexual values and wonders if television, in this instance, is confirming the correctness of their own values. Had there been a qualitative dimension to this study then a much more informative analysis could have been obtained. Nevertheless it is useful for showing the difficulties in demonstrating media effects, even when a sub-culture with values that are in conflict with media values is the object of analysis.

The final work I want to discuss in this section is another study by Hoover (Signorielli & Morgan, 1990) in which he not only compares conventional television with religious television but he examines the differences between the audiences of these two types of broadcasting. Drawing on the findings of the Annenberg-Gallup Study of Religious Broadcasting (Gerbner, Gross, Hoover, Morgan & Signorielli, 1984) he highlights a number of findings in relation to the audiences. Viewing religious television is associated with the conservative political values that have always been a part of the evangelical and fundamentalist sub-cultures. Viewers of religious television are more religious overall than the general television audience. They are also much more likely to want tougher laws on pornography and to believe that premarital sex and homosexuality are wrong. He also found a positive association between voting and watching religious television whereas there was a negative association between voting and conventional television. The limited presence of religion in conventional television and its conveyance of beliefs and values (particularly in the area of sexual mores) that are antipathetic to their religious viewpoint make religious television preferable.

Providers of religious television usually offer a variety of programmes that are intended to mimic the entertainment formats of conventional television, without reproducing its beliefs and values. It doesn't seek to provide only religious broadcasting. Rather it seeks to provide a complete alternative which, unlike conventional television, will not denigrate or undermine viewers' beliefs in any genre of programming. Hoover's study found that this was exactly what viewers of religious television were seeking. With reference to my own research the cumulative data from both of Hoover's studies demonstrates that there are sub-cultures who will distance themselves from conventional television due to dissatisfaction with the way religion is treated, and due to a clash of values and beliefs.



Hoover and Fore also showed that audiences of religious television tended to be more conservative, not only politically but also socially, and were more likely to be regular voters. Whilst these studies were based in the United States where the state of religious television is very different from the UK they do show that this is an area that social scientists should be addressing here. If conventional television becomes increasingly unattractive and religious television becomes more widely available and if it reinforces the political and social conservatism of its viewers then there are political and social implications due to the positive association with voting.

Media. Most of the work in this sections deals with the way the media cover religion though it does include work which looks at the impact of media on attitudes to religion. Silk (1995), Wright (1997), Guizzardi (1989) and Hart, Turner & Knupp (1980) are all interested in the way religion is covered by non-religious television. Through either content analysis or a theoretical typology the frequency and the style of religious coverage is analysed. Hadden (1987) provides an historical overview of the development of evangelical religious broadcasters in the United States and the relationship with secularisation. In a de-emphasising of ideology Hadden argues that the development of these broadcasters is more to do with resource mobilisation, in order to achieve their goals, than anything else. He also sees their development as a growing social force rather than a backlash against social developments. I would argue that it is perfectly possible for it to be a growing social force as well as being a backlash against social developments. In fact the work of Hoover in the previous section would seem to be a perfect illustration of this.

Hoover & Wagner (1997) provide an historical analysis of policy in American broadcast treatment of religion, which provides a more coherent explanation for the developments discussed by Hadden. Through examining the emergence of policy development since the inception of broadcasting they provide a useful, temporal context in which to understand the current state of religion in American broadcasting. This kind of analysis relates to my own use of archival material to contextualise current attitudes to religion and broadcasting. Mendelsohn (1997) looked at the religious cleavage in Canada in relation to political affiliation and how that is affected by the media. Drawing on data from the 1988 Canadian Election Study he found that the largest differences between Catholics and Protestants were between regular churchgoers with low media exposure, while the smallest differences were found between 'heavily exposed non-practisers'. He also found that the most religious Catholics were the most resistant to media messages. Clearly there are similarities to the resistance of the Mennonites in Zimmerman Umble's study – some media messages



only serve to reinforce faith positions. Mendelsohn suggests that there is some evidence of convergence amongst the heavy viewers. However, in the absence of qualitative data it is impossible to know whether the convergence was as a result of media exposure or whether the fact that this was found amongst non-practisers says more about their non-practising – a possible disagreement with denominational orthodoxy.

The work of Dart & Allen (1993) was unusual in that it not only questioned audiences but it also questioned producers of media messages. Whilst the focus of the study was on press coverage of religion it is useful because it identifies the difference in perception between audiences and producers. It also provides empirical evidence to support the concerns of the audience. Clergy, newspaper editors and religious writers were asked about their perceptions of news coverage of religion. The clergy felt that there was bias against ministers and organised religion whereas the others did not. Dart & Allen found that newspaper analysis supported the clergy viewpoint. When it comes to the way religion is treated within fictional broadcasting I wondered if it was possible that there was a similar gulf between producers and audiences? A study by Borowski (1987) looked at the way one US religious group used the media to create a religious message about itself. It is a good example of the kind of work which has a totally religious focus. It is also one of the studies which could have been placed in a different category but I chose this one because it was more about use of the media than a guide to using the media.

The next study to which I want to refer was conducted in Scotland by Gibson (1992). On the surface it looks as if it should have been included in the audiences section. However, because the focus is on the influence of television rather than a real interest in the audience itself I have included it in this section. Gibson was interested in the influence of television on adolescents' attitudes towards Christianity and to that end conducted a large quantitative survey of Dundee school children. He concluded that viewing soap operas and light entertainment showed a slight positive correlation with positive attitudes to Christianity, and that viewing current affairs and sport showed little effect either way. The problem with Gibson's study is that by the time he factored out age, sex, social class, parental and personal church attendance he was left with meaningless information. It was as if he was seeking the tabula rasa of the young people! As I noted in discussing the work of the Glasgow Media Group, television viewing takes place in the context of everything he factored out and it is impossible, on that basis, to conclude that certain types of programming show a positive effect on attitudes towards Christianity. There certainly is not enough evidence to support his concluding statement, 'Gerbner et al (1979) state that



“Television is... an agency to maintain, stabilise and reinforce – not subvert – conventional values, beliefs and behaviors [sic].” The result noted from this survey would tend to confirm such a theoretical stance’ (1992:28). What his study actually demonstrates is that over-manipulation of statistics, even when there is a large sample, produces irrelevant information.

The vast majority of work on religion and the media stems from the United States. Within religious studies there seems to be a preference for content analysis in conjunction with Cultivation Theory. Two studies which deploy these methods but which are unusually relevant to my own study are Maguire (1998) and Skill, Robinson, Lyons & Larson (1994). Maguire analyses the use of religious symbols in television adverts as part of an argument about secularisation. Whilst his paper concludes with more questions than answers he highlights the very limited use of religion in American advertising. He quite rightly notes that a further study which addresses the advertisers is the only way to answer some of the questions he raises – is the limited use due to a fear of offending or a belief that religion is irrelevant and would repel potential buyers? This limited presence of religion was addressed by Skill et al.

They note (and I have already noted), ‘Empirical investigations exploring fictional television’s portrayal of religion and religious behaviors [sic] are glaringly absent from the research literature’ (1994:252). They go on to discuss a number of studies which have looked at values in the media and some of the studies which have looked for explanations as to why religion is invisible in fictional television. The consensus (not always empirically founded) is that the majority of producers and writers have little time for religion in their own lives and as a result see it as having no relevance within broadcasting. Whilst Skill et al recognise that their study can not make claims about cause and effect relationships they do make the point that content analysis can provide an important insight into the nature and range of models that are available to the viewing audience.

One of the problems of content analysis is that the units of analysis are subject to the researcher’s perspective. For instance Skill et al have *Slang Expressions* as a category and each category is assessed for valence, salience and context. Whilst acknowledging that slang expressions contributed minimally to the religious or spiritual dimension of a character or programme nevertheless they noted that their inclusion contributed substantially to the number of religious behaviours identified in the investigation – excluding this category would have led to a 40% reduction in occurrences. I would



suggest that it is debatable to characterise the use of 'Oh God' or 'Hell' as a religious/spiritual behaviour. For people of faith it could reasonably be seen that way but I would argue that for many others it has as much salience as 'Rats' or 'Fiddlesticks'<sup>6</sup>

My criticisms notwithstanding, the conclusions of the study are informative:

The results of this study suggest that the religious side of prime time characters' lives are not typically presented on television. Very few characters have an identifiable religious affiliation and even fewer engage in prayer, attend church, or participate in group religious activities. (1994:264)

They also highlight the absence of different religious traditions, which does not reflect the religious make-up of the USA. Their main conclusion is that, contrary to many critics who say that religion is treated systematically negatively in television this is not the case. Religion is invisible. When its treatment is compared with a host of other social institutions that regularly appear on television:

...the message that is symbolically conveyed suggests that religion is not very important because it is rarely a factor in the lives of the people on TV or the society in which they are portrayed... we might conclude that television has fictionally "de-legitimized" religious institutions and tradition by symbolically eliminating them from our most pervasive form of popular culture. Over time the consequences of these actions may actually impact the strength and viability of these institutions as a social force in society. (1994:265)

My own interest is less with the impact upon the strength and viability of religious institutions but more on the perception and treatment of religion, be it individual or institutional. Nevertheless this study raises some interesting questions about the way television marginalises religion in a country that is considerably more religious than our own. Is our own experience any different?

Religious Use of Media. This area contains an enormous amount of work. It reflects the concerns of many religious organisations with communicating effectively and contemporarily with members and non-members alike, consequently I have given it limited

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<sup>6</sup> Whilst discussing this paper with a colleague the question arose of where a phrase like 'fucking hell' would

attention. Not only are there practical guides on how to use the mass media but there are also many discussions of whether or not the media (and television in particular) are appropriate for the dissemination of religious messages<sup>7</sup>. Fore (1987) for instance provides a Christian analysis of the nature of communication. Forde (1995) also looks at the communication of Christianity through the mass media in an Irish context. Coleman & Tomka (1993) look at the moral and ethical aspects of the mass media in religion. Field (1991) and Mills (1998) provide a critique of the moral and ethical values of the mass media. Unlike the works in the other sections the ontological basis of all the work in this area is theological.

Media as Religious. There is a blurring between this section and the previous one.

However the reason it exist as a separate section is because the works to which I refer in it are not 'guides' to media use. Instead they identify ways in which the media function as religious adjuncts. Like so much work that relates to religion and the media there is no supporting empirical evidence. It is much more akin to textual analysis. Shegog (1993) and Tilby (1991) both discuss the way television is good at telling stories and relate this to the way in which Jesus used parables to explain his ideas. Goethals (1981, 1990, 1997) looks at the ways in which television watching can be described as a ritual, as sacramental and as mythic provider. Her later work extends this into the domain of popular culture. Her interest is in the way that religious symbols are either incorporated into secular practice or the way in which religious symbolism can be used to explain those practices.

In Hoover's *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (1997) Goethals' article is included in a section entitled 'Media, Religion and Culture: Contemporary Society'. In the introduction to the book Hoover and Lundby (p11) say, 'In its empirical and phenomenological chapters...' Of the five chapters included in this section not one is empirical in the sense of engaging with audiences or consumers. Lundby is the only author to provide empirical work of his own; he analyses the ritualistic elements of the Winter Olympics and makes comparisons with religious ritual. Again this has more in common with textual analysis and is well removed from any engagement with the production or reception of media messages. The discussion list, to which I have referred previously, had much discussion about the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics. A number of subscribers wrote about the sacred and secular elements of the ceremony. Finally one

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be placed. Would it be excluded because it was sexual or it would be included because it had 'hell' in it?  
<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that the Pope has recently issued a statement welcoming the Internet as an evangelical tool.



contributor confessed to having seen none of what they were referring to. Instead she had wondered about the 'tackiness' of the dresses and the waste of money on fireworks. I mention this because not only did her response echo my own but also because it illustrates what I think is problematic with much of the work on the media, written from a religious perspective. It is similar to my criticisms of *Screen* theory. We can not assume that the ideal reader is the same as the actual reader. Neither can we assume that what we see is necessarily what other people will see especially when it comes to the religious symbolism of sporting events.

It is obviously desirable that good media research looks at the inscribed meanings within different programmes but I am convinced that if there is no investigation into the meanings that the 'real' audience find one is ultimately left with the researcher's personal point of view which might be shared by only a minority of the audience. During an earlier phase of this research I had been told by two Christians about storylines in two different soap operas (Tomkinson, 1996). Both people had been enthusiastic about the positive way in which Christianity was being portrayed. However when I conducted interviews with adolescents both of those storylines were seen as anything but positive. One, which showed a young man providing a Christian explanation for a father's death, was seen as inappropriate and interfering. The other, which showed a young woman becoming involved in a house church, was seen as sinister. All of the interviewees felt that she was at risk and this was partly evidenced by the extremity of her religious enthusiasm. This clearly demonstrates the limitations of only concentrating on the text. Those with an active Christian experience saw them positively whereas those who did not saw them negatively.

Opinion. This final section is not only illustrative of the point I made in the previous section but is also illustrative of much work on religion and media. There are no audience studies and in some instances there is a failure to even acknowledge the existence of audience studies. It falls, therefore, quite clearly into the category of personal opinion. The bibliography for this section could run to pages but instead I have decided to focus on a small number of works simply to provide a sense of what exists. Some of the work in this area sees television as positive and some sees it as negative. There is also a difference between those who concentrate on the medium and those who concentrate on the content. The negative views are covered by McKay (1964), Novak (1992) and Cover (1993).



McKay's concerns related to the medium of television although he was Head of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC from 1955 – 1963. He believed that television was unable to engage the viewer with worship:

Christians should hesitate before committing themselves to the position that the televising of an ordinary service enables the viewer at home to share in the worship of the church. Even sympathy for the old and sick should not be allowed to fog our judgement of what Christianity demands of those who take part in public worship.  
(1964:62)

An earlier piece of research that I carried out contradicts McKay – precisely because I interviewed viewers and listeners of religious broadcasting about whether or not they felt part of a religious community during their viewing and listening. The majority of interviewees did feel as if they were engaging in an act of worship as opposed to just watching one. The nature of their religious beliefs (being part of a community of believers, living and departed, present and absent) and the way in which they approached the broadcasts meant that they could be as involved spiritually as if they were co-present. The point was also made that it was perfectly possible to be co-present and, due to lack of spiritual preparation, to be disengaged from co-worshippers (Tomkinson, 1995).

Cover and Novak not only object to the medium of television as being inappropriate for spiritual development but they also object to the content. The basis of their objections stems from a view of the audience as an homogenous mass that is unable to bring any critical ability to their viewing. It is also a view that is clearly untainted by any contact with critical media studies. There is also a good deal of elitism in both of their analyses. Cover offers a programming schedule which she has selected (and omits to mention which programmes she has excluded in order to make her point) that comprises only light entertainment. In her ideological analysis of these programmes she assumes that the viewer accepts the preferred reading – ‘...leave it all to them for they will “do it all for us”’ (1993:212). In an analysis which shows a complete disregard for audience studies she says, ‘There is little opportunity for consideration of alternative definitions of meaning and self-transcendence’ (1993:212). Notwithstanding the arguments referred to earlier about just how much meanings can be negotiated Cover can not justify her statements. After all, she has been able to find alternative definitions of meaning – why is she so exceptional?



Novak performs a similar scheduling sleight of hand to make his point about television being the 'molder [sic] of the soul's geography'. '...not so much the news or documentaries, not so much the discussion on public television or on Sundays, not so much the talk shows late at night...' (1982:584). If television is the 'molder' of the soul's geography then why are so many programmes excluded? I would suggest that by excluding certain programmes he has excluded the ones that encourage thoughtfulness on the part of the viewer and, in order to maintain his argument, he has to portray viewers as thoughtless. It is a return to the hypodermic view of media effects. Whilst Novak makes some valid points about some of the values that are transmitted and about the selection processes that take place, overall he is taking an elitist position that enables him to see the harm that is being done, whilst the rest of us can not.

Soukup (1993) and Morris (1986) are less negative but still take the view that, as far as religious broadcasting is concerned, television is not an adequate medium for spirituality. Again this was not borne out by my own, earlier research. Finally an article which takes a positive view of the media is Weber's analysis of the Australian soap opera, *Neighbours* (1993). Weber looks at the way neighbourliness and community is conveyed within the soap opera. However, as far as an analysis of a television programme goes it is quite clearly theological. It would be almost incredible to find anyone outside of a theology department or a church study group who interpreted the programme in the way Weber does. I am not critical of theological themes being found in the media but to suggest that Harold Bishop is a good example of Christian neighbourliness (and will be viewed positively) makes no allowance for the possibility that he might be seen as an interfering 'do-gooder' by non-Christian viewers. It might provide a useful tool for theological study but it does nothing to further an understanding of the way the general audience might view him or the impact it might have on the way Christians are perceived within society.

In conclusion I have shown that there are considerable gaps, especially within the British context, when it comes to the study of religion and broadcast media. It seems to be a subject that is absent from the social sciences and when it is dealt with from a religious perspective there are not only methodological limitations but also limitations of focus. There is an overemphasis on opinion, textual analysis and quantitative methods. There is also a lack of integration of reception processes, production processes and programme analysis – the main elements that good media research needs to address. It should also have been clear that all of the work that I have reviewed has referred to Christianity. This was not a deliberate choice. Instead it reflects the paucity of work which deals with non-



Christian religions and broadcasting. There is some work that deals with other faiths and television (Islam -Said, 1981; Gillespie, 1989; Hinduism – Gillespie, 1995; Judaism – Rozmovits, 2000) but they are rare. However, most of them focus on film, news coverage (Islam – Poole, 2000 & 2001) or the role of certain programmes in identity formation and maintenance. In the latter instance the emphasis tends to be on race/ethnicity. I have been unable to find anything that examines the way in which all religions are portrayed in fictional broadcasting and how those portrayals are received by audiences. It was my intention, therefore, to fill some of these gaps and in the process rescue religion and broadcasting from inadequate research methods. In the following section I will discuss how this was done.

### **In search of a method**

It was clear from looking at the literature relating to media, and media and religion that there have been a number of methodological problems. In recent years this has been categorised variously as a debate between micro and macro studies, critical and administrative studies, and cultural and political economy studies. McQuail and Blumler, in discussing communication scholarship as a discipline note:

Communication processes take place within complex social and institutional structures and involve continuous patterns of behaviour as well as innumerable mental acts which can only be very partial and approximately recovered and subjected to examination... All methods are questionable, since there is no uniquely correct or self-sufficient method. (1997:18).

I would agree with that statement. However, by combining a number of methods it is possible to produce a more comprehensive piece of research that provides greater insight into the complex interactions between structure and agency. In order to understand and explain the reception, production and impact of religion in fictional broadcasting a number of areas have to be investigated. Talking to audiences and faith representatives alone would say nothing about the programming choices that were available for them. Doing a content analysis alone would say nothing about the way different audiences interpreted programmes and neither would it explain why programmes had been created in particular ways. Finally, talking to producers and members of advisory committees alone would say nothing about the impact of those structural constraints on audience reception. A synthesis of different approaches was required.

As previously noted, an ideal method for media research is to examine reception, production and content. However, the reality of conducting a research project on your own, as opposed to working with a research team, means that practicalities intrude. It had been my intention to examine those areas but including content analysis proved to be too time-consuming. This was mainly because I decided to include two components that I had not originally anticipated but which, nevertheless, proved to be extremely useful – historical/archival work and interviews with faith representatives. I will discuss the different methods I used shortly but at this point it is important to say that I believe that the way the audience interviews were structured meant that a content analysis was not essential. Whilst content analysis is definitely useful, asking people what they remember is perhaps more significant. It demonstrates what they have absorbed from what was available to view. Content analysis can provide statistical data to support or demolish an argument but ultimately it is what people have remembered that is most likely to have had an effect and content analysis can not say anything about that. The historical/archival work on the other hand was extremely useful in contextualising the current situation especially when it was linked to debates about secularization. The interviews with faith representatives provided evidence about the relationships between religious and broadcasting organisations. Writing about the relationship between structure and agency Bourdieu says:

...the analysis of objective structures... is inseparable from the analysis of the genesis, within biological individuals, of the mental structures which are to some extent the product of the incorporation of social structures; inseparable, too, from the analysis of the genesis of these social structures themselves. (1990:14).

Throughout this research it was my intention that the relationship between those structures should be analysed thus providing an explanation for the representation and impact of religion in fictional broadcasting.

## **Methods**

In order to answer the research questions different methods were employed and particular issues were considered in relation to those questions. I address the empirical side of the research initially. Historical and archival research into audience letters and official documents was conducted. Focus group interviews were conducted with audiences. Individual interviews were conducted with faith representatives and broadcasters. Why and how each of these methods was chosen and deployed will be discussed below.



Historical/archival research. Initially I had given no thought to a historical dimension but it became clear that it would be impossible to understand what was happening in the present without some understanding of how it had come about. Why, for instance, had the General Synod of the Church of England been so upset about the way the BBC treated religion (albeit specifically religious broadcasting)? After all, were they not two separate institutions? Why would they think that the BBC should take special notice of them? Why were certain groups within society upset about the way religion was portrayed on television (or not as the case may be)? Was it possible to find out if recent concerns about 'falling standards' had any bearing on reality or was it merely a reference to a mythical golden age when everyone held the same values? Was it also possible to see if there were taken-for-granted assumptions within the historical documents I would be exploring?

Through looking at the development of the broadcasting institutions and their relationship with the churches it became possible to understand where some of the current tensions had come from. However, it was also important to try to gain some understanding of whether or not audiences had changed in their attitudes towards religion and broadcasting. In order to do this I examined back copies of *The Radio Times* and *The Listener*. Both of these publications were for the audience and contained audience contributions. I also examined *The BBC Handbook*. All of these publications derived from the BBC and I am aware that an absence of publications from the commercial television companies is a gap. Whilst it would be a useful extension of this research – to examine publications such as *The TV Times* and compare them with *The Radio Times* – focusing on BBC material did not invalidate the study. The BBC was a monopoly for 30 years and they set the tone for much that was in broadcasting. *The Radio Times* and *The Listener* both contained comments from the audience about commercial broadcasting so it was possible to get a feel for audience responses across the range of channels.

According to May (1997) archival work raises issues of access, authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. I had access (at the BBC offices in Edinburgh) to back copies of *The Radio Times* and *The Listener* starting from the 1920s. However, due to a non-existent library system a number of volumes were missing and *The Listener* was only available for the 1920s and 1930s. The *BBC Handbooks* were part of a private library to which I had access and covered the decades between the 1930s and 1970s. Written and spoken memoirs, biographies and autobiographies formed part of the historical research and were easily accessed through private and public libraries. Unlike more ancient archival



research authenticity was not a problem. Whether it was *The Radio Times*, *The Listener*, the *BBC Handbook* or books written by key players of the time they were all clearly dated, they had not been tampered with and the authorship could be validated.

The issue of credibility – the extent to which evidence is free from distortion or error and evasion (Scott, 1990:7) – was less straightforward. The two magazines were subject to editorial decisions about content and therefore it was impossible to know how partial or impartial those decisions were. Equally the biographical writings I drew on suffered from partiality, which is inevitable when someone is writing from a subjective position.

Macdonald & Tipton note that researchers should always ask who produced the document, why, when and for whom (1999:196). Official documentation such as the *BBC Handbooks* had to be read with the knowledge that they were statements of ideals and best practice as well as summaries of the previous year's broadcasting achievements. The 'why' and for 'whom' aspects of biographical writing are endlessly debated but providing it is remembered that authors might have a hidden agenda they provide useful insights into historical events. It is also usually possible to verify the factuality of any public event to which they refer.

Macdonald & Tipton (1999: 196) also suggest that missing material should be considered, in as much as, did someone want to remove it, and does this then affect its representativeness? The large number of missing volumes of *The Listener* and a few of *The Radio Times* seemed to be the result of nothing more than careless storage. There was no method of recording who had borrowed a volume and therefore no method of pursuing its return. I have already referred to the potential problems of absence due to editorial selection. What was also unclear was just how representative the correspondents were of the wider population. It was possible that different voices could be found by reading the letters pages of different newspapers. However, that was outwith the scope of this study. My justification for using letters, bearing in mind the limitations to which I have referred, is that it is difficult to assess just how representative are the views which are expressed in contemporary newspapers and television magazines. Nevertheless they (whether past or present) become public voices and through circulation their views contribute to common-sense knowledge – everybody knows or thinks that.

The final issue to be considered is the document's meaning – what it is and what does it tell us. Some of my documents were personal accounts, some were institutional accounts and some were means of informing the public. It is sometimes suggested that content



analysis is the most useful way of looking at meanings. Through counting the number of references to a particular theme their salience can be judged. However, I took the view that an interpretative approach was more useful. By looking at these different accounts, in different decades, they can tell us where there were tensions amongst different institutions and different sections of society.

In addition to missing volumes there were some other practical problems with this aspect of the research. It became clear in a very short time that unless I wanted to focus solely on the historical/archival dimension I was going to have to limit my research to one year out of each decade. I am aware that this might mean that I missed crucial contributions but it was unavoidable. Again it could be the subject of future research – an in-depth study of readers' letters. I decided that the best way forward was to select a year from each decade that seemed to be significant in some way – either socially or in terms of broadcasting development. Even this had its problems. I had decided that 1964 would be a good year on which to focus because that was the year that Mary Whitehouse launched the Clean Up TV campaign. There was not a single letter or article in *The Radio Times* relating to this. Whether this says more about editorial policy or Mrs Whitehouse's ability to create news was impossible to ascertain within the limitations of my study. In the end it became an arbitrary selection.

As I indicated previously my main interest was in an interpretative or hermeneutic approach, which would allow me to gain a 'feel' for what audiences and broadcasters had to say over the decades. In short, I was more interested in trying to understand the social context in which these documents were produced with a view to understanding the current social context. Whilst the findings in this area will be discussed in a separate chapter it did become very clear, just from turning all of those pages, that the prominence that was given to religious writers (and religious topics) declined over the decades. What did not seem to change was the almost total absence of references to any other faiths apart from Christianity.

### Focus groups and Interviews.

In order to gain an understanding of the relationship between production and reception, or on a more theoretical level, between structure and agency, interviews were conducted with broadcasters/producers, advisory committee members, faith representatives and audiences. The audience interviews were conducted first and producers were selected for interview based on the focus group findings – which programmes were referred to most frequently. I

also spoke to senior members of the broadcasting companies and advisory committee members, who were able to provide an historical perspective of developments in the industry. Faith representatives were also interviewed in order to ascertain their relationship with the broadcasters.

All of the interviews were semi-structured because although there were particular topics I wanted to cover I also wanted the flexibility to be able to pursue interesting lines of enquiry. When it came to the historical perspective, as with the archival research, I was less interested in discovering the 'facts' than in discovering the subjective experiences of those who were involved in the industry (at a senior level) for many years. I was extremely fortunate in that despite having a small number of interviewees who could provide this perspective their collective experiences stretched from the 1930s to the current day.

Before discussing my reasons for using focus group interviews it is important to return to the history of media studies in order to address some of the background issues which relate to that choice. Throughout that history there has been a tension between objectivist and subjectivist types of research. Whilst I am not sure that it can equally be described as a tension between structure and agency it is clear that some types of research have privileged one over the other, which I demonstrated in the literature review. For instance research from an Effects or *Screen* theory perspective is more interested in structure than agency, as was shown with Abercrombie & Longhurst's continuum from Dominant Text to Dominant Audience (1998). Recent Effects work makes allowance for the context in which programmes are viewed and consequently is more methodologically diverse, but it still privileges structure.

On the other hand Uses and Gratifications research and studies from the Dominant Audience end of the continuum privilege agency over structure. There is scant attention paid to the limitations of what is available for the audience, instead there is a reification of audience 'trickery'. The focus on individual pleasure or usage within Uses and Gratifications and evidence of oppositional readings within some reception studies is seen as proof that agency is all-powerful. Within reception studies this has led to small scale, in-depth studies which fail to take account of the constraints that exist for most viewers. It ignores the fact that the audiences' choices are the last choice in a long line that start with production. Although he is talking about newspapers Fowler makes a valid point, which can apply equally, to television:



Thus, values which already exist – ideas about sex, about patriotism, about class, hierarchy, money, leisure, family life and so on – are reproduced in this discursive interaction between newspaper text and the reader. (1991:46).

I have previously argued that this tension between objectivist and subjectivist modes of enquiry is unnecessary. Both are required. According to Wacquant (1992) the danger of the objectivist view is that it reifies the structures it constructs by treating them as autonomous entities endowed with the ability to ‘act’ in the manner of historical agents – society thinks this, society demands that, and so on and so forth. The subjectivist mode has its own problems. Although it gives pride of place to agency in the way people endow their life-world with sense it does not explain how the structures are so resilient and doesn’t account for why, and according to what principles, the work of social production of reality is produced. Eldridge makes the point that one of the tasks of social science is to make more visible the nature and significance of different forms of discourse in their social settings (1993:342). The relational aspect of sociology is not new but it does seem to have been forgotten in many forms of media research. Marx, in *Die Grundrisse*, says, ‘Society does not consist of individuals; it expresses the sum of connections and relationships in which individuals find themselves’ (cited in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:16). The inter-relatedness of structure and agency are the basis of better social science and an awareness of this allows research methods to be chosen that are appropriate for a particular piece of research, rather than being constrained by a methodological or disciplinary allegiance. It is why I made the choices I did.

Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data and they explicitly use group interaction as part of the method. It is fashionable to deride focus groups because they are tainted through their association with political parties and marketing companies. This is to misunderstand the usage of focus groups within social scientific research. As May notes, we spend much of our lives interacting with others and our actions and opinions are modified according to the social situation in which we find ourselves (1997:14). The data generated from focus group interviews can provide an insight into the way peoples’ attitudes and values are affected by their social context, providing one is actually interested as opposed to seeking confirmation of a pre-existing agenda. The social context is particularly relevant when it comes to watching television and the portrayal of religion.



John B. Thompson has two useful concepts that relate to television viewing and the social context – symbolic dislocation and the disorienting effect (1995). Events that people experience through the media are often symbolically dislocated. They are no longer directly experienced but mediated through the media. If we have no personal experience of these everyday symbols how do we make sense of them? Equally the nature of television means that there is an overwhelming mass of information for viewers to process and he argues that this can have a disorienting effect. In order to make sense of this surfeit of information people seek advice from ‘significant others’ or ‘experts’. In the context of religion in broadcasting, if people do not have direct experience of religion their experience will be mediated through television and the experience of their ‘significant others’. Equally if they do have direct experience that will affect the way in which they interpret what they see. The value of using focus groups is that it enabled those mediated experiences to be explored. Not only in terms of what people told me but also in terms of the interaction that took place in the groups, which is why I interviewed people who were members of naturally occurring groups, rather than ones that I had set up arbitrarily. In that way I hoped to tap into the (sub) cultural values or group norms (Kitzinger, 1995).

One of the criticisms of focus group interviews is that dissident voices may be silenced due to group pressure. Equally, quieter members of a group might feel unable to express an opinion in the face of a more vocal group member. For those who are experienced in group work this can often be an easily resolved technical problem – there are many ways in which a vocal member can be discouraged and a quiet member encouraged although there are occasions when one’s repertoire of skills proves to be inadequate<sup>8</sup>. However, the silence of group members can also be indicative of their silence in a wider social setting. It could well be that an individual interview or a questionnaire might elicit more information but if they are unable to speak out in a social setting (a group of which they are pre-existing member) which is the more ‘truthful’ response? Which tells us more about their social behaviour? In their cross-cultural study of viewers of *Dallas* Liebes & Katz (1990) deliberately chose clusters of community members who were in close contact and amongst whom television programmes were likely to be discussed. As Lunt & Livingstone (1996) observed the focus group was an appropriate fit for their decision to conceive of viewers in terms of their relations to each other, rather than as isolated individuals.

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<sup>8</sup> In one set of interviews I carried out with adolescents in a school setting there was a very quiet young man. Nothing elicited a response from him. On reflection I concluded that the only reason he had volunteered to join the group was because it meant an hour out of his Religious Studies class.



One of the advantages of semi-structured, focus group interviews is that they allow for 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973). Although key topics are covered the flow of conversation is led by the group and lines of enquiry can be explored which the researcher might not have anticipated, and which might not have been uncovered if a structured interview or questionnaire had been deployed. It is one of the features of qualitative research as summarised by Wainwright,

...qualitative research can be characterised as the attempt to obtain an in-depth understanding of the meanings and 'definitions of the situation' presented by informants, rather than the production of a quantitative 'measurement' of their characteristics or behaviour. (1997:1).

Given that one of the aims of my research was to gain an understanding of the socially situated responses of audiences to religion in fictional broadcasting (whilst also looking at the structural constraints which affect those responses) I am in agreement with Lunt & Livingstone's summary of the way in which focus groups facilitate 'thick descriptions',

Focus groups can reveal underlying cognitive or ideological premises that structure arguments, the ways in which various discourse rooted in particular contexts and given experiences are brought to bear on interpretations, the discursive construction of social identities, and so forth. (1996).

### Validity, reliability and generalisability

One of the problems that is often identified in relation to qualitative research and hence, focus groups, is that of reliability and validity, and generalisability. There are three main arguments here. The first says that qualitative research can not make claims in these three areas in the way that quantitative research can. The second says that it should not even attempt to make these claims because that would be to maintain a positivist approach, which is irrelevant to qualitative research. The third says that the claims can be made but that there is a case for using different terms and/or clarifying their meaning. I want to address these three arguments briefly.

Reliability and validity probably have hundreds of definitions depending on which book one reads. I offer Gilbert's definition for its succinctness, '...the measurements which they make should be **valid** (accurately measuring the concept) and **reliable** (consistent from one measurement to the next)' (1993:27). In terms of the validity of my own research, have I

talked to audiences about their perceptions of religion in fictional broadcasting or did we end up discussing religious broadcasting? Regarding reliability how likely is it than another researcher, using my interview outline, would produce the same responses? Regarding generalisability, what kind of claims can I make based on a small sample (in relation to the, usually, much larger samples found in quantitative research)? If one follows the first argument about qualitative research then the reliability of my study could be called in to question. It would be possible to question the validity also – how could I be certain that I was accurately recording audience responses? It is equally possible to question the generalisability of my research. My response comes under the third argument – claims can be made but different terms or clarification are required. However I want to address the second argument, briefly.

Denzin (1983), Guba & Lincoln (1982) and Taylor (1994) take the view that generalisation is not possible in qualitative research and consequently issues of reliability and validity are not particularly relevant. Marshall & Rossman provide a clear statement of this viewpoint:

Positivist notions of reliability assume an underlying universe where inquiry could, quite logically, be replicated. This assumption of an unchanging social world is in direct contrast to the qualitative/interpretist assumption that the social world is always changing and the concept of replication is itself problematic. (Cited in Silverman, 1997:146).

The limitations of this approach are obvious – research can never be generalised and social patterns can never be discerned. As Silverman comments, 'Such a position would rule out any systematic research since it implies that we cannot assume any stable properties in the social world' (1997:146). It is why I agree with the third argument because it provides a balance between the other two extremes. In the next section I will provide an outline of this argument.

In a discussion of qualitative research in medical sociology Wainwright (1997) observes that its new-found respectability has been based on a willingness to submit to positivist criteria of reliability and validity. He argues that this has led to a situation where qualitative research can either be valid or critical but not both at the same time. He goes on to make the point that by rethinking the way in which validity is defined it is perfectly possible for qualitative research to be valid. One criticism I have of Wainwright's paper is that there seems to be some blurring between reliability and validity. Winter makes the



point that one of the most recurring features in critical discussions of validity is the combination of validity with reliability (2000:1). It is important to remember there is a difference and Gilbert's definition above makes it clear what that difference is.

If qualitative research is not to be a variant of quantitative research, if it is allowed to provide 'thick descriptions', then there has to be a rethinking of terms like validity, reliability and generalisability. Arksey & Knight (1999:51) see validity as raising the question of whether you are investigating what you claim to be investigating and provide guidelines for interviews, which should ensure that this is what happens. I go back to the point I made earlier – if, in my interviews, I allowed the discussion to focus on religious broadcasting then I have not investigated what I claimed to be investigating. Focus is essential. It was occasionally problematic with the archival research because it was very easy to become distracted by interesting letters and articles. I frequently had to stop and reflect on exactly what it was that I was looking for. It was also an occasional problem in the focus group interviews because no matter how much I stressed that religious broadcasting was NOT the focus of my study interviewees would frequently refer to it. Had I allowed that to continue the validity of my research would have been in serious doubt.

These problems and Arksey & Knight's guidelines really refer to the question of internal validity and I would agree with Ward Schofield (1993:202) that qualitative researchers have to question seriously the internal validity of their work if it is to have credibility with other researchers. I would also argue that there are issues of integrity and good social science. For example in the context of my own research I have appended interview transcripts and it can be seen if I have been highly selective in my use of quotations, thus invalidating my conclusion. However the main validity problem is external validity, which is often referred to as generalisability. How can small sample, in-depth studies make claims that can be extrapolated to a wider population?

Lunt & Livingstone (1996) and Ward Schofield (1993) provide a useful overview of the debates around generalisability. They all agree that the issue of reliability, with its emphasis on replication, tends to be subsumed into the debate. Ward Schofield cites Krathwohl as an example of this:

The heart of external validity is replicability. Would the result be reproducible in those target instances to which one intends to generalize – the population, situation,

time, treatment form or format, measures, study designs and procedures?

(1993:202)

She goes on to say that this is not the purpose of qualitative research. Rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of, and perspective on, a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of that situation. Drawing on Guba & Lincoln she suggests that a better way to conceptualise generalisability would be to think of it as 'fittingness' – analysing the degree to which the situation studied matches other situations in which one is interested. If researchers are clear about the research techniques they have used and the setting(s) in which the research took place it becomes possible to make comparisons.

This leads on to the question of reliability within focus group interviews. The classic reliability evaluation is test-retest. Clearly different focus groups have different conversations so it is impossible to apply test-retest criteria. What can be done is to conduct group interviews until no new information is forthcoming (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Murphy, Cockburn & Murphy, 1992). Reliability in this case is related more to the rate of information gain, rather than replicability. This position is easier to achieve when there is a team of researchers but even when there is a single researcher, as in my own case, it is still possible to reach a stage where the same themes occur across the different groups. This was, in fact, the position that my interviews reached.

As already noted I had taken the decision to conduct the interviews with naturally occurring groups. This was because I was interested in socially expressed and contested, opinions and discourses. Philo & Henderson noted, about their sampling choice for a study into audience responses to suicide in a television drama, 'we chose 'naturally occurring' groups – i.e. people who would normally meet, work or socialise together. New information from media is in everyday life discussed and exchanged in such groups. It becomes part of a general cultural currency' (1999:83). Whilst not wanting to import inappropriate quantitative methods into a qualitative study I wanted to achieve some degree of representation for those naturally occurring groups. One of the first decisions regarding sampling related to the geographical spread of the study, given temporal and physical limitations. During these deliberations I became aware that the British Social Attitudes Survey in Scotland had never covered the whole of Scotland and I was unaware of any work in the sociology of mass media that included samples from all of the Scottish



regions. Accordingly I decided to redress that imbalance and that interviews should be conducted throughout the country.

### Sampling

In order to facilitate coverage of the country I decided to use the dioceses of the Scottish Episcopal Church as my sampling framework. This not only had the advantage of dividing the country into seven areas – Edinburgh; Glasgow and Galloway; Aberdeen and Orkney; Argyll and the Isles; Brechin; Moray, Ross and Caithness; St. Andrew's, Dunkeld and Dunblane – it also enabled a selection of rural and urban locations. Using the dioceses was also an advantage because I had personal contacts in each of them, which I hoped would make the setting up of focus groups that bit easier. Focus groups are notoriously time-consuming. Not only in their setting up and conduct but also in the transcription and analysis of data that follows. When one person is doing them it affects how many can be done. This affected the next decision – how many groups should there be and how should those groups be selected?

I have already noted the absence of work that looks at the way different religions are represented in the media. This was one of the areas that I wanted to explore with the focus groups, particularly in relation to a sense of inclusion or exclusion. It seemed eminently sensible therefore to interview groups from different religions within Scotland, as well as people of no obvious religion. In the early stages of trying to work out how to provide a reasonably representative sample I had two categories of viewer – religious and non-religious which were broken down in to sub-categories of denomination, age, urban/rural, overtly political and apolitical. Even with these categories there were problems. For instance age was divided into three categories: school, working, retired, which were fairly nonsensical but to make them any smaller was going to increase the size of the sample exponentially. As it was, with those categories and the ideal size for a focus group being between five and seven people, I calculated that I would have 55 groups and approximately 275 individuals. This was outwith the scope of the study. Consequently I decided that the two most important variables were that interviewees should either be part of a naturally occurring religious or non-religious group.

I wanted to include representatives of the main faiths in Scotland in the religious groups. It was a source of frustration and fascination to discover that there are no official, national figures for the distribution and membership of different religions. In the end my decision as to which religions to include was based on discussions with a number of colleagues.

They were Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Sikhs. Given that Christianity is the majority religion and is shown most frequently on television, I wanted to include at least one Protestant Group and one Roman Catholic group. I also wanted to interview Christians who belonged to the more fundamental wing of the church. That created seven religious groups to fit the seven dioceses. The non-religious groups were to be selected from the same area as the religious groups in order to achieve a kind of parity. However, this did not always happen due to either problems with availability or unwillingness to participate. One other important point about the non-religious groups was that although I had designated them 'non-religious' based on their overt activity (e.g. Drama Group or Film Guild) it was quite likely that some members might be religious. This was not problematic so far as the study was concerned because it was my own view that any group can have members in it who are religious (unless the aims of the group are avowedly anti-religious). This would not only affect the way they viewed religion on television but would also affect their interactions with other people. The final list of groups can be found in the Appendices and detailed discussion can be found in the relevant chapter.

Interviews with producers were based on the most frequently mentioned programmes. This was not straightforward as some producers were unwilling to be interviewed. Interviews with more general broadcasters and members of Advisory Committees were done based on personal contacts and recommendations from interviewees. Faith representatives were chosen to reflect the focus groups and to find out if there was an official position for that particular faith regarding broadcasting. Detailed discussion of these interviews can be found in the relevant chapters and lists of interviewees can be found in the Appendices. All of the interviews were transcribed in preparation for analysis. Discussion of the analysis is included in the audience chapter. Having analysed the findings in relation to reception and production and having contextualised them historically it was also important to contextualise them contemporarily.

### **Secularization – a contemporary context**

Secularization within the UK is part of the social context within which programmes are produced and received. The increasing importance of science for providing explanations that had previously been supplied by theology was seen as undermining the power of religion – what Weber called 'the disenchantment of the world'. The relevance of secularization for a study into religion and broadcasting (and I discuss this in depth in a separate chapter), and the debates around it, is the way it impinges upon the consciousness of both viewers and producers. It is a concept that not only has a common-sense



understanding, which is not the same as academic understandings, but also has a taken-for-grantedness about it. Through an exploration of the debates about secularization and the impact of that taken-for-grantedness on production and reception I identified an explanation for the way in which religion is portrayed in fictional television. What was needed finally was a sociological explanation that drew the findings together.

### **Tools for a sociological understanding**

The effects of televisual representations can be investigated either by focusing on structure or on agency. However, as I said previously, there are problems with studies that privilege one over the other. The two are inextricably linked. I wanted to understand more about that linkage but I wanted to go further in terms of understanding the way the structures functioned and what impacted upon agency – be it the agency of viewers or the agency of producers. As Bourdieu argues:

...the most specific feature of production, that is to say the production of value, can not be understood unless one takes into account simultaneously the space of producers and the space of consumers. (1993:139).

More recently, in a discussion of the philosophy of his work, Bourdieu says:

This philosophy is condensed in a small number of fundamental concepts – habitus, field, capital – and its cornerstone is the two-way relationship between objective structures (those of social fields) and incorporated structures (those of the habitus). (1998: viii).

It is precisely this philosophy that I have found useful.

The main concepts that I have borrowed from his work are habitus, fields and doxa. I have referred also to capital (particularly symbolic capital) though less frequently. Bourdieu describes habitus as the 'feel for the game', which becomes embodied and as such becomes second nature (1990:63). This embodiment takes the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:16). For instance, a study by Burns (1977) into the BBC demonstrated (although he did not use the language of Bourdieu) the impact of habitus on those who were employed by the Corporation. Not only was there a mental incorporation but employees spoke of the corporeal incorporation – they could recognise, and were recognised as, a BBC 'type'

without speaking. With regard to my own research it seemed likely that habitus would explain producers' attitudes towards the portrayal of religion in fictional broadcasting. It would also explain the different ways in which characters were perceived by the different groups.

Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) describe a field as a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (capital). It is also defined by struggles and thus historicity. They go on to say:

In a field agents and institutions constantly struggle, according to the regularities and rules constitutive of this space of play with various degrees of strength and therefore devise probabilities of success, to appropriate the specific products at stake in the game. Those who dominate in a given field are in a position to make it function to their advantage but must always contend with resistance claims etc of the dominated. (1992:102).

Tensions within a field are related to the habitus of individuals and the position they have in that field but there are also tensions between fields. Using the concept of field provided a means of understanding the tensions around religion and broadcasting. One of those tensions relates to symbolic power and ultimately to doxa.

Bourdieu argues that social agents struggle for symbolic power. One of its key features is the power of constitutive naming '...which by naming things brings them into being' (1990: 55). In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1992) Bourdieu talks about the ways in which language (or linguistic exchanges) are relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualised. Through looking at the language used in relation to religion in broadcasting it became possible to identify shifting power relations between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting. By extending 'language' to include the way that religion in fictional broadcasting is 'talked about' or portrayed and ultimately perceived it was possible to demonstrate the marginalisation of religion and what I have called 'a move towards race/ethnicity'. The final concept of doxa is concerned with the taken-for-grantedness of certain positions but in relation to power:

Doxa is a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view – the point of view of those



who dominate by dominating the state and those who have constituted their point of view as universal by constituting the state. (1998: 57).

Although Bourdieu is discussing states in this instance the domination of a viewpoint and its presentation as universal is, nevertheless, relevant to an analysis of religion and broadcasting. According to Bourdieu, ‘...the stabler the objective structures and the more fully they reproduce themselves in the agents’ dispositions, the greater the extent of the field of doxa, that which is taken for granted. (1977:165).’ Doxic statements are those which seem self-evident and part of the natural order. An awareness of doxa enabled the doxic position of religion in the early days of broadcasting and the doxic position of secularization latterly to be exposed. This contributed, inevitably, to a clearer understanding of the tensions between the two fields as well as its impact upon the reception and production of religion in fictional broadcasting.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have demonstrated that there is a gap in the sociology of mass media as far as religion generally, and religion and fictional broadcasting specifically, is concerned. I have outlined the history of media studies and shown that good social scientific research in this area addresses the relationship between structure and agency rather than privileging one over the other. I have also demonstrated the limitations of much of the work that purports to address religion and broadcasting. In doing this I have provided justification for my own research method.

I have shown that in order to research the social impact of religion in fictional broadcasting it was necessary to talk to those involved in production and reception. It was also important to contextualise the current situation through reference to the historical situation. It was also important to understand the impact of secularisation on the current situation. Having outlined the methods I used for that data-generation I then described the tools I used to unite that data into a coherent sociological analysis. In Chapter Two I will discuss the historical relationship between religion and broadcasting. In Chapter Three I will discuss the findings from the focus group interviews. In Chapters Four and Five I will discuss the findings from the interviews with faith representatives, the broadcasters and members of advisory committees. In Chapter Six, I will discuss the debates around secularisation and their relationship to broadcasting. Chapter Seven will be the conclusion.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Religion and Broadcasting**

In order to comment on the way religion is portrayed in the broadcast media it is essential to have an understanding of the development of religious broadcasting (and the place of religion in broadcasting) since the inception of broadcasting. The theoretical focus of this chapter will be on the role of doxa in relation to the field of religion and the field of broadcasting. In order to understand the close relationship between religion and broadcasting, and the role of doxa, particular attention is paid to one of the key players, J.C.W.Reith. The use of archival material from *The Radio Times* and *The Listener*, at particular points across the decades, is used to illustrate audience responses to the doxa. It also provides an illustration of linguistic exchanges and a map of the relations of symbolic power amongst religion, broadcasting and the public. Through looking at the way religion has developed within the parameters of religious broadcasting (and its relationship to other genres within the media) it will be possible to chart the treatment of religion across all broadcasting genres and to demonstrate the struggle between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting.

#### **The Early Years**

Reith first joined the British Broadcasting Company as General Manager on 14th December 1922. S.A.Moseley in *Broadcasting in My Time* (1935) wrote about the way in which Reith acquired this position after reading the following advertisement:

Applications are invited for the following offices: General Manager, Director of Programmes, Chief Engineer, Secretary. Only applicants having first class qualifications need apply. Applications to be addressed to Sir William Noble, Chairman of the Broadcasting Committee, Magnet House, Kingsway WC2.



Sir William who, like Reith was a Scot, had 'sat under' the Rev. Dr. George Reith - J.C.W.Reith's father - in his Glasgow church. Moseley believed that this connection was helpful for Reith in gaining his position.

Reith regarded himself as a 'son of the manse' and his appointment as Providential: "I am properly grateful to God for His goodness in this matter" (Briggs, 1985: 44). His personal faith quite clearly influenced the way in which he saw broadcasting developing. In his own book 'Broadcast over Britain' (1924) he comments that Christianity 'happens to be the stated and official religion of this country' (p.191) which is why, within the conduct of a broadcasting service, there is a 'definite, though restrained, association with religion in general and with the Christian religion in particular' (p.191). In the chapter entitled Beyond the Horizon he goes on to discuss the view that religion is on trial and the danger associated with the secularisation of the Sabbath. He argues that broadcast religion is unassociated with any particular creed or denomination and as a result is 'a thoroughgoing optimistic and manly religion' (p.193), which avoids the inconsistencies and repulsiveness that many people experience 'with what passes for the real thing' (p.193). He also argues that the Sabbath ought to be a day of intellectual and spiritual refreshment and programmes are planned from that point of view. 'People who wouldn't go to church now have the influences of a straightforward and manly religion' (p.194). It is clear, then, from Reith's own words that religious mission and broadcasting were very closely linked. This can be seen from the way broadcasting developed.

The first religious broadcast went out on radio (more properly known as wireless in the early days) on the 24th December 1922 and was conducted by Revd. J.A. Mayo, the Rector of Whitechapel<sup>1</sup>. Stuart Hibberd who worked as a radio announcer for the BBC recalls a conversation with Mayo about what followed that first broadcast and where it was recorded. It came from the top floor attics of Marconi House, Strand. The following week Dr Fleming, the Presbyterian minister from Pont Street spoke. Then, to quote John Mayo:

I spoke again very soon. There was a request from the studio for hymns, and I supplied the books (music) and chose a couple for Sundays. Later a nonconformist minister ventured on a prayer and I on a short scripture passage. I then suggested

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<sup>1</sup> It seems likely that Father Archibald Shaw, an Australian Roman Catholic priest (-1872 - 1916), conducted the first religious broadcasting. In 1910 he acquired a wireless experimenters licence to operate his own station. Working in collaboration with a Mr. Kirkby (who owned a small electrical appliance manufacturing business) by 1911 his station was the most powerful in Australia. He developed successful locally designed wireless telegraphy stations and set them up around the Australian coastline. This was done to support the work of the Sacred Heart Missions and had the enthusiastic support of Cardinal Moran (Australia's Radio Pioneers, 1994: 4 - 9 pp.).

Anglicans and Nonconformists alternately, and this was done. This was the genesis of the service.” (Hibberd, 1950:6)<sup>2</sup>.

It was enormously important to Reith that the senior clergy would support his efforts and he was particularly pleased that he converted the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Randall Davidson, to the benefits of radio. Following a dinner party with the Archbishop on 16th March 1923 (when Reith phoned the BBC to request a piece of music for the Archbishop), Dr Davidson hosted a meeting with other religious leaders in the House of Lords. This was the beginning of the Religious Advisory Committee, which was the first advisory committee to be formed. The first formal meeting took place on the 18th May 1923, barely two months after Reith’s meeting with the Archbishop. It was chaired by the Bishop of Southwark, Dr Garbett and comprised representatives of the Church of England, Free Churches and Roman Catholics. As provincial radio stations developed so did more localised religious advisory committees. The work of the latter was used to supplement the work of the former (Briggs, 1961:241).

It is possible to assume that Reith was unopposed in his approach, after all much of the establishment supported him. Apart from his Christian standpoint he saw broadcasting as a servant of culture. In his book he wrote:

As we conceive it, our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement, and to avoid the things which are, or may be, hurtful. It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need – and not what they want but few know what they want and very few what they need. There is often no difference. One wonders to which section of the public such criticism refers. In any case it is better to over-estimate the mentality of the public, than to underestimate it. (1924:34)

It seems to be an approach that had many supporters and perhaps would not be out of place today. However, there were voices of dissent. A more recent writer looking back on Reith’s time takes a slightly less charitable view:

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<sup>2</sup> The Detroit News was the first newspaper in the world to install a radio broadcasting station. It went public on August 31st 1920. During Lent 1922 sermons were a feature of every evening programme. There was close involvement by the Roman Catholic, Episcopal and Methodist Bishops. Easter of that year heard the Easter cantata on Palm Sunday being broadcast from St Paul’s Episcopal Cathedral and the morning and evening services on Easter Day. Thereafter cathedral services were broadcast regularly, predating the UK experience by nearly 10 years.



The BBC was developed under Reith into a kind of domestic diplomatic service, representing the British - or what he saw as the best of British - to the British... Sports, popular music and entertainment which appealed to the lower classes were included in large measure in the programmes, but the manner in which they were purveyed... remained indomitably upper middle class; and there was, too, the point that they were only there on the menu as ground bait. (Burns, 1977:42).

Not relating to religion but to the content of programming in general Briggs (1985:61) cites an early letter to *The Radio Times* which complains about 'highbrow' and 'snob stuff' and demands a greater variety and appeal to the majority. In May 1924 *The Daily News* conducted a poll on listener preferences. These were, in order of popularity: popular music, dance music, children's hour, humour, light opera, grand opera, news, general talks, modern plays, sport, education, classical plays, sacred music, fashion talks, literature, hobbies, domestic economy, religious addresses, decorative schemes and clothing. The low place of religion and the desire for more populist entertainment had no effect on Reith who said that even a limited appeal might mean hundreds of thousands and he wanted the BBC to broadcast to and for minorities (Briggs, 1985:62). This did not mean, however, that the public quietly acquiesced.

Moseley (1935) and Robinson (1935) were more contemporary critics. Robinson in particular had a number of critical points to make, especially with reference to the link between Reith and the churches. Commenting on the early introduction of religious broadcasting Robinson observed that there were a considerable number of critics who said that the British people as a whole had no use for religion. He went on to say that whilst many people might not be in sympathy with the creeds and tenets of the Established Church it may be equally true that there is a very big public who are attracted to religious exercises of a simple kind (1935:100). However, he was critical of the way in which the broadcasting authorities had entered into a "gentleman's agreement" with the churches regarding the absence of broadcasting during church hours. He argued that a religion which was a living force need not fear the counter-attractions of broadcasting and yet this fear seemed to underpin the viewpoint that Sundays should only be devoted to church, food and sleep (1935:23) and that the broadcasters were colluding with the churches in this matter. Robinson went on to argue that religious broadcasting was beneficial to *The Listeners* but perhaps less so to the established churches. A great deal of his criticism of the link between broadcasters and the churches seems to be a critique of what he perceived as the inadequacies of the established churches:

In so far as broadcasting is widening men's outlook, broadening their thinking and encouraging critical speculation, it is the enemy of the church. In so far as it is leading them to an appreciation of the infinite possibilities of human thought and endeavour it is the friend of real religion (1935:104).

Robinson concluded that the only way for broadcasting to be of real religious help to its listeners would be if it abandoned the churches. Of course, if one refers back to Reith's own comments about the alienation of people from the churches it can be argued that he recognised the limitations of church based religion and that he was trying to rekindle faith rather than support any particular denomination; and that there was a degree of pragmatism involved in his close association with the churches. Equally if one accepts Burns' arguments about social class (and remembers Reith's background) then it would be inconceivable to him to exclude the church.

Robinson's criticism of the 'gentleman's agreement' was echoed by Moseley whose book was published in the same year. Moseley was, amongst other things, a radio critic and his book was, as its title indicates, about "Broadcasting in my time". He comments on the way in which the BBC was backed, in its position on limited Sunday coverage, by certain sections of the church and a considerable number of listeners. He mentions in particular the Bishop of Ely, the Right Reverend Leonard White-Thomson who remarked that within one month of starting 10.15 a.m. services 8,000 letters of appreciation had been received and undoubtedly there would have been many more who didn't write but who had enjoyed the service. With reference to the comments made earlier about the public's refusal to acquiesce to Reith's attitude, Moseley refers to the correspondence he received from listeners, which came from a different perspective. These were demands for coverage on Sundays that was not solely religious. Moseley fronted a campaign, which made repeated representations to the BBC in this matter. Ironically, in the later days of the campaign the letters he received changed in their request. The public had discovered that they could tune in to continental programmes, which they were enjoying. Moseley was asked to stop his campaign in case the BBC should take action and interfere with the reception of continental programmes (1935:161ff).

The closeness of the relationship between the churches and the BBC was highlighted in a book written ten years earlier by A.R.Burrows (1924). He refers to the 'ready and most gratifying response' from the different religious denominations, particularly in the matter of religious addresses and their willingness to work together on national and local advisory committees. Robinson (1935) observes that one of the advantages of religious broadcasting is the way it brought churches together and showed bigots that there is something in creeds and



denominations other than their own. In England there was little difficulty in bringing together the Church of England, Roman Catholics and United Free Churches. In Scotland there were representatives of the Church of Scotland, the United Free Church of Scotland, the Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Baptists and Wesleyan. It is perhaps worth noting the absence of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland at this point<sup>3</sup>. However, Melville Dinwiddie who was Director of BBC Scotland from the late 1930s to the 1950s wrote in, 1938, that Presbyterians could listen to Roman Catholic services and vice versa. This made them realise that what united them in loyalty to Christ was greater and more important than all their differences. However unlike the experience of Detroit, or even of England, there was reluctance on the part of the clergy in Scotland to get involved in the early days<sup>4</sup>.

Burrows refers, also in a positive way, to what was one of the early concerns about the broadcasting of religion on radio. Ernest McKay (?) as head of religious broadcasting had expressed real concerns that people might listen to church services in inappropriate places such as public houses. Burrows writes:

Hundreds of letters representing all classes of persons, equally from the infirm and physically fit, testify to the help and comfort which the Sunday evening talks invariable give. These addresses and the hymns and anthems broadcast at the same time are being received in many unexpected places, including wayside inns, where they are spoken of in terms of high respect (1924:172).

*The Radio Times* (January 13 1928) carried a letter from 'A West Country Doctor' referring to 'The Service in the Pub'. One of her patients, who owned a pub, told her that what the clients liked best was the Church Service on Sunday evenings, with many of them coming in on purpose to hear it. They didn't go to church because '...it was a matter of pipes and glasses'. On inquiring of another patient who owned '...a very respectably kept inn' she was told the same story but offered a different explanation, namely that the service at their local church was dull and poor whereas the wireless service was very good with a good preacher. This latter explanation would certainly seem to support Reith's concerns about what the church was offering and its inadequacies. It is slightly ironic to note that in many parts of the

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<sup>3</sup> In the early 1970s when the BBC in Scotland was discussing the possibility of local radio stations the point was made that if Dumbarton was to have a local radio station then the bulk of religious broadcasting would need to be Roman Catholic. The initial reaction was one of horror - the BBC could not be seen to be promoting Roman Catholicism. It was pointed out that a local service would be expected to cater for the needs of the local community and as the bulk of Christians in Dumbarton were Roman Catholic then this would have to be reflected in religious broadcasting. There was still resistance. In the event local radio, as being discussed, didn't materialise. (Private conversation, John Gray: 23/2/00).

<sup>4</sup> Private conversation with Mr Andrew Barr, ex-Head of Religious Broadcasting in Scotland. According to Mr Barr it was only the enthusiasts who wanted to get involved and it took longer for the bulk of the clergy to be convinced.



country nowadays churches are moving outside their traditional buildings and into pubs, supermarkets and shopping malls in order to reach a wider congregation.

By 1928 the BBC could assert with confidence (and lack of supporting evidence) in the Handbook:

...there is now 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* p.131).

They go on to state that from the record of listeners' letters to the BBC the Sunday evening epilogue is the most popular, single item in all the programmes and that the church bells and carillons which precede Divine Service help to produce a religious atmosphere through association of thought. The idea that religious broadcasting might rekindle faith, as expressed by Reith and Robinson, was echoed in the following statement '[broadcasting religion] it is not only keeping alive but giving new life and meaning to the traditional Christian character of the British people' (p.133). Looking at letters to *The Radio Times* in 1928 there are a number of interesting responses to the role of religion on the wireless. A number of extracts follow:

Your greatest achievement is to 'dare' to take religion right into the homes of the people who, believers or unbelievers, must be impressed and influenced thereby. Such a task is most courageous, but the seed thus won will bring forth good fruit and do more to accomplish unification than lords, bishops or Churchmen can ever hope to do. C.H.F., Birmingham. July 13 1928.

Thank you and God bless you for the 10.15 am Religious Service; if it does nothing else it reminds us of the great fact that God takes a greater part in our everyday life than most people realize. We seem to be too busy about our material affairs these days to remember that life and the future hold something more. I think that your daily service will act as a reminder to many who might otherwise have forgotten the precious truth. 'A Working Man', Dagenham. January 27 1928.

I wish to express through *The Radio Times* the very great appreciation of the Daily Religious Service at 10.15. I myself am an invalid, and, not being able to get to church services, it is worth more to me than I can express, and I am sure I speak for hundreds of other invalids in villages. M.Buiks, Clacton on Sea. January 20 1928.



May I beseech you that, if possible, the joy and blessing of the Daily Service may not be withdrawn? What it means to me must be multiplied surely among thousands of listeners who, like myself, are seldom able to join in public worship in their churches. The spirituality, sympathy and tender uplift of this quarter of an hour I daily thank God and you for. I am an old lady. May all who share in this wonderful privilege add their petition to mine that it may be continued to us! M.J., Falmouth. January 20 1928.

However, not all correspondents were as enthusiastic as can be seen from the following two letters:

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 law governing controversy - the opinion against it not being allowed - whilst being broadcast daily and monopolizing Sunday. R.B., Belfast. July 20 1928.

With regard to the Sunday evening programme, allow me to say that this so-called cynical outburst is not against the religious service itself, but against the practice of inflicting a dismal atmosphere upon those who do not require this service. A.P., Leicester. July 20 1928.

It is interesting to see, during this period, that many of the letters concentrate on the issue of what should and should not be on the wireless, questions of taste and the use of the 'off' switch. The majority of listeners seem to accept that whilst they have personal favourites it is not possible to please everyone all of the time and given that stricture the BBC does very well. There is also a sense of frustration with listeners who complain about things they don't like and bewilderment at why they just don't switch off. Again, this can clearly be seen in current arguments about the content of broadcast programming nowadays.

In 1934, the year before Robinson and Moseley produced their books, the renamed BBC Yearbook made comments on the end of the first decade of religious broadcasting. They saw it as a time when denominations had been drawn together and still as being totally Christian. They also noted that by 1932 there were criticisms of radio sermons due to them having become vague and soothing platitudes. (It is worth remembering that Robinson, in his section on what broadcasting is doing to religion commented that it has made listeners talk about

religion and by providing good preachers has made many listen to sermons who were convinced sermons were 'meaningless nothings or mere platitudes' (1935:105).) This led to the introduction of a series of lectures, 'God and the World through Christian Eyes'. These talks were aimed at an educated Christian and replaced the normal service on the first and third Sunday. It was preceded by a 15-minute service. The main criticism of these talks is that they were too intellectual for most listeners and a new series was being planned which, whilst not diluting the intellectual content, would use simpler language, in order to make them more accessible.

During the period discussed so far there were a number of interconnected developments, which will be addressed briefly. First of all there was the development of regular religious programming. Following a determined campaign on the part of one listener a daily morning service was established from 1928. There were Children's Services, a weekly Sunday bible reading, a monthly missionary talk and a daily epilogue. There was also a weekly Evensong from Westminster Abbey, which was seen as being of special benefit for the sick. It was agreed that services would not be broadcast during regular church hours. Secondly there was the issue of Sunday broadcasting. Moseley's campaign has already been referred to in which he was the public voice of opposition to Reith's view that Sunday was special. Between 1927 and 1933 when the Rev F.A. Iremonger was the Religious Director of the BBC there was a growing gap between Sunday programmes (and the number of listening hours available) and the rest of the week. In an article in *The Radio Times*, December 18th 1935 entitled 'Radio and The Ordinary Woman' by the Rt. Hon Margaret Bondfield, the final paragraph concludes:

I have also found amongst ordinary women that, while they welcome good plays and 'nice' music on Sundays, they do not want the day secularised; they like to hear the reading from that greatest of all Books, to listen to the hymns familiar to them from childhood, and to end the day on the note of peace conveyed by the Epilogue.

In fact there was no alternative to religious services and the weather on Sunday mornings until April 1938. Many of *The Listeners* resolved this for themselves by tuning in to European stations, which provided lighter entertainment in greater quantities. In 1935 the Radio Manufacturer's Association produced a paper which included the recommendation that there should not be any silent periods on Sunday and there should always be musical or dramatic alternatives to religious services. Two other points they made lead on to the third development to be discussed. They argued that far too little money was being spent on popular programmes and that there were two categories of listener. 80% wanted entertainment



that required no specialist training. The remaining 20% had a 'cultivated capacity' and yet these seemed to be the ones who were being catered for (Briggs, 1965).

This distinction between the 'masses' and the 'cultivated' can be seen throughout the development of broadcasting in this period. Reith's view of broadcasting as part of a religious mission inevitably led to the importation of particular values into the kinds of broadcasting which were seen as acceptable. In January 1925 instructions were given that all concert parties and entertainments were not to include adverts, dwell on drink or prohibition, make clerical impersonations, make political allusions and not introduce 'vulgar or doubtful' material. In 1926 there was also a ban on matters of political, industrial or religious controversy, though this was experimentally repealed in 1928 at the discretion of the Director General and the Governors (Briggs, 1985: 69). The need to discover more about the audience for broadcasting was raised by Mathieson in an article in *Sociological Review* (1935). She argued that qualitative research was needed and that it was important to find out if taste differed according to town and country, young and old and whether tastes and standards were shared with regard to humour, music and religious services.

By the mid 1930s Sunday programmes were beginning to change but 'mainstream religion' still accounted for a larger share of weekly broadcasting time than Features and Drama. At the beginning of 1937 *The Radio Times* announced a forthcoming series entitled 'Church, Community and State'. The description of the talks serves to illustrate the doxa of Christianity and the rightness of the way the BBC dealt with it:

New forms of nationalism threatening a return of paganism have created new problems for the Christian to face, and they will be dealt with a most impressive series of speakers... Sir Walter Moberly [will talk on] 'The present state of the world', and he will deal with the present situation its dangers, the new Faiths, the attitude of the 'semi-Christian' Englishman, the present ineffectiveness of the Christian Churches, the choice before the world, and the conditions of a Christian revival. (January 1, 1937 p5).

Further talks in the series were entitled *The Church, The Tribe and Humanity; The Christian Understanding of Man; History and the Kingdom of God; God and the common Life* and finally, *The Church's message to the World*.

By 1938 it was agreed that there needed to be a lightening of programming without destroying the special nature of the day. It should be noted that this came about as a result of

competition from the foreign stations and not through a change of heart. Dr J.W. Welch who was the new Director of Religious Broadcasting acknowledged in 1939 that the 'strict Puritan Sunday' was no longer enforceable. Despite this 'lightening' he held similar views to his predecessor, Rev F.A. Iremonger - religion was about scattering good seed on the ground and there would be no open access for rationalists, Christian scientists, spiritualists or Mormons. Equally there would be no synagogue services and no gospel religion. There was also a continued reluctance, stemming from Reith and the Religious Advisory Committee, to give freedom of the air to those who wished to attack or question the religion of large numbers of people.

It can be seen, then, that in the period leading up to the Second World War Reith's personal faith had a profound impact on the development of all broadcasting. Anything of a religious nature was to be Christian and quite clearly, mainstream. Within light entertainment religion was to be treated with respect or it could not be included. There was a belief that Reith knew what was best for people and that it did them no harm to be challenged. It is an argument that resonates with the debates about 'dumbing down' today. Nevertheless, the forces of competition led to compromises in the quantity and quality of broadcasting, particularly on Sundays. By 1936 technological developments led to the introduction of a regular, high-definition television service. However, the advent of the war meant a delay in the development of television programmes and radio programming continued to flourish. This period also saw the end of Reith's direct involvement in the BBC because he retired in 1938 and in less than a year Iremonger also retired. As Wolfe (1984: 133) notes, the praise for Reith's work and its effect on religion was fulsome. He quotes Garbett, 'I don't think we overestimate the influence the BBC has had on religion. I believe it has been the most effective antidote to secularism... and without your conviction and courage, the wireless might have become mere entertainment.' The coming of the war did not lessen the link between the broadcasters and the church.

## 1940

1940 was the year in which the Battle of Britain took place. It was a particularly difficult time for the British public. The aim of the BBC during the war years was to maintain the morale of civilians at home and forces abroad. Within the pages of *The Radio Times* morale was supported with articles on religion as well as with articles on coping with rationing (and the provision of a variety of recipes), guidance on the purchase of cheap and useful domestic appliances, health care and injunctions not to disturb sleeping war workers by having the wireless on too loud. With reference to the public at home the BBC noted that in order to provide 'adequate distraction from the ordinary listeners' inevitable sense of strain, due



regard should be paid inter alia to the importance of religion, varied entertainment and to the satisfaction derived from well-known personalities' (Briggs, 1970:94)<sup>5</sup>. Throughout this year numerous discussions about the relationship between religion and broadcasting policy were held. Not only was the possibility that the King's message might close on a religious note discussed but also the possibility of including extra services of an intercessional kind due to the part religion could play in crises.

The following letter was printed in *The Radio Times* (April 5<sup>th</sup> 1940):

The steady progress of the Sunday programmes towards complete secularism is deplorable. Cannot an hour of sacred music be provided (on gramophone records if necessary) on Sunday nights after the News? This would afford a change from the everlasting theatre, film, and dance music. D. B. Samuel, Morriston, Swansea.

This actually reflects a debate that was taking place amongst the governors of the BBC regarding the Sunday policy and the provision of programming specifically aimed at the armed forces. The background to this debate was the existence of a French, commercial, radio station, Fécamp, which provided a magazine, free of charge, to all British units on active service. The content of Fécamp was much more light-hearted than that provided by the BBC on Sundays. The governors decided that this was an example that should be followed. However, J. W. Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting was not happy with this decision. Not only did he feel that CRAC should have been included in the discussion but he also felt that the reversal of the traditional policy was based upon expediency rather than principle. His comments demonstrate the doxic view of the religious sensibilities of the population, "I cannot see why we should assume that because a few listeners have put on uniform and crossed the Channel they should be considered different persons religiously". Ogilvie, one of the other governors disagreed that it was expediency rather than it was a 'sense of duty to the Forces in their special circumstances'. Suffice it to say, a lighter touch was adopted, although it was made clear that there would still be a difference between Sunday and weekday programmes, the quality had to be the best in any department and they should be fortifying to the individual and strengthening to the home (Briggs, 1970: 132). In the same way that Welch was overruled the complaint by the above letter writer was not supported by any other contributors in 1940. However there was unanimity about the value of religious broadcasting.

At the end of 1939 a Sunday Children's Hour was introduced, as was a weekly religious

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<sup>5</sup> This section draws heavily on the work of Briggs for the historical detail.

service broadcast to schools. There do not seem to have been any voices raised in opposition. It was taken for granted that these were good things to do. If there were voices opposed to the prominence of religion they did not reach the pages of either *The Radio Times* or *The Listener* during 1940. Any complaints that were raised tended to be either about an absence of a particular denomination or a request for a rearrangement of programmes:

Thank you for the Sunday services which you broadcast, but we should like a few more Chapel services or a good old Salvation Army, please. 'Three Listeners', Bedford. (April 12<sup>th</sup> 1940)

During these difficult times, cannot the 10.15 p.m. service broadcast three times weekly be arranged for a few minutes before the 9 o'clock News each night? This is such a beautiful service, and so exceptionally well rendered that it is more than a pity that the hour seems far too late for it, as many people will have switched off and retired to bed. If it were broadcast at, say, 8.40 it may make many more realise that only One can really give us the help we need if our nation is to come through this severe testing time. Thomas A. Stroud, Farnham, Surrey. (July 12<sup>th</sup> 1940)

Whilst the last author acknowledges that there are some who don't realise the importance of God's help his view is that they should and that the BBC can help in their realisation. It is interesting to note that in September 1940 there was a report by the Forces Committee, which included proposals for programmes. One of these proposals was a 'Call to Britain Week', which would use religious services, speech, drama, features and music to put across the spiritual issues involved in the present war. The response of the Director of Religious Broadcasting was that he was not very clear how this could be done or how far the Christian cause could be identified with the national cause (Briggs, 1970: 317). This did not seem to be a problem for a number of writers in *The Listener* throughout this year, as will be shown shortly.

It is impossible to know if there were less, dissenting voices during 1940 or whether in fact it was an editorial decision to exclude them. As I said earlier the complaints about religion were confined to either absences or suggestions for rearrangement. The majority of writers wrote positively about the personal benefits they gained and some assumed that others received the same benefits:

What a help – and, I'm sure many others – found the Rev. W. H. Elliott's talk on June 13. I went to bed and slept soundly, having the most peaceful and happy time many months. M.A.G., Highcliffe, Hampshire (June 28<sup>th</sup> 1940).



I would like to return thanks for the lovely services broadcast every day – ‘Lift up your hearts!’ and the Daily Service – and for the morning and evening services on Sunday. I always read ‘What the Other Listener Thinks’, and I feel disgusted at the people who grumble at the best you are giving us. A most grateful listener, Scunthorpe, Lincolnshire. (June 28<sup>th</sup> 1940).

The grumbles to which this writer refers are not about religious broadcasting but about programming in general – too much variety, too little variety, too many crooners, too few crooners and so on and so forth. In the same issue of *The Radio Times* there is an article about Lift Up Your Hearts, which is approximately 500 words long (the author provides this information to illustrate the length of the talks on Lift Up Your Hearts). The sub-heading is, ‘The story of the morning broadcast that holds thousands of listeners daily.’ It explains the background to the programme and its rationale – ‘It was felt that this kind of talk would bring comfort to many who were bewildered or bereaved by the war.’ It also makes the point that the programme is not a religious service. There is sacred music to set the tone followed by a ‘tonic talk with a religious background. The speaker *talks* to you; he does not preach.’ Reference is also made to the many letters received from listeners and the one quoted makes the same assumption about help to others: ‘I am a widow and have a bed-sitting-room (sic). Your message seems to make it all sunshine within. I go to work every morning so very uplifted, and I am sure thousands of others are the same.’ The universality of appeal is illustrated in the following letter:

We are of the Jewish persuasion but listen every morning to ‘Lift Up Your Hearts’ with enjoyment. Any distressing news given at 8 a.m. is lightened with the inspiring words of comfort given a few minutes before. J. Turner, London, N.13. (July 19<sup>th</sup> 1940).

And an article in *The Listener* (1<sup>st</sup> August 1940) notes that there were so many requests for copies of the talks that they had been published in book form as *A Thought for Today*.

What is clear from the evidence provided so far is that any challenge to the presence of religion in broadcasting is unheard in the pages of *The Radio Times*. Numerous articles are devoted to the discussion of religious broadcasting – either to give background information and to ensure that listeners know just how popular these programmes are, or to give detailed information about forthcoming programmes. For instance in September and October there are two articles which fall into the latter category. On September 6<sup>th</sup> in a section called Both

Sides of the Microphone: Radio news and gossip by 'the broadcasters', there are two items. The first is about a play, *Noah Sails Again*, and details of the play and Noah's faith are provided. The second is about the serialisation of the life of St Paul for Sunday Children's Hour. The language used is interesting in its sense of inclusion and lack of embarrassment at enjoying reading the bible. 'The broadcasters' write: Even though we had to learn them at school, we always found the Acts of the Apostles delightful reading. It is hard to imagine similar sentiments being expressed nowadays in the pages of *The Radio Times*. A letter from October 4<sup>th</sup> refers to this serialisation with great pleasure and concludes with:

To young and old it was a thrill not to be missed, and the sentiments around our tea-table were: Thank you Mac, and all concerned. Give us more of the stories from the Book that has made this nation mighty. Gerald W. Chamberlain, Birmingham, 11.

The link between Christianity and the nation could not be more explicit.

The October article provides not only information about a forthcoming series of talks on the bible but it also takes it for granted that the answer to Everyman's questions are to be found in the bible. There is an assumption that if people don't know the bible very well nowadays it is not because of a lack of faith but because the language of the bible has been seen as conventional and dull. By providing readings from modern translations 'the argument of the bible will stand out afresh'. The readings for each week of a 20-week series are carefully detailed. Again, the language of religion is part of the language of broadcasting and therefore part of the country.

In the whole of 1940 there is only one letter from a writer who identifies himself as a non-believer but even then it is in order to compliment one of the religious programmes (although he also deploys the tactic of assuming that others share his experiences):

The BBC is to be thanked for turning loose Miss Dorothy L. Sayers among the theologians. Like, I expect, many another non-believer, I listened, who would never have listened to any of the usual pi-jaw. In other words I am the bloke Miss Sayers wants to get at. I admire her clear thought and, what flows from clear thought, clear exposition. The lady evidently 'knows all the answers'. Turn her loose again for the delight of the infidels. Who knows, she may catch one. She deserves to. Bayard Simmons, Croydon, Surrey. (August 30<sup>th</sup> 1940).

I want to turn briefly to the armed forces in this section. Separate programmes were broadcast



for the armed forces and I have previously outlined the concerns expressed by Welch. Whilst there is plenty of evidence elsewhere that many members of the armed forces are religious people it was not so clear to the broadcasters that they did not want to hear religious broadcasting. Or at least not in the style in which the BBC was delivering it during 1940. Christmas 1939 on Radio Fécamp was celebrated with a message from Canon Pat McCormick, piano music by Charlie Kunz, and singing and strumming from George Formby and Tessie O'Shea. This mix of religion and popular entertainment and its continuing popularity was what forced the debate around the Sunday policy with the subsequent lightening of Sunday programming for Forces radio. A letter to *The Radio Times* purports to know what members of the armed forces would like to listen to (foreshadowing a comment in a later chapter about requests for children's' religious broadcasting never coming from children!):

I know something of the members of our Forces and am *convinced* that in these perilous times they require something more stimulating and heartening than Variety shows and dance bands. Why not give them 'Lift Up Your Hearts' or a short Epilogue every night? We and the Indian troops would welcome a quotation from their Indian poet Tagore. A. Dicker Davies, Haverfordwest. August 30<sup>th</sup> 1940.

Not only are there no responses to this letter (it is also unclear as to who the 'we' of the letter refers to) but research carried out for Forces Radio showed that religion, drama and talks were never spontaneously mentioned by members of the armed forces. When padres were interviewed their observation was that as soon as a religious service began all billets would turn off the radio (Briggs, 1985: 186). The more secular style of programming that was wanted by the troops and ultimately provided for them was also accessible to listeners at home and Welch realised that whatever was said about the change in Sunday policy being temporary, there could not be a return to it once the war had ended. This meant that even though religion continued to have a special place in the schedules and in the formulation of policy the rude interruption of a war forced a loosening of its grip on Sundays.

1940 was significant for two other developments, which clearly linked religion and broadcasting. The King announced that Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> October would be a national day of prayer. This was given prominent coverage in *The Radio Times* and *The Listener*. The latter carried the full text of the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech. At the same time a campaign called The Big Ben Movement was launched. The driving force was a Captain Margesson who had the support of Winston Churchill. The aim of the campaign was to introduce a minute's silence before the 9 p.m. news. Margesson wanted it to be a religiously dedicated

silence. However, following the deliberations of a committee which had been set up to investigate the issue, it was decided that the chimes of Big Ben, which lasted for one minute, would be broadcast before the 9 p.m. news. Listeners would make up their own minds as to whether or not it was 'dedicated' but the space would be available.

Throughout 1940 *The Listener* carried a number of articles in which Christianity and the nation at war were addressed. Some were related to programmes that had been broadcast. Some of them, for instance 'What is the Christian Way?' (12<sup>th</sup> September 1940 by T.E. Jessop) were a straightforward discussion of what is demanded of Christians in the face of evil. The evil in question being Nazi Germany. The starting point for the article however is the assumption that the audience is also Christian. It is printed on the same page as the Archbishop of Canterbury's address on the National Day of Prayer and they both accept that for some their faith might not be very strong, being based on tradition rather than active commitment. Nevertheless the audience is addressed as 'we' and the salvation of the country is clearly linked to a commitment to God and a realisation that the way many of 'us' have practised 'our' faith has led to the war. At one point the Archbishop says:

May it not be that one of God's purposes in this war is to show what our once vaunted civilisation may become if God is left out and Christian standards are ignored, and to pronounce His judgement upon it? If so, must not we honestly confess that our own national life deserves some part of that judgement? You know how widespread is the neglect of God amongst us.

Jessop, in his article, suggests that a lack of understanding about what real Christianity is led to appeasement and then to war:

We found excuses for their misdeeds and yielded to their pressure in part because we thought that this was the right, the Christian attitude. Now the quite simple reason why I believe that it was not a truly Christian attitude is that it has had such appalling consequences... It is incredible to me that a spirit that has shown itself so inept in the presence of obvious evil on an obviously large scale, can fairly claim to be called Christian.

In an article on 10<sup>th</sup> October by W. E. Williams, where he reviews the first in a series of talks by the Archbishop of York, there is again an assumption that the majority of listeners will be Christians. Half way through the article he refers to 'that minority of listeners who feel alien to the faith which Dr. Temple was interpreting...there were moments when they discerned a



common sympathy after all... when he went on to describe worship in terms of an emotional response they must have been conscious that he was speaking of an experience which is as familiar to the agnostic as to the devout.' It is possible that Williams is making a clear distinction between listeners and the general population; that because the programme was hosted by the Archbishop of York it would, in the main, attract believers. However, my impression from the many articles I read in the course of this research (and which can not be included in this thesis) is that the dominant view is that the vast majority of the audience are Christians. Some might be more active than others but at heart they all share common beliefs and values. I stress that it is only an impression and a different piece of work might come to a different conclusion.

The perversion of Christianity was addressed in an article on German broadcast propaganda on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1940, by Colonel M. G. Christie. Having described various stations which were addressed to different sections of British society Colonel Christie writes, 'But unquestionably the most contemptible Nazi effort are the German broadcasts which are called 'The Christian Peace Movement'.' Whilst he contrasts 'this mock profession of belief' with what Nazis really believe it is interesting to note that listeners are warned about any call to pacifism, over the airwaves, as being Nazi propaganda. Again the impression is that proper Christianity requires commitment to the war and honourable broadcasters share that commitment.

Yet another example of the linkage between decline in Christian belief and the rise of the Nazi party can be found in an article written by Barbara Ward (12<sup>th</sup> December 1940) entitled 'The Defence of Reason'. Tracing the development of 'man's decadence' Ward is clear that without faith 'man [sic] has found himself reduced to a mere function of the material universe'. The work of Marx and Freud not only contributed to this, according to Ward, but also enabled the Nazis to profit from it. Like the previous writers her responses to the situation, as opposed to her analysis, rely on the use of 'we'. Her conclusion is that 'we need a renewal of our faith'. I said earlier, with reference to letters to *The Radio Times*, that it is impossible to know why voices of dissent did not appear. The same is true of articles in *The Listener*. Clearly there were questions of morale but throughout 1940 (and a couple of other war years that I studied in less detail) there was no voice which challenged the linkage between religion and the welfare of the nation. In their programming and in the pages of their official publications the broadcasters actively supported the place of religion. Two further articles relating to German broadcasting and Christianity (Pious Words and Pagan Ways, Rev Nathaniel Micklem; What they are saying, 26<sup>th</sup> December 1940) take a very similar line to the previous articles – the pacifist message is false, and the reality of the Christian



experience under the Nazis is very different from the rhetoric.

Throughout 1940 it can be seen that there were still very close links between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting. The doxic view of religion as an essential part of the war effort and something that would not be contradicted is clear, not only from the deliberations of the BBC Governors and policy development but also from the pages of *The Radio Times* and *The Listener*. Bourdieu states that it is as structured and structuring instruments of communication and knowledge that 'symbolic systems' fulfil their political function (1992: 167). From the point of view of the mainstream religions, especially during 1940, I would argue that their political function was to ensure that the public realised that the war was a battle between good and evil, for which they were partly to blame. The churches had a duty to call people to repentance and thus renewal; and eventually victory over evil. The political function of the broadcasters was to maintain morale amongst the public. Whilst they had different tools from the church their aims were similar and it seems clear that there was much to be gained on both sides as 'structuring instruments of communication'. This is not particularly surprising. A country at war with an external enemy will inevitably attempt to create a sense of cohesion. Whilst there were some disagreements about the details there was no disagreement about the need for co-operation. Despite Wolfe's observation that the first 30 years of broadcasting would challenge those images of a Christian culture shared particularly by churchmen which suggested that the vast majority of people were still favourably disposed towards the church in general and Christian belief in particular (1984: xxiii), the challenge seemed remarkably absent during the war years and 1940 in particular. The linguistic exchanges, which took place on either the radio or in the pages of *The Radio Times* and *The Listener*, demonstrate the symbolic power exerted by the fields of religion and broadcasting over the general public. A power, which served to reinforce the doxic view of religion and Christianity in particular – a taken for granted position for all right-thinking Britons<sup>6</sup>.

## 1955

Between 1940 and 1955 major changes had occurred within the field of broadcasting the most significant of which took place in 1955 with the launch of the first independent television service in the United Kingdom. Before I concentrate on that year I want to outline,

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<sup>6</sup> As a footnote to this, Melvyn Dinwiddie (Head of Religious Broadcasting, Scotland) published a booklet in 1948 to commemorate 25 years of broadcasting. His comments about the war and religious broadcasting are pertinent. He makes the point that for service personnel away from home anything that linked them with home was greatly appreciated and folk songs were sung in all sorts of places '...and along with them, competing in popularity, were the old Psalm Tunes... The BBC realized the value of such religious influence in war-time and provided items of Community Singing which soon had larger audiences than the traditional forms of worship.' He also writes about the need to develop a new way of presenting religion and refers particularly to the work of the Radio Padre, the Rev. Selby Wright. He also notes that Dorothy L. Sayers' presentation of *The Man Born to be King*, 'made the life of Christ real to millions of listeners and has probably done more than any other factor to stem the tide of secularism'. (1948:23/24)



briefly, some of the changes that had taken place in the preceding fifteen years. In 1944 Welch made a formal appeal to the Director General. He recognised that it was time to move away from the 'mere reflection' of church services and 'orthodox presentations of Christian claims'. He argued that 'whilst the old CRAC assumption was that calling Christianity into question on the air would be to give offence', the time had now come for free discussion so that the corporation could take an initiative in which 'basic issues on which religion rests may be shown to be worthy of debate by competent minds' (Wolfe, 1984:338). Whilst Welch saw this as a positive move for religion – it could and it would defend itself – inevitably it would lead to challenges. A couple of years later there were challenges from the new Light Programme about the scheduling of the evening service. The BBC was concerned with the general public and the Churches, through CRAC, were concerned with congregational numbers. The fact that the broadcasters won illustrated the power struggle between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting. There was also pressure on the BBC to give more space to Roman Catholics as well as Rationalists and Unitarians. Bourdieu says:

Specific revolutions, which overthrow the power relations within a field, are only possible in so far as those who import new dispositions and want to impose new positions find, for example, support outside the field, in the new audiences whose demands they both express and produce. (1993: 142)

The tensions amongst the mainstream Christian denominations, represented in CRAC, the ambiguous position of broadcasters who supported the presence of religion, and the audiences who were listening to the Light Programme in increasing numbers would seem to provide a perfect illustration of the specific revolution which Bourdieu describes above. Once a degree of controversy was allowed it became more difficult to know where to draw the line. And of course, once controversial views are aired they are no longer the province of a few. Broadcasting means that members of an audience who have held their views in apparent isolation realise that they are no longer alone thus increasing the challenge to the doxa.

In 1946 television was relaunched. Although television had ceased for the duration of the war The Hankey Report in 1943 addressed its likely future. At this point the BBC had a monopoly on broadcasting which made the link between broadcasting and religion relatively easy to maintain, the tensions described above notwithstanding. In 1949 the Beveridge Committee was formed in order to examine the future of broadcasting in Britain. In 1950 the British Council of Churches published a report into Christianity and Broadcasting. The terms of reference were two-fold:

1. to consider the responsibility and standards of the BBC, whether it can be claimed that its standards should be Christian, and how they can be maintained and expressed and,
2. to consider what broadcasting in the UK can do as a religious undertaking and to examine the nature and limits of its work as such.

The report identified a crisis in society which threatened Christian and liberal values defining it as secular materialism which was in contrast to the spiritual basis of European culture (a view which resonated with some of the 1940 articles in *The Listener*). One of the conclusions of the report was that the BBC had two obligations – to avoid what would undermine Christian morality and to foster an understanding of the Christian religion. The justification for this was that the BBC is a public corporation functioning in a Christian country. Whilst acknowledging that there were objections to this view they argued that the state had not repudiated Christianity and that the 1944 Education Act had a religious training specification; therefore the link between the BBC and Christianity was justified.

When The Beveridge Report was published in 1951 it concluded that the BBC should maintain its monopoly and that advertising should continue to be excluded. However Selwyn Lloyd, a Conservative MP, published his own report calling for an end to the BBC monopoly and controversy ensued. With the fall of the Labour government, in the same year, the new Conservative administration had to come to a quick decision because the BBC Charter was due for renewal. The ensuing White Paper in 1952 contained the first stated plan to break the BBC monopoly, in the medium of television only (Smith, 1974:100). It also suggested that religious and political broadcasting should be excluded from the new channel. However, by the time of the following year's White Paper religious and political broadcasting would be included because there would be a public corporation overseeing the new system (Smith, 1974: 106).

The proposed changes were not warmly welcomed. Speaking in a debate in the House of Lords Lord Reith condemned the changes as a betrayal and surrender by the government. The seriousness with which he viewed the challenge to the BBC monopoly can be seen in the following extract:

And somebody introduced Christianity and printing and the uses of electricity. And somebody introduced smallpox, bubonic plague and the Black Death. Somebody is minded now to introduce sponsored broadcasting into this country. (Cited in Smith,



Protests notwithstanding the decision to introduce competition was taken and as Smith comments, the breaking of the BBC's monopoly was an important cultural as well as organisational turning point (Smith, 1974: 16). So far as religion and the new company was concerned it would follow the pattern of the BBC – a Central Religious Advisory Committee with regional committees. The Television Bill was published on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1954 and reached the statute book on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1954. By 1955 the BBC had to deal with competition in television, although they continued to maintain a monopoly on the airwaves, and the churches had another set of broadcasters to deal with.

It is important to remember that the majority of the public still received their broadcasting through the wireless in 1955. Welch's concerns to open Christianity up to debate were realised. In 1955 there were three broadcasts from the Humanist point of view given by Mrs Margaret Knight, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Aberdeen. Whilst they were welcomed in some quarters Briggs quotes the comments of *The Sunday Graphic* – 'great stuff this for a Christian country' (1985: 294). However there were no letters in the pages of *The Radio Times*. In fact letters from the audience in relation to either religious broadcasting or religious values in any kind of programme are notable for their absence during 1955. Again it is impossible to know whether or not this was an editorial decision or whether there was nothing which exercised viewers and listeners in this area. The closest thing to a comment on social values came in a letter from a group of teenagers objecting to a programme about British teenagers, which they felt depicted, them as 'hooligans and jive-loving nitwits'. They concluded:

May we assure you that we, members of the sixth form of a Modern school come from good homes, have freedom but not licence, that we work hard and play hard, and that... we do not seek our pleasure in jive clubs, or in pandering to the sick minds of 'Teddy Boys'. (*Radio Times*, November 18<sup>th</sup> 1955).

The emphasis on the audience, as opposed to interested parties (referred to in an earlier paragraph) was re-stated in an article by Sir George Barnes, Director of Television Broadcasting on September 16<sup>th</sup> 1955, in *The Radio Times*. The thrust of the article is the role of the BBC as the main provider of national broadcasting despite the new competition. He concludes:

Although with powerful competitors bent upon exclusive contracts, we shall not have the same choice of events and performers that we have hitherto enjoyed, the BBC will

continue to give the most varied and diverse television programmes to suit all the tastes of a nation-wide audience – an audience which is increasing through the addition of one million new licences a year. This service is paid for by those viewers; it owes no allegiance to anyone else.

This is yet another example of the developing struggle between the field of religion and broadcasting. Without competition it was easier to resist challenges to the status quo. Once competition appeared the paternalism of the past was insufficient and this included the assumption of CRAC that religion should be treated in a special way. Broadcasters who wanted to challenge the status quo could appeal to the audience by way of justification; they had support outwith the field.

However the prominence of religion and the use of religious language was evident in articles in *The Radio Times*<sup>7</sup>. Most of them were either diary pieces highlighting religious programmes or background information about religious programmes and presenters. An interview with Stanley Maxted, who hosted *Late Sunday Special* on the Light Programme describes his extremely varied life experiences. However, it is his faith that is given prominence:

When you're dealing with people's most intimate problems you can't afford to give the wrong answers. That's why I refer them to the Bible... I am a sinner. If I *can* help anybody, it's probably because I have lived like people... (September 16<sup>th</sup> 1955).

The more questioning approach to religion (which Welch first mooted in 1943) is shown in a television programme called *Christian Forum*, which is highlighted for viewing on September 16<sup>th</sup> 1955. It was a programme that gave 'ordinary men and women the chance to put searching and challenging questions in public forum of Christians, clerical and lay about the application the Christian religion to modern problems'. Its timing – 10 p.m. on a Friday night – is something of a surprise compared to what is available for viewers at 10 p.m. on Friday nights nowadays! What is interesting also is that it follows an evening of variety entertainment. However it is in the use of language that is unembarrassed about religion that the sense of a common attitude towards religion is created. Again, it is difficult to imagine reading similar passages in *The Radio Times* today. For instance a short piece on the forthcoming Sunday night epilogue, describes Tom Fleming thus:

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<sup>7</sup> There are no further examples from *The Listener*, until 1980, due to their absence from the BBC archives at Queen Street, Edinburgh (and the National Library of Scotland does not have a full set of archives either).



...one of Scotland's foremost stage, radio and television actors, the son of a Baptist minister and a leader of the Scottish Baptist Men's Movement. He is a person who carries his faith to the stage, and who uses his gifts as an actor in the service and witness of God. (26<sup>th</sup> August 1955).

Another diary piece from the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1955 would more than likely have a present-day audience utterly confused<sup>8</sup>. The programme is about men who work in a glassworks and nothing to do with religious broadcasting. The assumption of shared knowledge, a common religious habitus, is clear:

Shadrach; Meshech and Abednego, those heroes of the Biblical fiery furnace, will come to mind next Thursday as men of the famous Brierly Hill glassworks in Staffordshire are seen in the jaws of a furnace equally fierce... So the Staffordshire Shadrachs must break down the furnace wall...

On the 9<sup>th</sup> September 1955 a new series is trailed called 'Is This Your Problem?' It was to be an audience participation programme in that viewers came in to the studio in order to put their problems before a panel of experts. According to the trailer it can't deal with specific medical and legal problems, 'The sort of question likely to get a hearing is: Should I emigrate? or Is it wrong to change my religion to marry?' Clearly wide-ranging problems but not yet seen as outwith the scope of religion because the panel 'will be composed for the most part of doctors and psychiatrists, clergy of different denominations, and educationist, though sometimes there will be probation officers, marriage guidance workers and other specialists...' What I find interesting, in that it seems to reflect the impact of CRAC, is that one of the sample questions refers to changing religion but the clergy panellists are not from different religions, merely from different Christian denominations.

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, congregation or clergyman. There is no embarrassment in referring to religion as in the example of Tom Fleming or in declaring one's own biblical knowledge, as in the glassworker's example. There might be more challenging programming and there were certainly far more alternatives for those who didn't want to consume religious broadcasting nevertheless the space given and the language used suggested that religion was part of broadcasting because it was part of society (and not as a minority activity). Changes were obviously taking place and the

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<sup>8</sup> A survey of 100 undergraduates, in 2002, showed that a tiny minority were familiar with the reference.

introduction of Independent television had a major impact on the field of broadcasting which consequently impacted on every other field in the social structure. In terms of what Wolfe describes as the struggle for supremacy between the mainstream Christian religious institutions and the BBC (1984: xxiii) the introduction of independent television facilitated the revolution within the field of broadcasting. The appeal to the audiences weakened the previous paternalism and provided a much wider public space in which the field of religion could be challenged.

## 1962 – 1965

The decision to look at four years at this point needs to be explained. The 1960s saw a major shift in attitudes towards previously accepted social mores. The broadcasters were perceived, in many quarters, to be the engineers of this social change, rather than mirrors reflecting it. Objectors to the iconoclastic style of broadcasting gathered around the figure of Mrs Mary Whitehouse who launched what was to become The National Viewers and Listeners Association in May 1964. I assumed that 1962 and 1963 would provide letters, which reflected both sides of the debate. I was wrong. However because of the significance of this period it seemed fairer to look at a four-year period in case the one year I selected turned out to be unrepresentative of the general mood. It was also the period when *Coronation Street* was first screened (one of the programmes referred to in the audience research).

In 1962 The Pilkington Report was published which, amongst other things, led to the establishment of BBC2. There was much concern about the quality of broadcasting, particularly where Independent television was concerned. As the authors of the report noted:

Nevertheless, many submissions put to us about television on behalf of viewers primarily expressed disquiet and dissatisfaction. Often the critics of television – including even the most severe critics – were at pains to praise the good things in television. But on the whole, it was adverse criticism which formed the substance of nearly all their submissions. Praise was given, but only incidentally. Though it was generally said to us of sound radio: “This is admirable”, none was willing to say it of television. (par. 77).

The concerns expressed in The Pilkington Report were a reflection of the wider public debate about the move away from Christian values in broadcasting and society. So far as religious broadcasting was concerned Pilkington had recommended that new lay members be added to CRAC which duly happened. It also recommended that the ITA (Independent Television Authority) should have a separate committee but CRAC and the ITA’s own panel of religious



advisers refused. In the end the ITA began to meet separately with CRAC whilst having occasional joint meetings with the BBC<sup>9</sup>.

There were many submissions to the Pilkington Committee. One of them came from the National Broadcasting Council for Scotland. They stressed the need to pay 'full regard to the distinctive culture, interests and tastes of the Scottish people' (Briggs, 1995: 670). The Church and Nation Committee of the Church of Scotland also made a submission wherein the position of the Church of Scotland vis a vis the established church was made clear. Pilkington noted that too few religious programmes were made in Scotland for Scotland and accordingly they recommended that the National Broadcasting Council for Scotland should assume responsibility for television as well as radio. They accepted that Scotland's requirements in religious broadcasting were different from those of England and Wales (par.289). The Scottish submissions also referred to the religious and moral dimensions of Scottish culture. Sundays were special days and it was felt undesirable to present plays which condoned or appeared to condone moral laxity (or to show them when family viewing was general) (Briggs, 1995: 670).

Further evidence of the struggle for supremacy between the field of broadcasting and the field of religion is found in paragraphs 463 – 465 of The Pilkington Report when discussing the role of CRAC. Because CRAC only represented mainstream Christian religion,<sup>10</sup> it was felt that the role of the broadcasters was more likely to reflect the needs of audiences than CRAC:

The Roman Catholic Church also advocated that the advice of CRAC should be binding on the BBC as it is on the ITA. There is certainly an anomaly: but we do not consider that the proposal offers the right remedy. The ultimate responsibility for the religious broadcasting conducted in their services must rest unmistakably on the broadcasting authorities and not on an external advisory body, no matter how important its advice may be. We are reinforced in this view by the fact that CRAC does not, and indeed cannot, represent all the varieties of religious opinion (par 465).

'Varieties of religious opinion' was referred to elsewhere in Pilkington. Pressure was still

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<sup>9</sup> According to Rev. Dr. Andrew McLellan (recently retired Chairman of the Scottish Religious Advisory Committee – SRAC - and current member of CRAC) the work of SRAC is more valued by the BBC than the work of CRAC. He believes this is because CRAC gives advice to the ITC and the BBC so less serious issues are discussed. He said, also, that there were always senior members of the BBC present at SRAC meetings whereas this was not the case for CRAC. (Interview, January 15<sup>th</sup> 2002)

<sup>10</sup> The churches regarded by the BBC and ITA as constituting the 'mainstream' are represented on CRAC. They are: Church of England, Church of Scotland, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Congregational and Presbyterian (par. 279, Pilkington Report, 1962). Whilst it is clear that those churches cherish their position on CRAC it is important to remember that even post-Pilkington the decision about who is included in the mainstream does not come from the Churches but from the broadcasters.

coming from Unitarians, Christian Scientists and Rationalists. The limited treatment of other religions was acknowledged. Jews were the only other non-Christian religion to have broadcast services but they were very few and far between<sup>11</sup>. As for other religions Pilkington took the view that they were so small in number that they might perhaps be better served by local broadcasting rather than national broadcasting – if they ever became numerous enough for consideration.

Whilst there were structural changes which affected the relationship between religion and broadcasting there were changes taking place within religion that articulated with the changes in society. As Sendall notes:

The publication of Dr John Robinson's *Honest to God* early in 1963 created a considerable stir, for when a bishop of the Church of England could express his doubts so freely, the place of organised Christianity in the 'establishment' itself came into question. In the new climate of opinion, of which quite apart from the bishop's book there was now much evidence religious television could no longer command unquestioned support. (1983: 288)

Changes within religion and arguments about secularisation will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter. However the increasing prominence given to clergymen who were more open about their religious doubts and who were willing to be more relaxed about moral issues not only led to questions about the relevance or purpose of the church but also provided a spur for those like Mary Whitehouse who felt that Christianity was under attack. There have always been divisions within the field of religion but broadcasting made those divisions visible to many who might otherwise have been unaware. At this point I want to turn to the pages of *The Radio Times* and to examine the way in which religion (and values) was covered.

As in previous years there was a combination of articles and letters. Towards the end of 1962

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<sup>11</sup> The *BBC Handbook* from 1960 to 1965 makes interesting reading in relation to religious broadcasting: The aims of religious broadcasting are first to reflect the worship, thought and action of those churches which represent the mainstream of positive Christian tradition; second religious broadcasting should bring listeners and viewers what is most significant in the relationship between the Christian faith and the modern world; third religious broadcasting should seek to reach those on the fringe of the organised life of the churches, or quite outside it. Provision is made for occasional broadcasts by certain minority Christian groups and there are some Jewish broadcasts in the year... Religious broadcasting staff is recruited from among the clergy and is broadly representative of the church in this country. Every effort is made to ensure that religious programmes will be presented with the same professional competence as in secular programmes. By 1965 the following had been added: ...religious broadcasting makes a substantial contribution to BBC2 although not at a fixed regular time set aside for its exclusive use. It is designed to show the relevance of the Christian faith to everyone in Britain today. 5 million listen to 'Peoples Service' on the Light Programme and the same number watch *Songs of Praise*. *Lift Up Your Hearts* on the Home Service has 3 million listeners.



two articles referred to key Christian festivals. On December 20<sup>th</sup> 1962 a fairly lengthy column is dedicated to a discussion of radio and television Christmas services as well as a more general discussion about the state of Christianity. Unlike articles from previous years there is a greater awareness that '...many fail to respond more actively ...to the claims of the Gospel'. There is a reminder to Christians that they have a duty to reflect God's love at all times. On November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1962 the Advent Talks on the Home Service are advertised. Along with details of the programme and the presenter is an explanation of Advent and its significance in the Anglican calendar. To emphasise the fact that the programmes are aimed at everyone the writer says, 'These talks are intended to remind us of God's concern with this world and to help us prepare in heart and mind for a proper celebration of the Christmas festival'. There are no reservations here about those who fail to respond.

Three letters from 1962/3 illustrate something of the tensions around changing values in broadcasting and society. The first refers to a serial, *The Franchise Affair*; the second refers to *Songs of Praise* and *Juke Box Jury* and the third to *Harry Worth*:

The sincerity, restraint, and good manners of the principal performers made this a gem amongst BBC-tv productions, and a most refreshing change from the unpleasant exhibitionism which is so often a feature in TV production. Margaret M. Smith, East Cowes, I.O.W. September 6<sup>th</sup> 1962

How refreshing it was to look at the happy faces of the girls and boys – pupils of Hamilton Academy – in the June 24 *Songs of Praise* on BBC-tv. What a contrast to the dreary looks of the *Juke Box Jury* audience of teenagers! Mervyn Williams, Market Harborough. September 6<sup>th</sup> 1962.

In *Bookshelf* (Radio Times, June 20<sup>th</sup>) your reviewer refers to the fact that fifteen million people watch the *Harry Worth* shows, and I can tell you why I and many of my friends are among them. These shows are truly humorous, without any trace of sarcastic cruelty, and also we can be sure there will be no bad language or blasphemy. Mrs. W. Alker, Castleford, Yorks. July 11<sup>th</sup> 1963.

The first and third letters are clearly expressing dissatisfaction with some of the more 'challenging' programming for which the BBC had been gaining a reputation. The second would seem to be expressing a preference for 'wholesome' teenagers who are still involved with religion. It is quite amusing that on the same page there are two letters from teenagers writing in defence of *Juke Box Jury* and complaining about adults who should 'discard the

rose-coloured spectacles through which they view the past'. I referred in earlier sections to the way in which some contributors presumed to be speaking for large numbers of people. A letter from October 11<sup>th</sup> 1962 does this in relation to the Daily Service:

No one can measure the numbers of listeners who have so richly benefited from this brief service, and who, I am sure, will join me in expressing our deep appreciation to all those who combine in this priceless fifteen minutes. Mrs J. M. Bradbrook, St. Margaret's Bay.

On August 9<sup>th</sup> 1962 advance notice is given of Kirk Week: Ayr 1962. One of the things it does is to highlight the greater coverage offered by radio to religion than television. It also points out that there are fewer Scottish services televised during the summer months. However, it is also at pains to stress the size and nature of the church:

'What is the Church?' It is so easy to answer wrongly – that it is the building, or the minister, or the organisations, or a brief Sunday activity. It is hard to realise how big the Church really is – that it is *all* Christians, and that it should be found in *all* the interests in the working, home, political, and social life of *all* its members.

Like the Christmas article there is a reminder to Christians that their faith should be seen in every aspect of their lives. However, by providing coverage of the whole week it is clear that the broadcasters saw it as still being relevant to and of interest to their audience.

I found few letters over the decades that referred to representation of any kind but on August 16<sup>th</sup> 1962 a clergyman wrote in to complain:

I have often wondered why radio plays concerning the lives of the clergy in post-Trollope times are such a rarity. Having listened to *The Mirage Beyond* (Afternoon Theatre, Aug 1) I know why. Evidently the task of dramatising the somewhat featureless existence of the professional clergy is too difficult a task for the contemporary dramatist... If this play is a true depiction of the life of the clergy no wonder the Church is a moribund futility. Rev L. E. Roberts, Beaworth, N. Devon.

A couple of weeks later another listener wrote in to disagree with Mr Roberts. What they heard was a man faced with a crisis of conscience and who ultimately put his love of God before his family. This difference of view is at the heart of audience reception studies. As a member of the clergy Mr Roberts obviously felt that his profession was depicted



inaccurately; after all he would have an insider's knowledge with which to compare it. The respondent on the 6<sup>th</sup> September, not having that knowledge (they don't identify themselves as a member of the clergy<sup>12</sup>), only found the Christian message. It is presumably equally likely that another listener without an understanding of the requirements of Christianity would have found it repellent – an example of being so in love with God that the needs of human beings are secondary. In January 1965 there was a letter about a new series with Frankie Howerd in it and the programme was praised for being 'good, clean, clever satire'. As a researcher this not only caused me some confusion but it also provided another example of the differences in audience reception. I remember watching Frankie Howerd in the 1960s when I would have been a young teenager. 'Clean' was never a word I would have attached to Howerd. My memory of his work is that it was always based on innuendo, double entendre and a smattering of smut. That's not to say I didn't find him very funny at the time!

*Songs of Praise* was first broadcast in 1961 and attracted very little comment in the letters' pages of *The Radio Times* initially. In March 1965 a writer refers to the frequent appearance of letters over the past few months in praise of *Songs of Praise*, which he finds 'quite nauseating'. The author is a clergyman and ends his letter thus:

*Songs of Praise* is not so much a religious programme as a sentimental sing-song!  
Rev. A. Caswell, Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire.

It was a foretaste of debates at the Church of England General Synod (2000) about the quality of BBC's religious broadcasting. Popular and populist programmes about religion were and are seen in some clerical quarters as demeaning to religion. In 1964 the BBC Record (26) reported a talk given by Mr Kenneth Adam, Director of BBC Television in which he defends the output of BBC Religious Broadcasting:

So far as the BBC is concerned, the percentage of the total religious broadcasting output on television which consists of discussions of a controversial kind is 5 per cent, or half an hour a month. All the rest of the time is given to positive, affirmative, evangelistic, non-apologetic programmes of one kind or another. In a questioning age, it could be that this is not too much but too little time to devote to free discussion of belief.

*Songs of Praise*, which was part of the output to which Mr Adam referred, was introduced by

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<sup>12</sup> Whilst it is possible the author of this letter is a clergyman, the social conventions of the day make this highly unlikely because a clergyman would always have used his title in formal situations.

Sir Hugh Carlton Greene, Director General of the BBC, in 1961. It is somewhat ironic that a programme which proved to be exceptionally popular<sup>13</sup> should have been the responsibility of a man that many Christians believed was personally responsible for the moral decline of the nation through his encouragement of more liberal and radical programming. In a speech in February 1965, in Rome, Greene outlined his approach to broadcasting and the tension that existed for broadcasters of challenging and reflecting society:

...the BBC should encourage the examination of views and opinion in an atmosphere of healthy scepticism. I say 'healthy scepticism' because I have a very strong personal conviction that scepticism is a most healthy frame of mind in which to examine accepted attitudes and test views which, in many cases, have hitherto been accepted too easily or too long. Perhaps what is needed, ideally... is what T. S. Eliot described as 'an ability to combine the deepest scepticism with the profoundest faith'. (Smith, 1974:182).

Lord Balerno tabled a motion for The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland aiming to 'reverse the policy recently adumbrated by the Director-General which outrages the conscience of Christians and the heritage of the nation'. In an interview with The Observer Greene said:

This 'policy' was expressed in a speech I made to the International Catholic Association for Radio and Television in Rome last February... The Swiss Monsignor who opened the conference... was simply flabbergasted [by Balerno's response] (Harris, 30/5/65).

According to John Gray (ex BBC Radio), Lord Balerno was objecting to changes to *Lift Up Your Hearts*. The fact that his complaints came at the same time as Mary Whitehouse was increasing her activity made it quite problematic for the BBC. Nevertheless it was not so problematic because *Lift Up Your Hearts* was replaced and the new programme proved to be just as popular, eventually<sup>14</sup>. What was problematic for the religious field was the

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<sup>13</sup> Whilst clergy might see it as a 'sentimental sing-song' and question whether it really had much to do with Christianity there is little doubt that for many viewers who either could not or would not go to church it offered a link which enabled them to continue to define themselves as Christians; and to see themselves as part of a Christian society. A survey conducted for ABC Television between 1963 and 1964 showed that 2 in 5 viewers thought that watching television services was a substitute for going to church for those who couldn't go (Wybrow, 1989:69).

<sup>14</sup> In a reply to a listener's question about the programme Mr F Gillard, BBC Director of Sound Broadcasting said, 'There is obviously a great deal of misunderstanding over what has actually happened... The whole purpose behind this change is to make the programme more of a Christian missionary instrument; to make it more effective in directing the attention – particularly of uncommitted listeners – to aspects of Christian faith and thought and belief and conduct' BBC Record (35) June 1965.



commitment to challenge on the part of the BBC. At the beginning of 1963 the BBC ended its ban on politics, royalty, religion and sex in comedy shows (Briggs, 1995). One programme to benefit from this change was the satirical show *That Was The Week That Was* (TW3)<sup>15</sup>.

Whilst the programme was extremely popular it upset many people with its iconoclastic approach. No aspect of the establishment was left unchallenged and religion was inevitably one of its targets. As Smith comments people like the Bishop of Woolwich (author of *Honest to God*) were easy to satirise, partly because until the 1960s the Church had always seemed to be anchored to the eternal:

The TW3 team... always claimed that it was satirising not religion, but its current representations on earth. Such an approach was taken less coolly by the leaders – and followers- not only of the Church of England but also of the whole spectrum of various denominations than Macmillan took of the TW3 approach to politics. A ‘Consumers guide to Religions’... seemed deliberately designed to offend them all. So, too, did jokes about the Bible. (1995: 361).

A survey commissioned by ABC Television between 1963 and 1964 on Television and Religion was presented at the ITA religious consultation in Durham, in September 1965. Up until this point many believed that if only Christian communicators could master the techniques of television the pews could be filled up. What the survey showed was that although there was still a good deal of religious belief and activity there was a much greater gap than realised between profession of religious belief and any sort of church allegiance. The report focused attention on the realities of a society largely alienated from the domain of organised religion (Sendall, 1983: 289). A lecture given by Mr Kenneth Lamb, Head of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, in February 1965 addressed the topic of religious broadcasting. Within his lecture he discussed the tensions between Christians and the tensions between Christians and the rest of society, picking up on some of the issues that came out in the ABC survey. He challenged the assumption that because less than one in ten go to church ‘the BBC should not foist on the overwhelming majority that to which evidently they are indifferent. “The creed of the English [sic] is that there is no God,” wrote Alasdair MacIntyre recently. But the evidence of the polls is against him, and in any case, let us complete his sentence. “The creed of the English is that there is no God, and that it is wise to pray to him from time to time”.’ He also explores the dichotomy among Christians – those

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<sup>15</sup> TW3 began broadcasting in 1962, before the ban was ended. What I have been unable to ascertain is whether the ban was ended as a result of the programme or whether it had already been broken and the ending was merely a formality.

in favour of radical renewal and those in favour of traditional forms. Not only does this create difficulties for religious broadcasters but at a time when there is a 'revolt against religion' there is a danger of alienating those on the fringes.

In conclusion then it can be seen that the 1960s were a key period in the developing struggle between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting. Whilst the pages of *The Radio Times* provided little evidence that religion was being rejected and that the new values were being happily embraced evidence from other sources show that this was partly true. However, the ABC survey did show that even though there was a gap between profession of belief and commitment to a church, so far as religion and broadcasting were concerned most people thought it was a good thing to have – if not for themselves then at least for others. The *BBC Handbook*, 1966, carried an article which, fairly comprehensively, covered the controversy of the previous years, drawing on newspaper reports, official reports, extracts from Hansard and journal articles to name but a few. In an extract from an article published in *The Listener* on 'The BBC's duty to Society' Lord Soper seemed to capture the zeitgeist:

I think there has been a lot too much dirt rather than soil in recent BBC presentations, too much reportage of evil rather than insight into evil, and a preoccupation with certain aspects of sex as if these present the entire picture. These failures in judgement are remediable, yet they reflect attitudes and issues which go very deep. The BBC operates in a community which is professedly Christian, whereas in fact Christianity is a minority movement in these islands. By the law of averages it is certain that a large proportion of those who prepare, produce, and perform the programmes of the BBC are themselves non-Christians. The moral standards of the historic Christian culture have been abandoned, but in the non-communist world no similarly articulated standards have been set up in their stead. The BBC and its critics both exemplify this dilemma. Christendom at least knew where it was going. Those who today are convinced that its journey was both abortive and unnecessary cannot just sit at home. (1966: 18).

## 1977

In 1977 the findings of the Annan Committee were published and, like Pilkington, it paved the way for a new television channel. This time it was Channel 4. The Annan Report also proposed an Independent Broadcasting Complaints Commission. Questions of taste and decency continued to be of concern, not only to viewers but also to broadcasters. The issue of whether or not broadcasters were reflecting society or were, in fact, setting the agenda was still unresolved. For organisations like the NAVLA there was still no doubt that broadcasters



were setting the agenda. In this section then I want to look at the impact of these debates and also the impact of some of the changes to come out of Annan. Alongside that will be letters from *The Radio Times*, which illustrate the tensions amongst viewers.

In May 1971 Lord Aylestone, Chairman of the ITA (soon to be changed to the Independent Broadcasting Authority, IBA) gave a talk to the National Council Meeting of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds on the topic of blasphemy. As Smith (1984: 187) notes he was concerned with how to hold the balance between the Christian viewer who argued that the word 'Jesus' (used as an expletive) should never be broadcast, and the creative writer who argued that in a given context it was necessary. His view was:

What better answer to this problem can you find than the one which the Authority has arrived at – not to ban the use of the word absolutely but to ask company managements, and all those concerned with the creative side of television, to think carefully before using it, and not to use it trivially or carelessly. This, you will notice, is a position some way away from that of those who argue that there are absolute standards (usually their own) from which no deviation is possible; but equally far away from those who would argue that there are no inhibitions left, that total freedom is the only possible stand for the creative artist today... All these are difficult and complex subjects, at which the researchers are picking away. All we can be sure of is that the extremists on both sides are just plain wrong. (Cited in Smith, 1984:187 – 188).

As a result of the growing concern about tastes and standards the BBC was requested, in 1972, to present to the BBC's General Advisory Council a prepared statement on 'Tastes and Standards in BBC Programmes'. The document emphasised the need for controversial issues to be constantly reviewed internally and to be referred upwards if there was any doubt. However, an interesting point is made about the role of the BBC as far as leading or reflecting society was concerned:

It was not the BBC which brought about the divisions in society, but its programmes reflected them. It began to publish things which some people did not want to hear. It showed up not the unity of the war years, but dissensions which, although they may have existed before, had not had this kind of projection before. Further, through the 1960s, it focused attention on the attacks which were gathering on institutions and ideas. (Cited in Smith, 1984: 191 – 194).

Whilst this document refers to the BBC it is clear that all broadcasting, by its very nature, enables the wide dissemination of dissensions that might otherwise have seemed to belong to a minority. The potentially revolutionary nature of this dissemination is at the heart of many debates related to broadcasting, especially when it comes to religion. Not only was space given to clerics who challenged the orthodoxy of Christianity but those internal challenges enabled external challenges to the doxa of Christianity (and all religion) to acquire legitimacy. Over the years a number of broadcasters and Christians (some of whom were both) had argued that religious broadcasting should allow more space for Christianity to be challenged. Not in order to destroy it but to demonstrate that it was a robust religion that could deal with challenges. It did not need special protection. Indeed, its credibility would be strengthened through challenge. I suspect that they had not anticipated some of the challenges that were to come from within their own camp. Equally they had not anticipated the kind of challenge that could come through fictional broadcasting. Challenge in a discussion situation is very different from challenge in an entertainment format. According to Paterson:

Comedy offers a space within a society from which to witness social transgression. Jokes destroy hierarchy and order, and denigrate dominant systems of value. The humorous context means that views can be expressed which allow the assimilation of more liberal attitudes to social problems (1995: 113).

There is no right of reply within fictional broadcasting. Comment can only be made after the event and it cannot be assumed that the follow-up comment will be noticed by the viewer or listener of the original programme. Within all of this is a concern with the effects of broadcasting on the audience. Although the debate is extremely complex, for organisations like NVALA the effects of broadcasting on the moral decline of the country were evident. Programmes (fictional and non-fictional) were regularly broadcast which undermined Christian values and the evidence for their effect was seen particularly in relation to the relaxation of sexual behaviour. In 1973 Norris McWhirter was granted an interim ban on the broadcasting of a film about the work of Andy Warhol (he had very public support from Mary Whitehouse), which some considered unsuitable due to its content. The programme was eventually broadcast with appropriate warnings. There is an argument for saying that the protest generated an audience that was out of all proportion to what it might originally have expected. I was living in a student house at the time and, as a result of the coverage of the protest, we deliberately watched it in the hope of seeing something salacious! If I remember correctly we got bored and switched off!

The campaigns of Mary Whitehouse and her supporters, the talk by Lord Aylestone on



blasphemy, debates about standards in broadcasting all serve to illustrate that there was a tension so far as the treatment of religion and religious values were concerned, in the 1970s. In an interview in 2000 with Professor Tom Carberry (former member of the IBA and Broadcasting Complaints Commission) he supported this by saying that in the 1970s there was still an expectation that religion should not be used in fictional broadcasting or that at least it should be used respectfully. Charles Curran (a former Director General of the BBC in the 1970s and himself a Roman Catholic) wrote about the need for broadcasters to not only reflect the Christian heritage of the country but also to distinguish between morality and taste (1979). Those areas seemed to encapsulate the increasing struggle between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting and in the following quotation it can be seen that the social context of the audience is used to support the broadcasters:

We are living in what is, in many ways, a post-Christian era, and I think that just as the BBC could not commit itself to the endorsement of the moral positions of other beliefs or unbeliefs, so they could not commit themselves to the direct preaching of Christianity – given that the content of ‘Christianity’ could be agreed between them. They would find themselves, in a very real sense, acting for the whole of the public and yet endorsing a morality which, in its full sense, was accepted by only a minority, even though a large one. (1979:91).

In the next chapter, entitled ‘Good Taste’ he goes on to make the point that ‘the plurality of moral standpoints seems to be moving further from uniformity, or even consistency’ (1979: 101). There did however seem to be some consistency when it came to the use of ‘bad language’. The Annan Report found that this was the most frequent complaint about television programmes. It was also a category of complaint that Curran had experience of. The use of blasphemous language (concerns about which were addressed by Lord Aylestone and referred to earlier in this section) seemed to give the most offence. As Curran writes:

The complaints reflected more than distaste. They were objections to the casual casting aside – as it seemed to the critics – of deeply held and centrally important beliefs. It is one thing to offend a man’s sense of what is proper. It is a much greater thing to offend his conscience. (1979: 102).

Complaints about ‘bad language’ were nearly always in relation to fictional broadcasting. The challenge to ‘deeply held’ beliefs could not be countered, except by complaining to the broadcasters, or writing to something like *The Radio Times* after the event. I am aware that this is speculation but, given the debates about the right of writers to reflect aspects of society



that were unpalatable to some viewers, it seems unlikely that many of those complaints had much effect. I was also struck by the tone of the replies of broadcasters in *The Radio Times* during 1977 – some of which generated follow-up letters of complaint. Compared to the more conciliatory tone which typifies broadcasters' replies nowadays, these bordered on the arrogant and had a tendency to dismiss the complainant as being a lone voice, as can be seen in this response to a complaint from a viewer about violent trailers:

Programmes such as *Dr Who* and *Starsky and Hutch* are very popular and new series have now started on BBC1. Surely few could believe in the reality of many of the fictional situations as illustrated in the promotion. The programmes should now be judged on their entertainment value. Pat Hubbard, Producer, BBCtv promotions. (24<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> September 1977).

One of the important changes to come out of the Annan Report, so far as religion was concerned, was the change in the objectives of CRAC<sup>16</sup>. Commenting on the submission of CRAC and the new guidelines, which had been evolved in discussion with the BBC and IBA, the Report stated:

20.12. This statement is import because it departs fundamentally from the previous definition of objectives. It recognises that religion in this country is no longer synonymous with Christianity, and it no longer requires broadcasting to pretend that it is. It abandons the notion that broadcasting should reflect only the life of the churches in the mainstream of Britain's Christian tradition. It wants to provide some programmes which would present a religious interpretation of the world rather than specifically a Christian interpretation. It asks broadcasting to cater for the religious needs of people outside the churches, but not to proselytise. This is an important change because it makes clear that even if their religion lays a duty upon believers to proselytise, they must not use broadcasting to fulfil that duty. In other words, religious broadcasting should not be the religious equivalent of party political broadcasts. (Cmnd 6753, 1977).

The Report went on to express concerns that CRAC's desire to break out of the 'God slot'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> According to Andrew Barr (ex Head of Religious Broadcasting Scotland) there are many Christians with an interest in broadcasting who not only think that CRAC stands for Christian Advisory Committee but also do not realise that the changes to CRAC post-Annan came as a result of CRAC's recommendations.

<sup>17</sup> This is not the same as the 'Closed Period' or 'Sunday Break', which operated since the birth of ITV. This had initially been a blank screen on BBC in order that they might avoid accusations of stealing congregations from Evensong services. With the arrival of ITV it became a period when both channels showed religious broadcasting. This religious monopoly of Sunday evening was broken by BBC2 in 1972 by the televising of



ghetto and to attract a wider, non-committed audience through more adventurous programming could lead to a situation where the essence of Christianity was lost:

20.19. While CRAC's intention to widen the circle of those who discuss religious matters is understandable, we have met with the criticism that religious programmes are so frequently humanist or modernist as to be scarcely Christian: a Sunday panel of two agnostics and a bishop of advanced views answering phone-in questions is not likely to give much reassurance to the faithful. It is as essential for some programming on moral and spiritual problems to be committed as it is for other programmes to admit all-comers. (Cmnd 6753, 1977).

The debate, in this area, continues today. However, at this point I want to turn to *The Radio Times* and its coverage of religion as well as the issues that concerned their respondents<sup>18</sup>.

Letters from 12<sup>th</sup> August 1977 were primarily concerned with social issues but moral perspectives informed some of the correspondence. Three letters referred to a recent appearance on *Top of the Pops* by The Sex Pistols. Whilst two of the letters were supportive of their appearance and tried to contextualise the debate in terms of previous 'moral panics' over pirate radio stations, rock and roll, and hippies, a letter from a parent used very different language:

With the ever-increasing lowering standards of morals in this country, surely there has got to be a line drawn at some time or other? ...I believe that the BBC has finally hit 'rock bottom' by allowing the Sex Pistols punk group to appear on the programme... at least the Beatles looked presentable and seemed to be well behaved at the height of their success. Our children are influenced by what they see on television and a punk group, known to behave outrageously in public, can have a detrimental effect on their attitudes by appearing on their favourite television programme... Ken Headon, Plymouth, Devon.

When Mr Headon refers to 'our children' I suspect that he is not referring to only his children but to all of 'our children'. Unlike letters of previous decades this was not just a complaint about music that was disliked. The existence and broadcasting of The Sex Pistols is an example of social norms being attacked and of the BBC enabling that attack to take place. On a different topic but relating to concerns with social norms was the following letter:

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one-day cricket matches. The 'God slot' refers not only to Sunday broadcasting, at whatever time, but also the idea that religion was confined to only religious broadcasting. (Bonner, P. & Aston, L. (1998:124).

<sup>18</sup> The volume containing January to July 1977 issues was missing from the archives.

Thank you for a most interesting talk (*The Editors*, 17 July BBC1) and opinions of the 'gay' poem controversy, which my husband and I much appreciated. We only have one small criticism to make. When is someone going to be brave enough to tell Mary Whitehouse to mind her own business and let people lead their own lives? We were professional musicians until our retirement, and having worked with many different people, including homosexuals, we can probably understand their point of view much better than she can. We hate gossip and prying into people's private lives. Gladys Humphries, Reading, Berks.

What is interesting here, apart from the disagreement with Mary Whitehouse's point of view, is that this writer sees the gay poem controversy as a private issue – sexual orientation is irrelevant in the public sphere. Whereas for Mrs Whitehouse the issue was very much a public issue because of her biblical understanding of the non-acceptability of homosexuality. It might exist but it should not be given media coverage because that would seem to suggest public acceptability. As an aside, in 2000 the NVALA complained about the repeat showing of *Queer As Folk* (Ch4), which was a drama about gay men in Manchester. The key point of their complaint was that it was screened when Clause 28 was being debated and that it was calculated to influence public opinion. The influence being in a direction which was contrary to their aims.

In the same issue of *The Radio Times* there is a full-page article by Wilfred De'Ath on *Everyman* which was broadcast on BBC1. His discussion and interview with the producer of the programme highlights the changes that had been taking place in religious broadcasting. Echoing the CRAC submission to the Annan Committee, he says:

...I have maintained for some years that television's religious programmes, if they are to justify their existence in this secular age, should be moved out of God's precious ghetto and made to compete with the main documentary output of BBC1.

He also quotes the brief of the programme which is, 'to take a hard, objective look at religion and not to be on the side of anybody in particular. It is certainly *not* intended as minority broadcasting for those interested exclusively in religion nor is it intended to be an arm of the Church, as religious broadcasting generally has been in the past. In fact, we would expect to attack the Church from time to time.' Whilst he is full of praise for the programme he does wonder whether in fact the questioning of Christianity no longer has any limits and if the programme will contribute to secularisation – 'It would be sad, as well as ironic, if an



ambitious programme like *Everyman*, however successful in its own terms were to contribute to this process.’ It is impossible to know the answer. There will be those who say that it most definitely has and equally there will be those who deny it – and they would come from the ranks of believers, not just broadcasters.

The week of 17<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> September saw extensive coverage of a new documentary series for BBC2, *The Long Search*. The series ran for 13 weeks and covered religious experience and observance around the world. A lengthy article by Margharita Laski asked, ‘What are religions for?’ Her exploration of this question is interspersed with reference to different programmes in the series. However, her conclusion seems to confirm the anxiety expressed by Wilfred De’Ath:

It is hardly possible to see so many people so deeply moved by so many different kinds of religious beliefs and practices, and to remain oneself entirely unaffected. For me, distressed by so much evidence of what too often seemed a diminishment of the dignity and potentiality of man, the result of seeing these programmes was a vehement confirmation of my own unbelief.

Following on from the earlier reference to a viewer’s complaint about violent trailers there were a number of letters in October 1977 complaining about violence on television, particularly in relation to police programmes. Concerns were also expressed about the use of ‘bad language’. However, the focus of the complaints was the effect that these two things could, or would, have on children. Whilst these two issues are not directly related to the focus of my research they are indicative of the view that standards have fallen (echoing concerns about The Sex Pistols appearance on *Top of the Pops*) and that children will be the ones who are the most susceptible, with concomitant social effects.

The week of 8<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> October 1977 carried a number of letters relating to religion. The first referred to an *Everyman* programme, which was a reconstruction of the blasphemy case against the editor of *Gay News*:

As a 32-year old German I have been brought up to beware of any individual or any movement that undermines the intellectual rights of the individual in the name of an ideology, be it political or religious. BBC1’s reconstruction of the case of blasphemous libel against the editor of *Gay News* has therefore me feel most uneasy. It appears that the poem in question was in poor taste, yet I do not know of any instance in which bad taste has ever harmed anyone... At the risk of offending Mrs

Whitehouse, I demand the right to decide for myself what I regard as offensive, obscene or even blasphemous. As for the latter charge – has Christianity lost so much ground that it needs the likes of Mary Whitehouse to defend it? Miss C. Lundt, Sheffield.

The interesting point here is that because blasphemy is an offence in this country and it only relates to Christianity, Miss Lundt may demand the right to decide for herself but she does not have that right. It is not a question of Christianity having lost ground (although there is an argument for saying that Mrs Whitehouse saw her actions as holding the ground against creeping erosion) because the law was enacted at a time when Christianity had much greater power. Nobody would suggest that charging someone with treason means that either the state or the monarch has lost ground. It means that their behaviour transgresses acceptable bounds. Blasphemy, once upon a time, was seen in the same way and for many believers it still is – hence the desire expressed by other religions that they should be protected by blasphemy laws.

The other letters all referred to Margharita Laski's article in *The Radio Times*. One writer, the Bishop of Guildford, suggests that Laski's article, by focusing on mankind's [sic] search for God neglects God's search for mankind and hopes that the programme will do this justice. Another writer takes her to task for writing sympathetically:

The fact which she consistently refuses to accept is that more and more people have no religion and no need for it... Like her, I find that the result of a series like *The Long Search* is 'a vehement confirmation of my own unbelief'; but unlike her I don't feel uncomfortable about it.... What I do feel is irritated that such series always pretend that irreligion is really religion in disguise... Unlike most religious people, we really do mean what we say. Nicolas Walter, London, N1.

The final letter is a slightly tongue in cheek offering from a clergyman who comments on her atheism and how encouraged he was by the content of her article:

Following Margharita Laski's last article on her understanding of Easter I have heard of a considerable number of people who, having read it, have come to the conclusion that there must be something in Christianity after all if that is the best the 'opposition' can manage... Keep up the good work Miss Laski; you'll convert the world to Jesus Christ yet! Rev, Lionel E. Osborn, Derby.



Comments about the actual programme were concentrated in the week 29<sup>th</sup> October to 4<sup>th</sup> November 1977. Out of six letters only two complained about the programme. One complainant saw it as a banal travelogue whilst the other was angered by the treatment of Christianity, feeling it to be unrepresentative of her religion. The others letters were all agreed that in its treatment of Buddhists, Hindus and Roman Catholics it provided extremely balanced information which would go some way to dispelling myths and misunderstandings. In the same week there was another letter, which referred again to changing standards, in a play. The writer concludes:

More profoundly upsetting, however, was the irresponsibility of those adults who had decreed repetitive pictures of the sex act. Have they got to spell out everything nowadays, and is nothing sacred? D.M.Fowler, Braunton, Devon.

Why it was irresponsible to have repetitive pictures of the sex act is not clear. One can only assume that this ties in with earlier writers who were concerned about the social effects of changing standards.

The publication of the Annan Report would eventually lead to the establishment of Channel 4. It also highlighted the changed views of CRAC about the aims of religious broadcasting. *The Long Search*, which had been planned and produced before Annan, was clearly part of the desire to include non-Christian religions. The brief of *Everyman* reflected the increasingly questioning attitude that was being brought towards religion generally but Christianity in particular. At the same time the content of fictional programming was reflecting a more relaxed attitude towards sex, violence and swearing in society – and religion was no longer exempt from humour and satire. However there was not a social consensus about this. The Gay News blasphemy case was one example. The attempt to ban the Andy Warhol programme was another. Many of those who objected to the changing standards had Christianity as their base but even within Christianity there was no consensus; a point which was alluded to in the Annan Report. Bishops of advanced views were hardly likely to provide support to the faithful either in spiritual terms or in providing support for campaigns, which called on traditional Christian values. The letters pages of *The Radio Times*, in 1977, reflect the growing diversity of views. The language of commonality was also disappearing when it came to religion. Having someone who was an atheist write an extended article, in *The Radio Times*, about religious broadcasting was a major change from previous decades when it seemed as if writers not only shared a Christian past but also a Christian present. The presence of agnostics on the *Everyman* production team was a considerable change from the early 1960s when the BBC could state that religious broadcasting staff were recruited from



among the clergy and was broadly representative of the church in this country (*BBC Handbook*, 1959, 1961, 1962). There were none of the diary items which had characterised previous years which, again, had assumed a shared habitus. Despite the perceived arrogance of some producers the broadcasters increasingly looked to the audience for support in challenging the power of the field of religion and appeared to be meeting with some success.

### 1985

In 1982 The Hunt Report was published and it led to the Cable and Broadcasting Act of 1984 which set up the new Cable Authority to oversee the selection and monitoring of the operations of the new cable operators. The Authority was eventually subsumed into the Independent Television Commission (ITC) after 1990 but its arrival heralded a multi-channel future for UK audiences, which would erode the power of the field of religion even further. In the same year as The Hunt Report Channel 4 began broadcasting. Its remit was to provide programming which reflected the concerns of minority groups (blacks, disabled), disadvantaged groups (women, the working class) and political parties broadcasting partisan programmes. Individual programmes were allowed to show bias and offer controversial views as long as there was balance in the overall schedule – very different guidelines from the ITA/ITV companies (British Programme Production Companies, <http://www.mbcnet.org/archives>, 8/2/02). In 1983 Breakfast Television began broadcasting. In 1985 *EastEnders* was screened for the first time, followed in 1986 by *Neighbours* (two of the programmes referred to in the audience research). 1985 was also the year before The Peacock Report was published; the impact of which will be addressed in a later section.

A relatively small change took place in religious broadcasting during 1983, which proved to be a precursor of more serious changes. The BBC had moved *Everyman* out of the Sunday break to a post-10 p.m. slot. Accordingly IBA's Director of Television went before CRAC to argue that ITV should be allowed to move their equivalent programme, *Credo*. The suggestion was that it should be moved to Sunday lunchtime. CRAC was not impressed by this. However as a result of commercial concerns the IBA ignored CRAC and agreed that *Credo* could be moved. Although the more competitive *Highway* (with the extremely popular Harry Secombe as the presenter) would remain in the Sunday break, opposite the BBC's *Songs of Praise*, it was indicative of future changes. It was also significant that the objections of CRAC were ignored.



Concerns about standards were still extant. In a longitudinal study of audience research Svennevig (1998) charted the British public's view of television. In Chapter Six he addressed the question of offence and sensibilities. Over the years of the study there is a substantial and stable minority of around four in ten viewers who claim they have been offended in some way by television. Unsurprisingly levels of offence caused by BBC and ITV rose sharply in the early 1970s. By the 1980s they had declined to the norm of around 40%. The three main areas of complaint are sex, violence and swearing. During the 1970s complaints were equally distributed across all three areas. However, by the 1980s the proportion of viewers complaining about sex on BBC1 or ITV fell and is now the least reported concern. In the first couple of years after its launch Ch 4 received less complaints in these categories than either BBC1 or ITV. The same was true for BBC2. This was not to last! Svennevig makes an interesting point about the demographics of complainants particularly if one refers back to the letters from the 1960s and 1970s expressing concerns about children watching the more permissive programming. By the mid 1980s these children would be adults and might well be expected to be much less easily offended as a result of their exposure. This is not the case:

It is generally accepted that the 1960s formed a social and cultural watershed in the UK in terms of lifestyle, morality, sexual permissiveness and an end to the post-war period. A good theoretical case could be made for this carrying forward with an ageing 1960s 'generation'; this may well be the case in other domains, but it does not appear to hold as far as being offended by broadcasting is concerned. Rather, what seems to happen is the ineluctable process of getting older has its own impact on individuals' views, as people age, largely regardless of immediate social and cultural norms. (1998: 90).

At this point I want to turn to the pages of *The Listener* (1980) and *The Radio Times* (1985).

On September 25<sup>th</sup> 1980 there is an article by David Henshaw on The Electronic Church. This was a phenomenon that was sweeping the United States and quite alien to anything that British audiences had experienced. He discusses the religious fundamentalism that motivates the vast majority of these religious broadcasters as well as their predominantly right-wing political affiliations. It was a pertinent article because with the development of cable and satellite channels UK audiences would soon be able to tune into these programmes. There would also be demands for dedicated religious channels in this country. Why had this phenomenon emerged? According to Dr Martin Marty (an American theologian and one of Henshaw's interviewees), 'These are the people who feel they've been left out – they feel that the public media haven't done justice to their rages or their hopes.' The rise of



fundamentalism will be addressed in the next chapter, in more detail, so it is sufficient to say at this point that the inadequacy of the public media is one of the motivations for those who seek more specifically religious programming. The perceived marginalisation of religious broadcasting and the perceived immorality of other genres of broadcasting have led some to find alternatives.

A small piece in a section entitled 'Langham Diary' on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1980, by Anthony Howard not only gives a flavour of the changed way in which the Church of England is dealt with but also provides a subjective view of *Thought for the Day* and *Prayer for the Day*. Discussing an article in Time magazine about 'seven star preachers of America' he notes the less dignified approach to sermons, taken by The Sunday Times: '...at St Paul's Cathedral, for example, you are advised to pick your Canon carefully if you want your ears pinned back: but the C. of E. must, I imagine, these days be grateful for small (even rude) mercies.' As for *Thought for the Day* he objects to the inclusion of politicians who are in danger of 'turning the old *Lift Up Your Hearts* spot into a party soapbox' and recommends the discriminating listener tune in to *Prayer for the Day*. The fear that *Thought for the Day* would be more secularised than *Lift Up Your Hearts* was clearly rejected by the BBC at the time. Nevertheless, the marginalisation of religion, especially within the BBC, was (and still is) seen by many as a given. It would not be unreasonable to say that a new doxa of secularisation was emerging. Those within the field of religion ascribed it to the broadcasters and the broadcasters ascribed it to the audience in order to justify and support the increasingly secularised field of broadcasting. David Holloway (an evangelical Church of England priest), writing about broadcasting in the UK, argued:

It is now readily admitted that humanism is the creed of many in broadcasting while Christianity is passé. One senior BBC drama producer said rather cynically that in broadcasting today you can be committed to anything except Christianity. (1987: 121).

He goes on to explain the logical conclusion of the marginalisation to which I have already referred (and also makes it clear who he holds responsible):

Greene [Sir Hugh] was either someone who brought the BBC out into the open air of the sixties; or he was someone who actually began to destroy Public Service Broadcasting as a national monopoly or duopoly. He probably did both. For with Christian consensus broadcasting brilliantly demolished by Greene, there was now an inevitable consequence. However reluctantly, influential sections of the Christian



community would be demanding a new and independent deal. (1987: 132).

The varied responses that members of audiences have to humour, especially sexual humour, is illustrated in letters to *The Radio Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> –11<sup>th</sup> January 1985. The first letter is primarily a complaint about the background noise on *Bob's Full House* but the opening lines state:

My wife and I viewed *Bob's Full House* each Saturday evening for some weeks as we both like Bob Monkhouse's lively sense of humour and quick repartee. N.E.Mason, Epsom, Surrey.

However, the following letter takes a completely different view of the humour and clearly relates it to standards:

We are writing to protest against the coarse nature of Bob Monkhouse's jokes on *Bob's Full House*. Was such constant sexual innuendo really necessary, especially at family viewing time on a Saturday night? Please bring back some standards to our television programmes! Terese Sturdy, Pauline Tuttle, Reading, Berkshire.

On the same page a 13-year-old writer objected to comments by a presenter which were, again, based on sexual innuendo and which the author described as rude and suggestive.

On the letters page 19<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> January 1985 there were nine letters under the banner headline, Christmas Programmes: some afterthoughts. Given that Christmas is a Christian festival (and the prominence that was given to this aspect of programme guides in previous decades) only two of the letters made any religious reference; and one of those was somewhat tenuous in that it regretted that *The Radio Times* did not find space in 160 pages to give the names of arrangers and composers of the carols, nor to set out the order of service more carefully. It was a change that was very noticeable from looking at the listings over the years. Services were listed in detail – hymns, psalms, chants and bible readings were all included. The other letter however was a complaint about one of the programmes:

I wish to express my disgust at the Dave Allen show on Boxing Day (BBC1). The contents were offensive, and I was thankful that I had no children staying up late on this holiday night who may have heard the crudity and vulgarity of some parts, and the near blasphemy of others. Cannot the celebrations because of the birth of the Holy Son of God be free from such dubious humour as the impersonation of vicars and priests, particularly the degrading and suggestive 'confessional'? The

insinuations of the lovemaking scene were filthy, and should certainly not be screened at such a time, if at all. Joyce E. Ashworth, Rochdale, Lancashire.

It is clear that Mrs Ashworth's religious sensibilities have been deeply offended. A time of the year, which is sacred to her, has been polluted by the profane but the importance of religion at key religious festivals was becoming less and less obvious so far as programming was concerned.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> April issue of *The Radio Times* there were a number of letters which again referred to concerns with standards but at the same time highlighted the different perceptions of different audience members. There were also the first letters referring to *EastEnders*! Out of ten letters, which referred to the screening of *Blott on the Landscape*, only two were critical:

I found the first two episodes of *Blott on the Landscape* extremely offensive because of their sex, nudity and violence. The scenes between Sir Giles and his prostitute/mistress were particularly sordid. In my opinion this programme was not suitable for viewing in the home, and incidentally, it was not even amusing. Miranda Strait, Enfield, Essex.

Are we to assume that BBC producers believe that hitting policemen and burning cars are accepted practice when there is an issue to protest about? The first episode of *Blott on the Landscape* ended on a sickening note, with people behaving like hooligans... The more often these scenes are churned out, whether in a comedy or on the news, the more likely it is that this behaviour becomes the accepted norm. Carolyn Carden-Jones, Southampton.

The first complainant does rather invite the question as to why two episodes were watched if it was so offensive and unamusing? The second is interesting in that the writer seems to be unaware that is an adaptation of a book by Tom Sharpe and not the creation of BBC producers. She also expresses concerns about the effects of viewing violence, for society. A letter on the same page refers positively to *Last of the Summer Wine* (another programme mentioned in the audience research):

What a wonderful series *Last of the Summer Wine* is. It is always possible for the whole family to enjoy it without having to be ready to jump up and turn it off because of violence, swearing or worse...Mrs C, Southampton



What is clear from these letters is that they are referring to a discourse of taste and decency. Whilst it is possible that religious belief underpins that discourse it is not made explicit. The concept of shared habitus, so far as linguistic references to religion are concerned, seemed to disappear from the pages of *The Radio Times* somewhere between the 1950s and 1960s. A discourse of taste and decency, without explicit reference to Christianity, became the alternative discourse. For a multitude of reasons objections to programming on explicitly religious grounds became a marker of otherness and to some extent irrelevance – which is why the letter complaining about the Dave Allen show seemed incongruous. As for *EastEnders* the letters were either to praise the script and the acting or to complain about one or the other. At this stage in 1985 nobody had been offended by the content.

In conclusion then, this period saw a weakening of the power of CRAC to influence broadcasters and the first steps were taken towards moving religion out of a sacrosanct place in the schedules. As regulators applied a lighter touch broadcasters broke more and more taboos, and from the pages of *The Radio Times* it would appear that there was far less consensus about what was acceptable and what was not. Concerns about unacceptability referred to a discourse of taste and decency as opposed to the doxa of Christianity. The prominence given to religion and religious language (and the lack of embarrassment about its deployment), in earlier issues of *The Radio Times*, had effectively disappeared. In the struggle for power between the fields of broadcasting and religion the internal struggles in each of those fields has had an impact. The doxic place of religion to the early broadcasters (and a nearly universal acceptance of the doxa) was challenged by a combination of market forces, which led to structural changes, and an increasingly secular workforce who took a heterodox position. The internal struggles in the field of religion regarding the orthodoxy of Christianity enabled its opponents to identify the struggles as weaknesses, which were used to highlight the apparently increasing irrelevance of religion to the majority of the British public and thence the viewing public.

### **Up to the present day**

In 1986 The Peacock Report was published. Four years later it was followed by the 1990 Broadcasting Act, which saw the re-structuring of the IBA as the Independent Television Commission (ITC). The 1990 Act also made religion a mandatory programme category for ITV. The ITC was (is) required to ensure that ITV schedules contain a 'suitable proportion' of religious programmes, which was defined as a minimum amount of two hours per week. (Gunter & Viney, 1994: 3). The main difference between the IBA and the ITC was that the ITC was no longer the broadcaster of programmes on ITV and Ch4, rather it had powers to

license companies to operate as television programme providers. It would enforce on all services – terrestrial, cable and satellite – ‘consumer protection requirements’. These stated that news and political and religious stances should be ‘impartial’ and that ‘nothing should be included in programmes which offends against taste and decency or encourages crime or disorder or is offensive to public feeling’ (Goodwin, 1998:96). Also, it had no control over scheduling, which raised concerns that public service broadcasting could be moved out of peak viewing hours in favour of more audience-maximising (and therefore revenue-maximising) entertainment (Goodwin, 1998: 119). Until the end of 1992 the ITC had been able to require ITV companies to broadcast back-to-back religious programmes with the BBC (the Sunday break or closed period) but after 1992 it no longer had this power. Once the 1990 Broadcasting Act’s changes were in place, one of the first scheduling changes in 1993 was the removal of religion on commercial television, from the Sunday break altogether (Bonner & Aston, 1998: 130). Religious programmes were broadcast at times when smaller audiences were available. The ITC was unable to take any action on this.

Another change initiated by the Broadcasting Act was the inclusion of broadcasting under the Obscene Publications Act. The Broadcasting Standards Council had come into existence in 1988, to complement the work of the Broadcasting Complaints Commission. By 1997, following the Broadcasting Act of 1996, the two bodies had merged as the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC). Although the ITC and the BSC had different areas of concern and differing authority in terms of sanctions, so far as audiences were concerned either body could be complained to in the event of offence over a television programme. Research produced by the BSC (and some which drew on ITC data) showed the changing public attitudes towards taste and decency, and the move away from religion as the source of value judgements. This will be addressed in more detail shortly. The focus for most broadcasters, in the period covered in this section, was multi-culturalism with an emphasis on ethnicity, and an ignoring of religion. There were, and continue to be, charges of tokenism about this approach. Black and brown faces were included in programmes with little reference to the cultural background of the characters – a non-white face was seen as reflecting multi-culturalism. This will be discussed in a later chapter.

CRAC, and in Scotland SRAC, continued to exist although as the years went by there were many within the Christian churches who doubted the effectiveness of CRAC in particular. The membership of both bodies was no longer solely Christian. Representatives of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Sikhism were or are currently Committee members. So far as their remit is concerned they are charged with an interest in religion in broadcasting. Whilst this would seem to include all genres of broadcasting according to Rev. Dr. Andrew McLellan



their deliberations in the past four years have primarily been concerned with religious broadcasting. Consideration might be given to news and current affairs but only in as much as it relates to something like *Thought for the Day*. The only time that fictional broadcasting was raised was when *The Vicar of Dibley* was discussed in terms of whether it could be damaging to the issue of the ordination of women. Religion in broadcasting as opposed to religious broadcasting seems to be as neglected by the advisory bodies as it is by academe!

Since the 1960s religion had increasingly appeared in fictional broadcasting, particularly in sitcoms. One of the earliest, *Silent Song*, was set in a Trappist monastery (Briggs, 1995: 582). Others such as *Bless Me Father* and *Oh Brother* provided a vehicle for the comic talents of Derek Nimmo, as a slightly vague and buffoonish cleric. More recently *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Father Ted* have been the face of religion in comedy. The chapter on the audience research provides much more comprehensive coverage of the programmes that were identified, and remembered, as having religious characters or themes in them. However, the programmes that seem to have taken the greatest license when it comes to the treatment of religion are the soaps. Apart from one or two exceptions, recently, involvement with religion for a soap character usually meant they came to a 'sticky' end, in some way or another. Religion was not portrayed as an integral and interesting part of the character. Rather it was seen as a vehicle to produce a sensational storyline. Any deference that might have been shown towards religion no longer existed in soap world.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s cults were extremely fashionable. It was clear from my previous research (Tomkinson, 1996) that adolescents interpreted characters' involvement with religion as problematic and 'read' particular signs within soaps as indicating cultic influences. Professor Carberry made the point that many of the issues which appear in soaps reflect the concerns of the tabloid press and cults certainly seemed to be a big issue in the wider media at the time they were appearing in soaps. Scandals within the Roman Catholic Church regarding non-celibate priests were also seen in soaps but equally in films and dramas. As for other religions, they were few and far between. In fictional broadcasting religion seemed to be slipping off the agenda. It could be used to spice up a tired story line but it couldn't be part of the regular story. It also seemed to be slipping off the agenda when it came to issues of taste and decency.

In 1991 the Broadcasting Standards Council commissioned a report into audience attitudes towards television and issues of offence (Millwood Hargrave). Only two of the groups could be defined as having a religious base for their attitudes and they did not add up to a majority. The first was described as 'Offended' who were predominantly older women, relatively



frequent churchgoers with strong, negative opinions about the levels of bad language, violence and sex on television. The second was described as 'Religious Protectors' who were frequent churchgoers, biased towards social classes ABC1 and more likely to vote Conservative. They didn't feel as strongly about bad language as 'Offended' but religious swear words were seen as the most offensive. In 1995 Gauntlett produced 'A Profile of Complainants and their Complaints' for the BSC. The main aim of the research was to discover whether or not complaints were being received, predominantly, from the NVALA, and a few enthusiastic complainers. However, so far as my research is concerned, the most interesting finding was that although only 14% of complainants stated that they were Christian, with 1.4% saying they were members of the clergy, nevertheless they are the most frequent group of complainants. Christian complainants frequently commented that their faith was seen as an easy 'target' by comedians and others. Many believed that broadcasters would never allow other faiths to be treated in this way (1995:4). These sentiments were voiced in my own audience interviews. There was a feeling that because of 'political correctness' other faiths were safe from the open attack that Christianity was under. The material that was complained of was very varied. However offence against religious sensibilities – almost without exception Christian – appeared in almost 10% of complaints. It would be interesting (but impossible) to know if the predominance of Christianity here is because other faiths don't complain or because there is so little about their faiths that there is nothing to complain about.

Letters to *The Radio Times* in 1985 were complaining about falling standards<sup>19</sup> and it is a complaint that continues to be voiced. In Gauntlett's research he found that 23% of complainants referred to falling standards with their particular complaint being indicative of the general trend. It was also noticeable that a much higher proportion of those declaring themselves to be Christians perceived a decline in broadcasting as well as society in general. Nevertheless the vast majority of complainants did not identify themselves as religious and therefore did not appeal to their religion in order to support their complaint. The continuing shift away from religious values was identified by Kieran, Morrison & Svennevig in 'Regulating for Changing Values' – another piece of research for the BSC:

The decline of religion, once a major source of morality, was not thought to have caused changes in social values. For most, religion was not a significant influence in their's or their children's development. (1997: 5).

They identified two approaches within the focus groups – Neo-Aristotelians and Liberals. The former saw the purpose of the state as maintaining and cultivating the character of its

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<sup>19</sup> There were no archives for the 1990s in the BBC library, which is why this section contains no letters.



citizens, including the moral and social virtues. The latter saw the state as protecting and promoting the freedom that was required for people to lead their lives how they chose, providing they did not infringe upon the basic rights of others. The problem was that both groups were concerned about the cultural influence of television, especially the worldview and moral framework presented by television. In this area they were somewhat authoritarian which put them at variance with most media professionals (Morrison & Svennevig, 1998). However, the absence of a religious framework made the articulation of an ideal moral framework problematic. It also would seem to hinder the views expressed by Lady Howe (chair of the BSC at this time) in a panel discussion:

When broadcasting works best, it's because it 'connects'... That's why I, and I do suspect an awful lot of people, want a broadcasting system which continues to make a contribution to social cohesion. (Ralph et al, 1998: 45).

Thompson & Sharma (1998), through an analysis of complaints to the BSC, ITC and the BBC Complaints unit, identified the different moral discourses which audiences and authorities drew upon to justify their position taking. Although a religious discourse is one of nine, which they identify they note that there seems to be a general awareness that complaints are most likely to gain acceptance if they are couched in the legal-technical discourse that suits the regulators' desire to avoid having to decide between different moral positions. I would argue that the shift in language, identified in *The Radio Times*, reflects the erosion and fragmentation of 'the sacred canopy once provided by religious discourse' but, as Thompson and Sharma point out the fragments can combine with other discourses, such as health, the family or the natural.

In 1999 a report entitled "Losing Faith in the BBC: Religious Broadcasting Beyond 2000" Nigel Holmes attacked the religious broadcasting output of the BBC. The following year there was a debate at the Church of England Synod. One of the points made by Holmes was that in a recent strategy document, 'The BBC Beyond 2000', the smaller, 22 page version made not one mention of religion and the longer, 86 page version, which had a limited distribution, only mentioned religion twice – each time as part of a list. The upshot of the Synod debate was the setting up of a monitoring committee, to be chaired by the Bishop of Wakefield, the Rt. Revd Nigel McCulloch. Although the focus of Holmes' report was the BBC and religious broadcasting the monitoring group (Religion in Broadcasting group) decided to look at the whole question of the presence of religion in the media, rather than just religious broadcasting. Whilst the focus of my own research is television it is, in the context of the concern expressed by Synod, and comments quoted elsewhere in this thesis by Rev.

Ernest Rea, Lord Bragg and David Holloway, perhaps pertinent to quote the following, in reference to *Thought for the Day*:

Angela Tilby argues that it is important on *Thought* 'to remember the word "God"' and to be prepared to 'open a window on the transcendence of God'. She perceives that there is sometimes now 'pressure to turn it into a nice little talk about morality' or allow it to become 'an opinion piece' which is 'not offensive to agnostics'. She believes this pressure is part of a contemporary process, where 'the name of God is being erased from public speech'. (Mitchell, 1999: 130).

It is some way from the reassurances given in the *BBC Handbook* that the change from *Lift Up Your Hearts* to *Thought for the Day* would not lead to secularisation<sup>20</sup>! The full report on the quantity and quality of religious programmes was due to appear in autumn 2001 but despite repeated requests I have been unable to access it so can make no further comment.

The final report to which I want to refer, *Reflecting Community Values*, was published for the BSC (Verhulst, 2001). It is further illustration of the move away from a religious discourse. It also provides some evidence that the increased number of channels is leading to a sense of fragmentation. The work to which I have already referred (Millwood Hargrave, 1991; Gauntlett, 1995; Kieran, Svennevig & Morrison, 1997; Thompson & Sharma, 1998) all noted some referral to a religious discourse, even though it tended to be a minority position. In Verhulst's study there is not one reference to a religious discourse in order to justify 'values'. This absence seemed to create a problem:

Although many respondents, particularly from the younger groups, had difficulty articulating what specific concepts they associate with 'values' in relation to media there were common themes... in the context of the media, values were described as 'family values'... Probing for other relevant values yielded no more than a general sense of 'rightness' not clearly articulated, which came close to 'taste and decency', although the latter term was not expressed spontaneously. (2001: 9)

However, so far as regulation is concerned almost two thirds of the respondents felt it was

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<sup>20</sup> In August 2002 a letter with more than 100 signatories (academics, writers and scientists) was sent to the governors of the BBC attacking the BBC for banning those who are not religious from contributing to *Thought for the Day*. The *Today* programme experimented with a secular slot and invited Professor Richard Dawkins to contribute. The majority of contributors to the BBC discussion site were in favour of a less or non-religious item. However, many others disagreed and felt that secular attitudes already had plenty of space. This was also the line taken by the BBC. Nevertheless, it is indicative of a desire to remove religion from the public sphere of broadcasting.



more to do with protecting children and other vulnerable groups than reflecting the values and moral beliefs of society. Two of the concluding points are interesting because they not only relate to the proliferating number of channels (and platforms) but they also indicate the tensions that can occur when the doxa of religion is challenged, as the basis for values and moral beliefs<sup>21</sup>. People had lost the notion of television as a shared experience about which they talked everyday with friends and colleagues and that was missed. Secondly, a focus on diverse 'community' values was seen as working against the formulation of broader 'public' or 'national' standards, which were perceived as necessary in order to better enable self-regulation (2001: 37).

## Conclusion

In conclusion then it is clear that since the inception of broadcasting and the personal vision of John Reith there has been an enormous power shift between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting. Each field has had to deal with its own internal struggles as well as the struggle between fields. The monopoly situation which existed in Reith's day enabled the close link between broadcasting and religion to flourish, as did the still relatively high standing of the Christian churches – at least in terms of being seen as a powerful part of the establishment, with its closeness to the monarchy. Whilst there were a few dissenting voices, some of which were found in the pages of *The Radio Times*, they were few and far between, and the popularity of religious broadcasting demonstrated that even though congregations might have been slowly dwindling, religious sensibility was not. The place of religion in programming was also protected – not just in religious broadcasting but also in fictional broadcasting. It was not to be attacked or mocked. The language of religion and the assumption that it was part of a shared habitus could also be seen in the pages of *The Listener* and *The Radio Times* up until the 1960s, where it was used without embarrassment. However, by that period the monopoly of the BBC had disappeared and the struggle between both fields intensified, with the broadcasters prioritising the audience as opposed to interested parties.

From the 1960s the position of religion was weakened. CRAC (and SRAC) had expanded to include other faiths which ought to have strengthened their position but in fact seemed to lead to a dilution of their powers leading to the suggestion, within the Christian church, that they only served as a rubber stamp for broadcasting decisions. Outwith religious broadcasting religion was no longer protected, as was seen in the satirical attacks by *TW3*. From that point

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<sup>21</sup> This is not to suggest that when religion and broadcasting were closely linked, and both were seen as integral parts of the establishment, that there was no disagreement. Only that it was easier to either support or object to something if the language of religion was seen as part of the 'taken for grantedness' of discourse. When there are a multiplicity of value-claims it is difficult to justify the rightness of one over others.

religion featured in sitcoms and stand-up comedy. Soaps also moved along in their portrayal of religious characters. Ena Sharples and Albert Tatlock (*Coronation Street*) were good Methodists, if slightly old-fashioned (although probably easily recognisable to viewers of the day), whose faith was part and parcel of their character. By the 1980s and 1990s religious characters had become oddities who either got involved in cults or were seen as fools by other characters, and the audience. As for non-Christian religions it was assumed that it had been covered if an 'ethnic' character had been included.

In drama the affectionate, insider's view of Judaism as seen in the plays of Jack Rosenthal gradually disappeared to be replaced by the lapsed Catholicism of Jimmy McGovern, which portrayed the Church as corrupt and hypocritical. Sitcoms have always had a place for religion (although like nearly everything else they have tended to be about Christianity). How much they have contributed to a negative or positive view of religion is open for debate – as can be seen in the audience chapter. Unlike the work of Jack Rosenthal or comedies like *Goodness Gracious Me*, written by members of particular religious and cultural communities, it is debatable how many of the sitcoms about religion (Christianity in particular) have been written by active Christians, as opposed to people who have been raised in a nominally Christian country. Although broadcasters are governed by either the ITC or BBC Producers' Guidelines, which make clear statements about being sensitive to religious sensibilities across all genres, it is clear that the importance of religion in broadcasting has declined. Whilst much is made of multi-culturalism the limited representation of other cultures and other faiths in fictional broadcasting is obvious (see Sreberny, 1999 for an in-depth examination of ethnic minorities in broadcasting). Absences are as significant as stereotypes. Although Reith was referring to Christianity and religious broadcasting when he spoke of 'a thoroughgoing, optimistic and manly religion' I would argue that so far as religion in fictional broadcasting is concerned, nowadays, it is seen as anything but. Whether this is a true reflection of society or whether it is the outcome of the struggle between religion and broadcasting will be addressed in the next chapter.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Focus group interviews**

In this chapter, I present the findings from the audience interview component of the research. I will start by outlining how the different groups were chosen followed by an explanation of the way in which the interviews were conducted. I will also address some of the problems that were encountered in the course of the interviews and their impact on the course of the research process. I will then discuss the findings as they relate to six key areas in the research question.

#### **Selection of Groups**

The main criteria for selection (religious/non-religious affiliation and geographical location) were discussed in the introductory chapter. In this selection I will elaborate on some of those choices. Religious affiliation was important for two reasons. Firstly, it was possible that people who were religiously affiliated might view media representations differently from people who were not. To have representatives of religious and non-religious people therefore would allow a comparison to be made. Secondly, within the religious grouping it was also important to have representatives of different faiths within Scotland. Again it was possible that different faiths might have different perspectives on representation. Geographical location also was important for two reasons. Firstly, it was possible that interviewees in rural and urban locations might have different perspectives not only of media representations but also on the way they perceived religion. Secondly, I wanted to produce a piece of work which would be more fairly representative of Scotland than if I had just focused on the Central Belt.

Finding a framework for group selection that would incorporate all regions of Scotland, urban and rural locations, and religious diversity was resolved by the decision to use the dioceses of the Scottish Episcopal Church. There are 7 dioceses, which would mean that I would have a total of 14 groups – on the basis that two groups (one religious and one non-religious) would be selected from each diocese<sup>1</sup>. Given the nature of the diocesan divisions there was the potential to select from urban and rural locations. There was also a perceived advantage, from my perspective, in that I had contacts in each of the dioceses and hoped that it might make the accessing of groups less problematic. This turned out to be less of an advantage than I had hoped for, which I will explain later in the chapter. How to decide which religious groups to include was not a straightforward matter. There are no current statistics on religious affiliation in Scotland. There are figures for ethnicity but these are not always relevant and neither are they necessarily accurate. Whilst this situation should change once the 2001 census data is made available the voluntary nature of the religion question might be problematic and more importantly I needed the data before the census took place. Finally, following discussions with a number of people who were either academics with an interest in religion or were senior clerics, I decided to include the following religions (with Christianity as the dominant religion in Scotland being broken down into 4 denominations): Christians (Church of Scotland, Scottish Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Pentecostals), Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs. How this worked out in reality will be addressed in the next paragraph. Non-religious groups were chosen on the basis that the group was not overtly religious. This led to the following groups being chosen: Rotary, Film Guild, Friendship Group, Drama Club, Schoolgirls, Book Club, and Housewives' Register. Again the reality of those choices will be discussed in the next paragraph.

Any researcher who decides that interviews are an essential research tool faces problems of access. So far as the religious groups were concerned I wanted to spread those groups across the 7 dioceses. Whilst I knew that I would find Christians in every diocese I was less certain about the other religions. At the same time I was aware that I was more likely to find Sikhs and Jews in either Edinburgh or Glasgow whereas Buddhists and Muslims were more likely to be more widely dispersed. To that end I searched the Internet and made enquiries amongst my contacts. As a result of this it was my intention to interview the following groups in the following dioceses: Jews in Glasgow and Galloway; Muslims

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<sup>1</sup> Dioceses of The Scottish Episcopal Church: Aberdeen and Orkney, Argyll and the Isles, St. Andrew's, Dunblane and Dunkeld, Brechin, Glasgow and Galloway, Edinburgh, and Moray, Ross and Caithness.



in Brechin; Buddhists in Moray, Ross and Caithness; Sikhs in Edinburgh; Church of Scotland in Argyll and the Isles; Roman Catholics in St. Andrew's, Dunkeld and Dunblane; Pentecostals in Aberdeen and Orkney. Episcopalians would be the pilot group and therefore included in the Edinburgh diocese. In order to avoid repetition of the dioceses suffice to say that it was my intention to find an appropriate non-religious group in the same location as the religious group.

### Problems

The problems I encountered in setting up the focus groups were unlikely to be unique to my experience. It was always essential to approach a member of the group (and it was the same for religious and non-religious groups), to explain the nature of my research and to request their group's assistance. This meant that I was dependent upon the gatekeeper's willingness and/or enthusiasm to approach the group. Whilst some gatekeepers were extremely helpful and very speedy in their actions there were a number who took months before they finally said that they couldn't help. This meant that some interviews had to be conducted wherever I could find a friendly gatekeeper. Despite repeated attempts to find a focus group (and being prepared to take it in whatever location I could find) the decision had to be taken, finally, to exclude Buddhists and Jews from the research. Whilst this was a source of regret so far as the audience interviews were concerned they were at least included in the individual, faith representative interviews. It is interesting to note that in the dioceses to which these two faiths had been allocated it was impossible to find a non-religious group that was willing to participate in the research. Accordingly, Glasgow and Galloway, and Moray, Ross and Caithness were excluded as locations.

Which interviews were conducted in which diocese can be seen from the list below:

Edinburgh	Roman Catholics
	Film Guild
	Muslims
	Sikhs
	Episcopalians
	Schoolgirls
	Friendship Group
Brechin	Muslims
	Women's/Church Group
Aberdeen & Orkney	Pentecostals

Argyll & The Isles

St Andrews, Dunkeld &

Dunblane

Rotarians

Church of Scotland

Book Club

Drama Group

Whilst there were similar problems with some of the non-religious groups there was another problem which couldn't have been anticipated. Whilst all of the groups were chosen on the basis that they were not overtly religious – group members met for a variety of reasons – nevertheless the reality was that every single group had at least one member who was actively religious. Whilst this seemed to be a problem initially, on reflection it was probably a reasonably accurate reflection of the communities where the interviews were conducted. It said something about the influences that would be brought to bear on interviewees in their daily lives and particularly in relation to the way they would view televisual representations of religion.

Whilst there was an attempt to ensure a representative distribution of groups there was an element of snowball sampling. My initial attempts to arrange a Muslim focus group in Brechin diocese (through a Muslim contact) were unsuccessful. Accordingly I wrote to two mosques in Dundee and one in Edinburgh. I received one invitation to Dundee and one to Edinburgh, which is why there were two Muslim groups. Similarly with the Sikhs there was an initial meeting followed by a meeting with the men from the temple and then they suggested a meeting with some of the younger temple members. There were three other practical problems. Two related to the conduct of the interviews and one related to the data analysis. The former was a problem of gate-keepers not explaining to group members what they were agreeing to, despite me sending out leaflets which explained exactly what was involved. This meant that the structure of the interview had to be altered in order that people didn't feel they had been misled whilst attempting to introduce the questions I wanted answers to. The second problem was purely practical. A friend lent me some recording equipment and undertook to transfer two interviews from mini-CD to audiocassette. Somehow one and a half tapes were lost and all I had were some very basic notes. The third problem was related to the location of the interviews and the varying size of the groups. Sometimes they took place in someone's home and sometimes in a church or temple hall. The latter location often meant that there was a lot of echoing on the tape, which made transcription more difficult. The size of the group also made transcription



difficult especially when there were more than 5 people. There were two interviews where I was only expecting about 4 people and the gatekeeper had asked extra people along at the last minute. For one group this meant there were 12 people present leading to people who were furthest away from the tape being very difficult to hear. This explains why some of the transcripts have unidentified members.

### Transcription

All of the interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed. Whilst the transcription did not utilise the methods of conversation analysis – showing how long pauses were and where conversations overlapped, for instance – conversations were transcribed as accurately as possible. No attempt was made to alter either the language used by interviewees or their syntax. When dialect words and phrases were used they were transcribed with the assistance of a Scots Language Dictionary. Whilst transcription is extremely time-consuming (a one hour interview taking an average of 7 hours to transcribe) there is the advantage of having access to any part of the interview at the turn of a page. It also meant that when the tapes were being analysed it was possible to use ‘Find’ and ‘Copy’ and ‘Paste’ in the word processing package to ensure that all relevant comments were included in the appropriate section. Interviews were also divided into religious and non-religious groups to make the identification of differences and similarities across the two groups easier.

### Structure of interviews

At the start of each interview I asked group members to fill in a short form (see Appendix 1) which provided demographic information<sup>2</sup> and I provided a checklist of programmes that they might watch. There was space for them to include any others that I had forgotten. Apart from the couple of groups where there was a misunderstanding about the purpose of the group all interviews began with a broadly similar question which was: “Out of all the programmes that you have circled on the form and anything else that you can think of as we go along, can you think of any characters who are supposed to be the religious ones?” On examination of the interviews it was clear that the programmes could be divided into four main genres: Soap Opera, Comedy, Drama and Science Fiction. Which programmes were mentioned and which genres they fell in to can be seen in the list below:

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<sup>2</sup> An accidental feature of the focus groups was the fact that apart from the Sikhs and the Muslims (who were mostly British Asians – some having emigrated here and others being born here) all of the groups were white. It was unintentional but perhaps says something about the distribution of different ethnic groups in Scotland. One of the Muslim women was white and had converted to Islam in her twenties.

### Soaps

Brookside, Coronation Street, Emmerdale, High Road, EastEnders, Hollyoaks, The Bill, Neighbours, Dawson's Creek

### Comedy

Vicar of Dibley, Father Ted, Only Fools & Horses, The Simpsons, Friends, Goodness Gracious Me, Bread, Last of the Summer Wine, Dad's Army, M.A.S.H., Sister, Sister, The Royle Family

### Drama

Perfect Strangers, Messiah, Holby City, Salaam Shalom, The Lakes, Morse, Love Hurts, A Taste for Blood, The Rector's Wife, Ballykissangel, The Love Divided, Buddha of Suburbia, BarMitzvah Boy, Peak Practice, Taggart, ER, Bad Girls

### Sci-Fi

Star Trek, Buffy, X-Files

By breaking down the above list into individual genres it can be seen which characters were mentioned in relation to which programme. I have described the characters as 'bearers of religiosity'. It is worth pointing out at this point that the inclusion of a programme does not necessarily mean that a religious figure was identified. This will be discussed in more detail later but suffice to say that some characters were mentioned because they either seemed to be spiritual or there was a feeling that some of the things they enjoyed doing could be interpreted as having religious sensibilities; but there was always debate within the group over these characters. It is also worth mentioning that some of the characters mentioned had not been in the programmes for 10 years or more. The characters and their programmes<sup>3</sup> are listed in the lists below:

### *Soaps*

Brookside: Cult Church; DeeDee; Sheila Grant; the Murrays – especially Anthony and his Grandmother. (Ch4)

Coronation Street: Asian family – Dev; Emily Bishop; Ena Sharples; Vicar; Ivy Brennan.

Emmerdale: Ashley, the vicar; Edna. (ITV)

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<sup>3</sup> Where possible I have identified the channel on which the programme was shown but this was not always possible.



High Road: Mrs Mac; the whole village; old priest; young priest. (STV)

EastEnders: Hindu family at very beginning of programme; Dot Cotton; Sarah; The Vicar;

Audrey – the Doctor's mother; Italian family; Dr. Legge. (BBC1)

Hollyoaks – Zara; Brian; Anna; Vicar. (Ch4)

The Bill: Sikh policeman. (ITV)

Neighbours: Harold Bishop; Mrs Mangle. (BBC1)

Dawson's Creek: Ty; Andy, Jen's Grandmother. (Ch 4)

### *Comedy*

Vicar of Dibley: the Vicar. (BBC1)

Father Ted: Father Ted; Father Jack; Father Dougal; Bishop; Irish Jig priest; Graham

Norton priest. (Ch4)

Only Fools and Horses: Dr Singh/ Dr Kapoor (might be same character). (BBC1)

The Simpsons: Ned Flanders; Reverend Lovejoy. (Ch4)

Friends: Phoebe (spiritual); Joey (Catholic family); Ross and Monica (Jewish). (Ch4)

Goodness Gracious Me: Different characters; Kapoor (Cooper) family. (BBC1)

Bread: the mother. (BBC)

Last of the Summer Wine: All characters talk about going to church. (BBC1)

Dad's Army: Vicar; Verger. (BBC)

M.A.S.H.: Father Mulcahey.

Sister, Sister: Twin sisters. (Nickelodeon)

The Royle Family: Child's christening. (BBC1)

### *Science Fiction*

Star Trek: Counsellor; Worf; Prophet Race. (BBC2)

Buffy: Willow; general sense of good and evil. (BBC2)

X-Files: Scully. (BBC1/2)

### *Drama<sup>4</sup>*

Perfect Strangers: Jewish family.

Messiah: Priest but general theme.

Holby City: female doctor.

Salaam, Shalom: mixed marriage.

The Lakes: Priest. (Ch4)

Love Hurts: female Rabbi.

A Taste for Blood: Priest.

The Rector's Wife: Rector; Wife.

Ballykissangel: Australian Priest; Old Priest; female shopkeeper. (BBC1)

The Love Divided: Bishop; Papal Legate.

Buddha of Suburbia: no characters.

BarMitzvah Boy: Jewish family.

Peak Practice: Dying Nun. (ITV)

Taggart: D I Jardine. (STV)

ER: Lukacs (Croatian doctor); The Bishop; Priests who appear briefly; Dr Green; Carole

Hathaway; her mother (Ch4)

Bad Girls: Crystal; Black minister. (ITV)

Having established whom they identified as religious characters interviewees were then asked to explain what it was about the character that enabled them to be identified thus. I have described this as 'the markers of religiosity'. Before I go on to an analysis of these markers I want to describe briefly what other key areas were addressed in the interviews. They will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter. There were six main areas although in some interviews two of them became subsumed into one. They were:

### Absences

This area was concerned with the things that were missing from the programmes they mentioned. Very occasionally a group member would comment on the fact that, for instance, all the characters they had referred to were Christian and they had not come up with any other faiths. More usually I had to prompt group members. However, it wasn't just about absence of other faiths. It could have been the absence of young people or an absence of variety in faith praxis.

### Moral and Ethical Issues

This area was concerned with the variety of issues that characters had to deal with in the programmes.

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<sup>4</sup> It is not possible to list characters for all of the programmes mentioned in this section because sometimes a general theme was remembered rather than specific characters.



### Guiding Principles

This area was concerned with the framework used by characters in guiding their decision-making. It was often subsumed, by interviewees, in to Moral and Ethical Issues. These two categories were often the most difficult for interviewees to deal with.

### Explanations

Interviewees were asked to provide explanations for why they thought religion was treated the way it was. This was the main area that could be compared with broadcasters' interviews.

### Fit

This area was concerned with how well the religious representations on television fitted with their own experience of religion. It was hoped that this area would highlight any differences between religious and non-religious groups.

### Unusual/Extraordinary

This area deals with the unexpected. Themes that weren't asked about directly but which interviewees raised in the course of discussion.

### **Bearers and markers of religiosity - soaps**

I now want to return to the descriptions of different characters and the markers of religiosity<sup>5</sup>. Dot Cotton was consistently identified as the religious character in *EastEnders*. Apart from one interviewee who liked her because she reminded her of her grandmother most interviewees saw her as a fairly negative character who didn't do religion any favours, even though she might be a good friend to some of the other characters. This is particularly interesting because in a radio interview shortly after taking up his new post, Alan Bookbinder<sup>6</sup>, Head of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC (a controversial appointment due to his being an agnostic) said that there was a lot of religion on television. Not just in religious broadcasting but in things like *EastEnders* and he cited Dot Cotton as an example. It was also interesting that he identified her as a Roman Catholic (although it is only fair to say that in our telephone interview he now identified her as an Anglican) whereas not one of my interviewees did – they all assumed she was Church of England

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<sup>5</sup> Because transcripts of all the interviews are included in Volume Two I am only going to provide quotes which illustrate comments about the most frequently mentioned characters (which also tend to be the ones that are currently on television) and which are illustrative of the main themes to emerge from the interviews.

(although there was one group who didn't seem to know anything about denominations outside Scotland and decided she was probably a Presbyterian). As for the other soaps the main characters identified were Emily Bishop in Coronation Street, wee Anthony and his grandmother in Brookside, Ashley the vicar and Edna in Emmerdale, Mrs Mac in High Road, Brian in Hollyoaks and Harold Bishop in Neighbours. It is worth mentioning that not everybody identified Emily Bishop as the religious character. Some groups saw her more as doing good works rather than being religiously motivated. Below are some of the comments made about these characters:

### Dot Cotton

D. She's the sort of religious fundamentalist isn't she? She quotes all the scriptures.

I. The Old Testament.

D. And of course they'd made her rather a strange character as well haven't they?

M. And of course she's older so she sticks to her guns all the time. (Edinburgh RC Women)

### Edna

T. There's a frightfully good pious woman who's not very nice... [She's elderly and single] and critical of everyone else. (Edinburgh Film Guild)

### Emily Bishop

E. Aye she's religious and she wouldnae

T. But again I do not think it's made known... it's made known that she's all out for this charity work... but I do not actually think it's foretold that she's actually religious or Christian or whatever. (Fraserburgh Pentecostals)

### Harold Bishop

2. Harold Bishop in Neighbours. I always remember him. I think because he always speaks about good Christian values and he always actually says that, you should have good Christian values and try to be a good Christian person. And I think some of the things he says are really good because it's like very good, modern day methods but like some traditional and very respectable. I like him. (Dundee Muslim women)

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<sup>6</sup> See transcripts/notes of individual interviews for details of a telephone interview with Alan Bookbinder about 4 months after he took up his post.



### Brian (Hollyoaks)

G. He didn't look it. Like going to church because he was like Goth and like you wouldn't expect somebody looking like that to go to church. But then he was talking to Zara about getting christened so like then you realise that he's a Christian or whatever, religious... it's not really the way he looked. It's just that the first time I saw him I didn't think he was religious... because he just talked about going to concerts and he used to be in a rock band. You wouldn't expect him to be religious or anything. (Edinburgh Sikh mixed group)

### Anthony and his grandmother – Brookside

L. And the little boy is funny because, I have seen that because he prays about absolutely everything doesn't he? And he worked out with money how many babies you could keep in Africa. (Dunblane Drama group)

M. Oh yeah the grandmother and Anthony are always going on about religion and her turmoil with her belief. Catholicism and then also her desire to help her daughter to have a baby and how it's not in God's way to artificially have a baby. They're always on about the son Anthony and his religion and how he loves going to Mass and how he loves doing whatever else connected with the church and how he's kind of the most religious boy they know. (Edinburgh Film Guild)

### High Road – Mrs Mac

2. Well I thought of Mrs Mac from Take the High Road... she's sort of odd. She wears odd hats and cleans the church hall and is just an odd, not odd, sort of caricature of a lady who goes to church... she's doing something with the hotel so she's moved away from being seen as a church person, so it's seen again as negatively, you become more whole the less churchy you are. And that seems to be the portrayal. (Oban Book Club)

It is clear from these representative quotations that there is a tendency for the lay, religious character(s) in soap operas to be older, single women who are not always very nice. I say tendency because three male characters were mentioned – Harold Bishop from Neighbours, Brian from Hollyoaks and Anthony from Brookside. Harold seemed to be the

only older character who was identified with practical Christianity. He was remembered as having been involved in a drugs project in the past and for his on-going work with the Salvation Army. The distinction between him just being a nice person, as opposed to being a nice person who was also religious, was highlighted by the following exchange:

I. Well Harold Bishop in Neighbours is always doing good deeds.

A. He never sees the bad side in any body.

I. No

A. He always says there is a good side in everybody.

*How clear is it though that that's to do with him having a faith? As opposed to just being a nice person. I suppose that's the kind of distinction that I'm looking for.*

I. I think because they're portrayed in equal quantities. You see as much of him being a member of the Salvation Army as you do of him doing good deeds so they run sort of parallel. Whereas somebody who's just a good person, that's what come across more than the religious side of things. Whereas in Harold Bishop the two run alike side-by-side.

(Dunblane Drama Group)

The comment about the two running alike, side by side illustrates the difference between the way Harold was seen and the difficulty that some people had with Emily Bishop from Coronation Street. Emily was identified as doing good works but when interviewees were pressed they struggled to come up with anything which clearly identified her as a religious person. This can be seen in the following comments:

2. I think perhaps we've fallen into the trap of thinking that because she does things like that she must be religious.

3. No I think there is more. I think there is. I'm sure she does go off to church... Oh well she does take a moral stand. She will actually fall out with people if she doesn't agree with what they're doing. She will say that she thinks things are wrong.

4. Yes she will do that.

3. She will do that. And I presume it's for a religious reason.

4. And I'm sure she says things like Christian charity.

(Oban Book Club)



Brian from Hollyoaks and Anthony from Brookside are much younger characters. Brian is about 15 or 16 and Anthony is about 10 or 11. Interestingly enough most people who mentioned Anthony assumed that he was much younger. It was a mistake I had made also and it was only after the interviews took place that Anthony's age became clearer because he moved up to senior school at the beginning of September. When Brian entered Hollyoaks and his Christianity was revealed I was extremely keen to interview people who watched Hollyoaks. None of the adult groups I had interviewed by that stage watched the programme so I approached the local secondary school to see if I could interview a group of adolescents who watched Hollyoaks. Following this interview it turned out that two other groups had members who also watched the programme.

Most people found Anthony to be a bit of a curiosity. I had thought that the Roman Catholic women might find him more recognisable but in fact they saw him as more representative of an earlier age. The Church of Scotland group were highly sceptical that a young boy would be as devout as Anthony, though they did accept that Roman Catholics did things very differently from the way they did. However one group member drew on her experience of working with children to make the following comment about Anthony (which also illustrates the misunderstanding over his age):

It's not normal. It's not normal. You do not get young kids of seven or eight talking about it. I mean I work with them every day and none of them speak about Jesus or God, you know. They do not.

(Oban Church of Scotland Group)

The non-religious groups who watched Brookside were less critical or less aware of the discrepancy between the religious praxis of a 'real' child and Anthony. What did interest them was the way Anthony's faith provided an interesting dimension to some of the storylines:

A. Yes, Anthony is quite interesting because of his guilt. I'm waiting to see what happens. I'm interested... Well they talk about him singing in the choir and being very interested. They talk a lot about him singing in the choir and being very interested. They talk about him being interested in religion, being very committed. Which seems very unusual in a little boy so I'm waiting to see what develops.

(Edinburgh Film Guild)

2. Yes he thinks that because he didn't want this other baby to come and replace him as the youngest and he prayed for it to die and she miscarried, it's all his fault sort of thing. So that was quite well dealt with I think...

(Oban Book Club)

Although A. does say that it seems unusual in a little boy she is less dogmatic than either of the religious groups on the likelihood that you would get this kind of behaviour. It seems that the religious groups have experience of children who attend church as well as experience of children outwith church. Both of which are brought to bear in their assessment of the representativeness of Anthony's behaviour. For the non-religious groups their experience is confined to children outwith the church and therefore seem more willing to accept Anthony as an interesting character but they can not make any kind of experiential judgement about his religious behaviour.

Brian from Hollyoaks is almost more unusual than Anthony in that teenagers with a religious faith rarely feature in soap operas. There had been a teenage girl in EastEnders approximately 5 years ago, but she was no longer in the programme, and her portrayal had been very different from Brian's portrayal. Despite her age, the way she was described by interviewees fitted more neatly with the description of the older woman. Brian was introduced to the programme as the boyfriend of Zara who was an extremely rebellious and fairly unlikeable teenager. He was a Goth and played in a band but the twist was that he was a Christian. Despite his external appearance (which clearly upset Zara's parents initially) he was unlikely to get their daughter into trouble, especially as he was a virgin and resisted Zara's attempts to seduce him. As one of the interviewees said:

D. He was brought in as a danger, wasn't he? ...he was brought in as in, he could make Zara do wild things and the kind of flip was no, no, it's Zara that's wild and out of control and she wanted to sleep with him and he said no. And I think that's how they found out, they found out that he was a Christian. And now he's kind of, I do not think he is a joke now. I just think he's the kind of boy that if you were a parent you'd like your daughter to bring him home because he seems to have quite strong moral values... he's not this weak man of God or he's not the other way...

(Edinburgh Film Guild)



The Schoolgirls and some of the Sikh girls made the point that he didn't look like a Christian. The schoolgirls also said that they had not expected that Brian's refusal to have sex with Zara would be based on religious beliefs. They had assumed that he was either scared or respected the law regarding under-age sex. Nevertheless the main assumptions about Brian were based on his physical appearance:

E. [when he first appeared] I didn't think he was religious. He didn't appear to be.

R. Rocky, rebellious... I think we were meant to find him attractive but

*...He's not your cup of tea?...*

E. No

R. It was quite bizarre but the way he deals with it is quite unique, the way he sought to treat his religion. But I didn't think he, I had no idea

E. I had no idea he was going to be a big Christian.

(Trinity Schoolgirls)

G. He didn't look it. Like going to church because he was like Goth and like you wouldn't expect somebody looking like that to go to church... it's not really the way he looked. It's just that the first time I saw him I didn't think he was religious.

(Edinburgh Sikh mixed group)

Even though G. later denied that Brian's appearance affected her judgement it seemed clear that it did. However what was definitely clear was that a set of assumptions were being brought to bear in the way they decoded Brian's behaviour. When they were questioned further about how they would expect a Christian to behave it seemed that they were keen to present themselves as non-judgemental and yet everything they said, in terms of the unexpectedness of Brian's Christianity, indicated that they were making judgements based on a perception of Christian homogeneity in the real world. Whilst referring to two other Christian characters the Schoolgirls made passing reference to what Christians believe. One referred to an incident with Dot Cotton and the other was about the grandmother in Dawson's Creek:

E. I don't know if Ethel was religious because like if, to do that they believe that you won't go to heaven because it gets in the way of God's hand... for Dot to do that it was going against her religion and she did feel guilty.

E. But Christians are supposed to be against gays and she was never like... so she was never against Jack because he was gay. And that's like a lot of Christians are, they think it's wrong.

(Trinity Schoolgirls)

In terms of Christian attitudes it is possible that this girl was influenced by her experience of family members who were very strict Christians because, following the last quotation, the other girls made the point that some non-Christians were anti-gays. That particular experience notwithstanding, judgements about the way Christians looked were made on the basis of appearance and some undefined expectation they had – which seemed to be partly based on their lack of exposure to and awareness of Christians of their own age, and any knowledge that Christian teenagers are as varied in their dress as non-Christian teenagers. Their main exposure to Christianity seemed to come through the media or in some limited way through their education. So far as media Christianity was concerned there were very limited representations of teenage Christians. Before the appearance of Brian they seemed to be very ordinary teenagers who had been sucked in to a cult, this usually made them appear fanatical in their behaviour but did not alter their sense of dress. Zara and Anna were the only two younger female characters to be mentioned. However Zara was more usually mentioned for being a revolting teenager and Anna for being the daughter of a vicar who was more remarkable for 'being a bit square but not religious'.

All of the characters so far have been members of the laity. Currently, apart from Ashley the Vicar in Emmerdale, none of the soaps have a vicar who is a regular character. Only one interviewee mentioned the vicar in Hollyoaks, although it was to say that he seemed to be a very positive character. Ashley was the one character who seemed to create the most diverse responses. What was interesting about this diversity of response is that the split was not between religious and non-religious groups but amongst all of the groups as can be seen from the quotations below:

He's all right.

Yes he's quite normal isn't he?

He's a bit, if necessary, a bit wishy-washy.

... I find he's very like the younger minister that you get. He's more pastoral and he's easy to talk to... (Oban CoS group)



A. Same with Ashley in Emmerdale though [leading an immoral life]. When you think about it.

T. Oh aye. I mean he was living in sin before he was married and sort of things wasn't he?

A. That's right.

T. I think he's a bit of a wimp.

M. Aye he is

A. Aye but he's lashed out

T. Oh aye, like he's been violent as well, he's been violent... then regretted it about 10 minutes after he did it but definitely a very violent man. I think as a character he wants to be friends with everybody in general... he just wants an easy life basically (Fraserburgh Pentecostals)

There is only explicit religious talk from the vicar when he is talking about changing jobs. On reflection he does do pastoral care well. He reflects the changing style of the clergy. However he's been living with his fiancée and they said he wasn't practising what he preached although there was no evidence to suggest that he'd ever preached against sex before marriage. They referred to a discussion he had with a young girl considering having sex and initially it was seen as an example of his hypocrisy but after discussion they agreed that he wasn't saying no to sex but only to caution her because of her age and for her not to feel pressurised if she wasn't ready.

(Edinburgh friendship group)<sup>7</sup>

4. I mean I would see him as a wimp... there didn't seem anything special about his relationship with Bernice. They were sleeping together and not wanting the village to know about. That's not my idea of a vicar you know.

3. It wasn't. Not honest that. (Oban Book Club)

Whilst a couple of the groups felt that he was a reasonably accurate reflection of ministers nowadays there were very mixed reactions regarding the pre-marital sex. What is interesting about this is that he was initially accused of preaching one thing and doing another. However when groups were pressed on this point it became very clear that there

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<sup>7</sup> I had taken extensive notes of this interview prior to transcription. However another interview came up at short notice and I had to reuse the tape because I didn't have any unused ones in the house. Hence the unusual format.

was no evidence to support this view. It seemed to be the case that he was being judged on the basis of what they would expect a minister to do in real life. This view is borne out by a comment from one of the Pentecostals following an attempt to clarify exactly what Ashley had said:

A. I haven't watched this but if he was doing that then I would think that would be, he would still be a hypocrite in my eyes.

This diversity of view is also very apparent when it comes to comments about The Vicar of Dibley, which will be addressed in the section on comedy.

It will be obvious by now that every single character mentioned so far has been a Christian. It was only when interviewees were pressed about representatives of other faiths that a handful of characters were mentioned. What became clear was that, particularly for white interviewees, there was an assumption that if a character was Asian they were also religious, even if there was no evidence to support this assumption. Audiences who were long term viewers of EastEnders remembered an Asian family right at the start of the programme but the only group to identify them religiously was the Sikhs. However their view was that most westerners would see an Asian family and just assume that they were religious:

J. The Hindu family at the beginning when EastEnders started off. That's going back some time. It portrayed obviously an Asian family. Now being from the sub continent whatever, they portrayed them as being a religious type so the general public will assume that because they're Asian they will be more religious than a western cultured people.

Every time I asked groups if they could think of any non-Christian characters, after struggling to remember any, they always remembered Asian characters. It was only when they were pressed to say if they were Asian or religious that everybody agreed that they were in there as an Asian rather than as a religious character. Dev from Coronation Street was another character who was identified as being religious. Again it was only the Sikhs and the Muslims who identified him as a Hindu but not as a particularly religious Hindu because he was seen as very westernised. Only two white groups mentioned Dev. One group felt he was really in the programme as an Asian because there was no mention of his



religion. In the other group one member assumed that because he was Asian he must be a Muslim; despite the fact that she had seen him drinking alcohol. Other group members corrected her but again, nobody could identify any markers of religiosity.

The Sikhs were also the only group to identify a Sikh policeman in The Bill but again this seemed to be more to do with his name and racial characteristics rather than any obvious signs of religiosity. What was interesting about this discussion was the fact that the group agreed that he could be a Sikh even if he didn't wear a turban and had cut his hair. The two things he couldn't do though, if he was a practising Sikh, were to eat beef and smoke cigarettes. However they concluded the discussion with the following comments:

W. Well he may be, it's the person themselves, how he's interpreted what he should be doing but we obviously do not want that image projected to the wider community. Whatever someone does outside in their personal life is their own business, whether it's in his home or in his business.

J. But if he's on television portraying the Sikh as a religious character then that image is going out to quite a majority of the population and it's giving the wrong image regarding this.

(Edinburgh Sikh mixed group)

There was obviously a tension between the ways Sikhism is practised and their desire for a more obvious presence within the media. It was difficult for much more to be said about this character as he had only been introduced to the programme a week before this interview. There was only one other group, following the Sikh interview, who watched The Bill and they only commented on him after I said there was supposed to be a Sikh policeman. Their impression was that he was no longer a practising Sikh:

D. Yes that's right. There's one of them is a Sikh.

*How do you know he's a Sikh?*

D. I think somebody asked him.

I. He said, where's your turban?

M. There's reference made.

D. But I do not think he's practising religiously either, you get that feeling.

I. He shrugs it off. He said like he threw it away or something

*Oh really?*

I. As if he threw the religion away.

M. Yes

I. So that's what he meant. And he's divorced. Well he said to somebody he's divorced.

M. I didn't hear that bit.

(Edinburgh Roman Catholic women)

I was told by one of the faith representatives that there was a Jewish policeman in *The Bill* and that he had gone to visit his mother in one episode, who was portrayed as a stereotypical Jewish mother. However none of the interviewees from the groups had noticed a Jewish policeman and even when I described an episode where he was making connections amongst the activities of a far right, racist group and the holocaust and his growing awareness of his Jewish background nobody remembered it. The only other Jewish character to be mentioned, and he has long since disappeared from the programme, was Dr Legge from *EastEnders*. Because it is so long since he has been in the programme interviewees had difficulty in remembering why they thought he was Jewish (it is only fair to say that only two groups remembered him):

A. Remember there was a Jewish character in *EastEnders*?

T. The doctor. Wasn't he Jewish? Dr Legge.

M. Aye he was

A. Oh no, I dinnae ken

E. Aye he was

T. He was Jewish

*How do you know he was Jewish?*

T. I do believe, there was, it was mentioned... There was something. I've got this image in my head. I know I can actually, funnily enough; I can actually see this guy standing there.

A. Did his loon no bide in Israel or no and he came ower?

T. That, that's it.... I think just his portrayal of the character as Jewish though.

There was something Jewish about him. Not as in tight-fisted.

(Fraserburgh Pentecostalists)



Interestingly he was one of the characters that Alan Bookbinder mentioned as being an example of religion in soap operas. Nevertheless it was some years ago and it was evident that interviewees were really struggling to identify non-Christian bearers of religiosity.

To conclude this section on soap operas it can be seen that the majority of characters were members of the laity. Clergy tended to be brought in for 'hatching, matching and dispatching' purposes with the exception of Ashley in Emmerdale. The recurring markers of religiosity were older, single, eccentric, bible quoting and female with one or two exceptions. It was also clear that characters that did not fit this mould were less easily identified as Christians, Brian from Hollyoaks being the most notable example. It is also quite clear that when religion is included it is predominantly Christianity. Non-Sikhs and non-Muslims consistently confused being Asian with being religious, and the religion most frequently connected with Asians was Islam. The consistency with which this happened would suggest that it was a doxa. This is particularly noticeable when it comes to the Explanations section. So far as differences between religious and non-religious groups there was a slight tendency for the religious groups to be more tolerant of some of the female characters. This was usually expressed as them 'having a heart of gold' even if it was not always obvious. However for the rest of the time differences were spread across the groups. Overall there were more similarities amongst all of the groups regarding whom they identified as bearers of religiosity and what the markers of religiosity were. There was a fairly widespread view that religion in soaps was usually presented in a negative way and that a religious character was seen as becoming 'healthier' the further they distanced themselves from their faith. In the next section I want to look at religious characters in comedy.

### **Bearers and markers of religiosity - Comedy**

Disagreements about The Vicar of Dibley can be divided into two categories. The first was a criticism of the programme at an aesthetic and humorous level. The second was a criticism of her behaviour as a vicar. For some interviewees they did not enjoy the programme because they felt that it relied on stereotypes and clichés that meant it did not appeal to their sense of humour. The second criticism however is the one most pertinent to the research. Again differences were spread across the groups rather than being a straightforward division between religious and non-religious groups. However the severest criticism of her behaviour came, again, from the Pentecostals, who had been very critical of Ashley, the vicar in Emmerdale:

T. ... But then again you've also got things like that Vicar of Dibley as well. And that just takes the mick out of

A. And I think that she leads a pretty immoral life.

T. Definitely.

A. Almost blasphemous I would say.

J. Never seen it.

T. It can be funny.

T. It takes the Mickey out

A. But I think it puts the wrong image of Christianity

E. Aye

*Can you explain that, what it is wrong about the image it puts across?*

A. Well if she fancies a feller she'll sleep with him. She over imbibes.

T. But then again you've got

A. she swears

M. It's a bit like Father Ted

A. Aye there's swearing and things

A. It shouldnae be

Just after this exchange T. described a scene from the programme which he felt gave a very positive religious message and said that if you concentrated on those ten minutes you'd get something good. However, as can be seen from the following exchange even this was seen as problematic:

T. And things like that so they do try to mix the both, the actual with the fictional

J. To my mind that's more corrupting. I can't speak because I haven't seen it but the way you describe it, it is. Because if it is just done for a laugh that's fine but if there's a sub message that's ridiculous.

Members of this group did disagree with each other but, unlike other religious groups, if the disagreement related to an issue of faith praxis (as in the example above) the 'orthodox' view was incorporated. For instance they would distance themselves from the programme by condemning its morals but then excuse their own viewing behaviour on the basis that it was just a laugh. The presentation of themselves to each other as



Pentecostals, who differed from other Christian denominations by being 'real' Christians, was extremely important. There were obviously certain issues which everyone 'knew' they had to disapprove of e.g. pre-marital sex, homosexual sex, swearing<sup>8</sup> and drunkenness. At the same time there was a fair degree of pragmatism when it came to watching programmes containing these issues. Most of them had access to GodDigital (a satellite television channel) and they spoke very highly of the moral content of the programmes and how they were far more edifying. Nevertheless they continued to watch the programmes on terrestrial which they criticised for being unedifying. What I seemed to be observing was the continual reinforcement of group norms and the tension that arose between their belief that the norms were right and their difficulty internalising them.

All of the other groups saw *The Vicar of Dibley* as a very positive representation of a priest. Although it was a comedy programme nobody felt that it mocked religion and nobody felt that it mocked the clergy, although one Episcopalian said she knew people who wouldn't watch it because they thought it was sacrilegious. The vicar was seen as being representative of a younger generation of clergy who also had a life outside of the church. This was particularly pertinent for religious interviewees. She was compared favourably to real life clergy. One group felt that more of this kind of representation would actually encourage people to come to church. She was also mentioned as being the only Christian character who had any spirituality, which was seen as a marker of real Christianity, rather than bible-quoting which was a marker of televisual Christianity. Whilst other groups commented on the positive aspects of *The Vicar of Dibley* it was only the religious groups who made reference to real life clergy in their assessment of her.

Ned Flanders and the Reverend Lovejoy in *The Simpsons* were the two religious characters mentioned by most people who watched *The Simpsons*. Again the consensus was that they were stereotypes whose idiosyncrasies were exaggerated in order to extract the maximum amount of humour. In view of the publication of 'The Gospel According to *The Simpsons*: The spiritual life of the world's most animated family', it was interesting that the only person to comment on the number of religious episodes in *The Simpsons* was

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<sup>8</sup> After the interview a friend who had driven me to Fraserburgh told me that one of the group members came down the stairs and saw some youngsters, with whom she obviously had problems, and told them to "Fuck Off". I found this extremely interesting because in the interview she had been as condemnatory of swearing as everyone else in the group!

an atheist. The two religious<sup>9</sup> groups that watched *The Simpsons* saw him as a ridiculous character and not reflecting at all well on Christianity:

G. Oh yes, he's the epitome of bad religion if I remember rightly. Everything that's awful.

(Arbroath mixed group)

T. He's a wimp... his religion to him is the be-all and end-all of everything, of life. And basically I think the way he's portrayed is just as I said, as a wimp. I think he's too soft as a character. He doesn't challenge nothing or anything. You know, he's got his life and it's his life and round about him I think anything could break loose and he's not really bothered.

(Fraserburgh Pentecostals)

The consensus with Father Ted was that it wasn't at all religious and the characters were only identified as religious because they were priests. The only real difference to emerge amongst the groups was that some saw it as satirical because it took well known priestly weaknesses and really exaggerated them, whereas others thought there was no basis in reality and that was why it was so funny. One group member, who was Irish, saw it as part of the weakening grip that the Roman Catholic Church had on the Irish. However, nobody saw it as an attack on religion whether they were part of a religious group or not.

Interestingly though the schoolgirls spoke of people they knew who disapproved of it:

R. People say that you know how the main character Dermot Morgan died, people say that was because he was disrespecting.

E. Yeah because my auntie and uncle will not let my cousins watch it [they are a very religious family]

R. I've heard a few, I have heard that a few times.

E. They think it just makes a mockery out of their religion so they will not let anyone, well they don't let my cousins watch it. (Edinburgh Schoolgirls)

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<sup>9</sup> The Arbroath group was a problem so far as membership was concerned. I had gone there expecting to interview members of a National Housewives Register, which is not an overtly religious group. However my gatekeeper, who is a priest, had worried that not enough people would turn up so had invited a number of her congregation to join us. This meant that Christians substantially outnumbered potential non-Christians. When I include it as a religious group I do so because I know it is Christians that I'm quoting.



Apart from a couple of people who just didn't enjoy the style of humour the only other group to express any kind of religious sensibility was the Pentecostals but even then their enjoyment of the humour over rode their reservations:

M. But it's like Father Ted. I really like that but yet if I was to look in to the beliefs that believe in I shouldnae be watching Father Ted. But I like it. It's a laugh.

(Fraserburgh Pentecostals)

Bread, Last of the Summer Wine, Dad's Army, M.A.S.H., The Royle Family and Only Fools & Horses were only mentioned by one group each and there was very little said about them. Last of the Summer Wine was included because all the characters at different times talked about going to church. There had also been an episode that dealt with the funeral of one of the characters which was described as very moving. Again it was felt to be more typical of a previous age. Bread was remembered for having a Catholic family but because it was so long since it had been on television there was little to be said about it. Dad's Army has a vicar and a verger both of whom were described as being very unattractive characters. However given the historical setting of the programme this wasn't perceived as being particularly unrealistic. The Royle Family was included for its avoidance of religion – specifically an episode when the baby was christened but the ceremony was not included and the focus appeared to be on the preparations and the party afterwards. M.A.S.H., which hasn't been on television for many years, was remembered with great affection for the character of Father Mulcahey. He was seen as an example of practical Christianity because he would often help out in the operating theatre. Only Fools and Horses was mentioned by the Sikhs because there had been an episode when a Sikh doctor bought a crash helmet from Del Trotter. It perhaps reinforces the absence of Sikhs when this was the first Sikh character they could think of and it had been on many years ago. Two different names were given but the story that was described seemed to be the same so I concluded that the name had been remembered incorrectly.

Friends was mentioned by three groups. This was mainly due to Phoebe who was seen as having spiritual beliefs as opposed to religious beliefs. None of the others were identified as being religious. However, when I said that I had been told that Ross and Monica were Jewish everyone agreed that this was the case. One group said it was because they had heard Phoebe singing 'Happy Hanukkah to Monica' and another group said that Monica only ate Kosher meat. This same group said that by the law of averages there was bound to

be somebody religious in that friendship group. This tied in with earlier comments they had made regarding the non-representativeness of televisual religion.

Goodness Gracious Me was, without fail, the first programme that was mentioned when I asked if interviewees could think of any programmes that had people of non-Christian faiths. I was unsure about including Goodness Gracious Me because it is a series of sketches, but because it was mentioned in every group it seemed unreasonable to exclude it. Its inclusion is interesting because many people didn't understand where the humour was coming from even though they found it funny. They knew it was poking fun at religious and cultural practices but they found it almost impossible to distinguish between the two or to be certain which religion they were poking fun at (although those who had an idea usually settled for either just Islam or Islam and Hinduism – the former because of the doxa that Asians are Muslims). Whilst I considered myself to be well informed about Islam and Hinduism it wasn't until I spoke to the Sikhs that I discovered that Sikhism was also the butt of their jokes and it is worth noting that not one person mentioned Sikhism as possibly being included. The Episcopalians I spoke to objected to one of the sketches where an aspirational family called the Kupars (but prefer Coopers as a pronunciation) went to a Christian church and a humorous point was made out of the Eucharist. This was a mockery too far as it touched on a really fundamental part of their belief. One of the Sikh men mentioned this:

It's like the Kupars that want to be the Coopers... they also had a go at the Christian faith also. I thought that was, I got offended to that like. How they went into the church and they were given, going through the whole ceremony and that right. I thought that was maybe over the top but then you say well, ok, they are having a go at everyone. (Edinburgh Sikh Men)

The final programme I want to discuss is Sister, Sister. Although it is shown on satellite television I am including it because it was spoken about extremely enthusiastically by one of the Fraserburgh group. It turned out that the Muslim women from Edinburgh also watched the programme, which provided a comparison. The programme is an American youth comedy based around black, twin sisters. It made a big impact on M. in the Fraserburgh group:



M. They do really emphasise the Church and Jesus and I think that's another thing. They're always mentioning Jesus. And I think that's another thing. Even like Dot and that you never hear them mention Jesus do you? Sister, Sister always mentions that Jesus is the most important thing in their life. But yet they do not, you see all these Christian festivals happening and them at it and you see them haein the time of their lives without drink, drugs, under-age sex or anything being portrayed as Sister, Sister. Ken you see them as young teenagers having a great time and they are Christians.

For M. there were clear markers of Christianity most notably the fact that they talked about Jesus, which is one of the markers of Pentecostal Christians in real life. When it comes to the section on Fit this is the programme that M. refers to, in that she hopes that this is the type of Christianity that she portrays. However, when this programme was discussed with the Muslim women they were unaware of the markers which seemed so obvious to M. They agreed that the girls were Christians because you saw them in church but they saw that as a vehicle which allowed the girls to show off their singing abilities. As one of the women said:

A. They don't bring too much about their religion in. It's just the songs every now and then.

Following the Fraserburgh interview I questioned my daughter about the programme, which I knew she had seen occasionally, and her reaction was the same as the Muslim women – it wasn't obviously Christian. The church singing was just a vehicle for their voices. On the basis of such a small sample it is difficult to make a definitive statement but it does seem to fit in with work referred to in the introductory chapter – finding examples of Christian behaviour in television programmes that only Christians would identify.

To conclude this section, it seems clear that within the comedy programmes raised in the interviews, Christianity dominates comedy in the same way that it dominates soap operas. There were few differences between the religious and non-religious groups. As with soap operas the religious groups brought their knowledge of their religion to bear when assessing the quality of the representation. The Eucharist sketch in Goodness Gracious Me was the only event that caused deep offence to a religious group. Concerns about the personal morality of The Vicar of Dibley were only expressed by the Pentecostals. The

rest of the groups discounted any sexual misbehaviour because of the holistic way in which her faith was expressed. It was however the one area where people expressed concerns on behalf of others. Roman Catholics thought Anglicans might be upset by The Vicar of Dibley. Anglicans and atheists thought Roman Catholics might be upset by Father Ted. All of the non-Muslim and non-Sikh groups thought that these groups would be upset by any humour which drew on these faiths, which wasn't produced by members of their communities. In the next section I will discuss the way religion is represented in drama.

### **Bearers and markers of religiosity - Drama**

When it came to drama there were only a few programmes that more than one group mentioned. Much of the drama that was mentioned was plays that had been on many years ago. The Buddha of Suburbia for instance was mentioned by a number of groups but following discussion it always seemed to have been remembered for the word 'Buddha' rather than for actually having any religious content. Drama did however seem to be the one area where Jews were more likely to appear – usually in one-off plays or short serials. However the most recent example, Perfect Strangers, which was supposed to be about a Jewish family was mentioned for the fact that there was nothing overtly Jewish about them. It was also the area where Muslims were most likely to have been remembered, usually in relation to arranged marriages or mixed marriages that had gone wrong although Salaam, Shalom (which seemed to have been shown quite a few years ago) was actually the only title that was remembered (apart from Death of a Princess which was more like a docu-drama). The four most frequently mentioned programmes that were current at the time of the interviews were Bad Girls, Taggart, E R and Ballykissangel. Apart from one episode in ER when somebody remembered Dr Green being invited to join in a Jewish ceremony which made them think he might just be Jewish all of the religion referred to in all of the programmes was Christian. In Bad Girls there was a prisoner, Crystal, who was described as a fairly stereotypical television Christian:

E. She's really Christian. She's really into God and things...

R. Because she doesn't believe in pre-marital sex or anything...

E. At first she wasn't accepted at all. She was the big Christian and she used to sit with a guitar and sing gospel songs but now she's accepted but she still believes in

J. Yeah she never really accepted anyone else either



E. She thought they would all, she kept on telling them they'd sinned and they were all wrong to be in there. But then she was a bit of a hypocrite because so was she.  
(Edinburgh Schoolgirls)

She quoted the Bible, disapproved of lesbian relationships and was extremely judgmental. In fact there are similarities with the way characters were portrayed in soap operas. The Schoolgirls also said that recently her religion was mentioned only when her character was central to the story line. Which would suggest that her religion was included less to make her a more complex character than to provide a trait, which could be used, for dramatic effect.

D.I. Jardine in Taggart was mentioned by everyone as being a religious character. Whilst some people felt that his faith had toned down recently he was still seen as being someone of faith. He was identified as Church of Scotland because he was teetotal.<sup>10</sup> Taggart was also mentioned by the Sikh men for having had a Sikh actor in it though he didn't actually play a Sikh character. This was a point that will be discussed more fully in the Absences section.

ER was mostly mentioned due to a recent storyline where the Croatian doctor was looking after a dying Bishop. Lukas had lost his faith but over time the Bishop enabled him to rediscover it. Everyone who had seen this particular story commented on how well it was done:

D. That was quite nice because he had lost his faith because his wife and his children had been killed. It was the Bishop that brought him back and I thought that was very well done... I thought the language there was very good. The dialogue was good. (Edinburgh RC women)

There were some references to clergy who had made very brief appearances, either for christenings or weddings, but as with all medical dramas the absence of a chaplain was noted; as was the absence of any medical staff who seemed to have a faith, which did not

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<sup>10</sup> This is an amusing aside given that everyone was adamant that Jardine was a Christian. When I interviewed the current producer of Taggart I asked him why Jardine was a Christian and he said, is he? Apparently Taggart doesn't keep a biography of each character. When a new producer takes over they watch the previous 6 or 8 episodes and take it from there. Obviously at some point Jardine's Christianity had been allowed to lapse hence its absence, yet long-term viewers continued to interpret his actions in the light of his Church of Scotland Christianity!

fit with people's experience of the medical profession. Again, this is something that will be discussed more fully in the Absences section. There was a feeling that Dr Green might be Jewish based on a very brief storyline and that Carole Hathaway might have been Catholic, although this seemed to be based on the fact that her mother was shown as having a faith. However nobody knew what faith it was.

Ballykissangel, which is set in rural Ireland and revolves around the village priests, was seen as a positive representation for the most part. There was a woman character in the programme who all agreed fitted the stereotype of being an older, single, interfering woman. Her alliance with the older priest fitted with what the Roman Catholic women called 'Pre-Vatican Two' Catholics. Although some reservations were expressed about the way temptation for the younger priests was always included the portrayal of them was seen as very positive. Their failings were dealt with sensitively. One of the Fraserburgh interviewees who had been quite condemnatory of The Vicar of Dibley commented:

A. The original one, like he packed in the priesthood because he'd fallen in love with this girl. But I thought he came across as quite a strong character and I thought it, it was a Roman Catholic of course, but it presented it in a more positive image of it.

Having said that there was one group where members drew on their own experiences of Roman Catholic priests, although they were not Roman Catholics themselves, to deny the representativeness of the younger priests. They saw them as being far too human and not cruel or didactic enough.

In conclusion, from the programmes mentioned by interviewees, it can be seen that yet again Christianity dominates drama. However it was rarely shown as something positive. It was agreed that all of the examples of Roman Catholic and Anglican clergy, which they could think of, nearly always showed them as being weak people who succumbed to temptation. Or they were bullying and insensitive to the needs of other characters. Jews were remembered for having been in dramas (usually in plays or short serials) but nobody could remember anything that had been shown in the past five years. Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and Hindus were, yet again, noticeable for their absence, although there was a feeling that Muslims had been in some dramas which focussed on unhappy arranged marriages or mixed marriages. Again there was no difference between religious and non-



religious groups in the way they responded to the different representations. Both groups agreed on the limited ways in which religious characters were shown.

### **Bearerers and markers of religiosity - Science Fiction.**

Most of the characters mentioned in this genre came from a small number of interviewees and were usually included based on quite flimsy evidence. Accordingly I have given it only a limited amount of attention. Scully, from the X-Files, was thought to be a Christian because she wore a crucifix, not because of anything in her behaviour. Buffy the Vampire Slayer was seen to have elements of Christianity in it – notably using crosses to ward off vampires. One of the characters, Willow, was mentioned because of her pagan beliefs and her induction into witchcraft<sup>11</sup>. Star Trek was seen as being very spiritual by the three fans who raised it (from three different groups). One of them argued that the spirituality of one character was treated far more seriously than Christianity ever was – a point to which I will return in a later section. In conclusion there were only three science fiction programmes mentioned but it was clear that apart from the spirituality of the Star Trek character there was little evidence to support identifying the others as religious. In the next section I want to look at the Absences which were discussed within the groups.

### **Absences**

The main difference to emerge between the religious and non-religious groups was that the religious groups were more aware of absences in relation to attendance at Christian churches and variety of worship. The relative paucity of non-Christian faiths was commented on by all groups but specific absences were only commented on by the Sikh and Muslim groups. This seemed to be due to a fairly widespread ignorance amongst the other groups of what was involved in Sikhism and Islam, and how they might prefer to be seen. What was interesting across the groups was the way only two groups noticed for themselves that all the characters they had referred to so far had been Christian. For the rest of the groups it took quite a bit of prompting to get them to think about other faiths. On a few occasions other faiths were confused with different Christian denominations. The following extract is a good illustration of this:

Asked about other religions and an Asian comedy was mentioned but no one could identify it but assumption was made that Asian equalled Muslim. Then discussed

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<sup>11</sup> In a previous research project (Tomkinson, 1996) this programme was mentioned by one teenager because there was a techno-pagan who provided her with a role model for her own pagan beliefs.

Father Ted so had to say that wasn't another religion but still Christian. The following question was asked by one of the group: "What about Jewish, does that pass as Christian?" I have to list other faiths. Ned Flanders referred to and have to point out it's still Christianity. Decide there aren't any other faiths even when they think about plays and serials they watch.

(Edinburgh Friendship Group)

What was particularly disturbing about the Jewish question is that that particular respondent was a regular churchgoer, often attending twice on Sundays. I will return to the discussion of non-Christian faiths shortly. I want to begin this section by looking at the absences in relation to Christianity.

### Christianity

There were two main areas in absences relating to Christianity. The first relates to how realistic portrayals of church attendance were. The second relates to the practice of Christianity on television compared to real life Christianity. The absence of families who attend church was one of the most obvious absences. Religious groups, drawing on their own experience of church attendance, knew that families attended church but this was hardly ever shown. The only programme that was mentioned as showing a whole community attending church was High Road but it was agreed that this was really unusual. Having said that they did comment on the absence of a minister in the programme which was seen as extremely unlikely given the location of the programme. The absence of young children and adolescents was also commented on. Whilst Christian religious group members accepted that there weren't many young people in churches nowadays nevertheless they did exist, and in greater numbers than televisual representations would suggest. The Sikh group had also noticed the absence of younger characters who didn't fit into the stereotype of being older and strait-laced. It was also remarked that you rarely saw people going to church, and there was an absence of Salvation Army bands, especially at Christmas.

The second area was the one that gave the most cause for concern amongst all of the religious groups. There was a consistent feeling that there was an absence of well-rounded human beings who happened to have a faith. For Christians in particular there was a concern that television Christians were often set up as hypocrites who liked to tell other people what to do all of the time. There was no awareness that Christians who take their



faith seriously know they are flawed human beings. There was also an absence of practical Christianity. The only character whose faith led him to an involvement with social justice issues was Harold Bishop from Neighbours. This was felt to be unrepresentative of the way Christians operate in the world today. One group mentioned the absence of a Christian solution for many social problems, specifically drug abuse, which was something their church was heavily involved with:

T. Modern-day problems. I think socially people are willing to accept almost anything on television programmes but I think in reality, you know, there's a lot of problems, things like drugs or whatever, and I do not think the true Christian perspective of these is put across in any way. Tell people it's helping in any way from anywhere. I think that, well that's what I feel...

(Fraserburgh Pentecostals)

This absence of a Christian perspective was mentioned by the Roman Catholic women, specifically in relation to The Bill:

D. I find The Bill actually quite interesting in that if any of them you know the policemen, are alcoholics or whatever, it's always a therapist they recommend or a Counsellor. It's never a clergyman. None of them seem to be religious at all

M. I can not think of anybody. I do watch The Bill. I like The Bill.

D. It's interesting to me that kind of epitomises our society. You know the fact that they're all rushing away to analysts and encouraged to do so

M. That's just a sign of the times too isn't it? It's always analysts.

Another absence that didn't fit with people's real life experiences was hospital chaplains or medical staff with a faith. Apart from the storyline in ER, with the Croatian doctor's rediscovery of his faith, according to interviewees none of the other hospital programmes had any identifiable characters with a faith. One doctor from Holby City<sup>12</sup> was mentioned as being religious however after some discussion it seemed that she had drifted from her faith and the only reason there was an awareness of faith was because her father had come over to try to arrange a marriage.

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<sup>12</sup> A year after these interviews (2002) a hospital chaplain has appeared in Holby City. He is a Roman Catholic priest who unsurprisingly is getting involved with a nurse he has been supporting!

The final area that was absent from portrayals of Christianity was spirituality. One Christian interviewee spoke about a character from Star Trek who was a deeply spiritual character. Her feeling was that this was treated quite differently from Christianity:

G. But never laughed at. It's quite interesting that that is always portrayed as being something, I mean he went off to do this sort of what we would term a sort of retreat. He went off and he saw to have sat in this mountainous area for a week and meditated. So it's all very, very serious. Very charged with high spirituality. Which is something that you don't often get in the characters that are Christian. You very rarely see, for me you rarely see the spiritual. You get a little bit in The Vicar of Dibley but you do not very often get the spiritual coming out in the same way as you would in Star Trek with Warf and a few other characters that are definitely religious.

(Arbroath Mixed group)

The pleasure of spirituality and ritual in the lives of many Christians was always absent. The explanations offered for this, which will be dealt with in a later section, were remarkably similar.

### Non-Christian Faiths

The interviews with the Sikhs and Muslims were structured somewhat differently from the other interviews. This meant that the discussion concentrated on how aware they were of Sikhs or Muslims on television before moving out to other faiths. With the other groups discussion of non-Christian faiths tended to occur about half way through the interview usually, as I said earlier, after my prompting them.

Sikhs and Muslims found it very difficult to think of fictional programmes in which there were characters of their faith. As one of the Muslim women commented:

A. I've seen a lot of programmes portraying Christianity in a sense. Buffy for example, they use the cross to get rid of the evil but I think Islam's seriously lacking. They do not portray it at all. You couldn't even say they do it in a bad way because they don't.

(Edinburgh Muslim Women)



When Islam is portrayed they see it as focussing on stereotypes. One of the Muslim women described a daytime programme she'd seen the week before, on satellite, (but couldn't remember its name) where there was a Muslim man and a joke was made about him having a number of wives. This really upset her because, drawing on her own experience of Islam, she didn't know any men living in this country who had more than one wife. Because Islam featured rarely in fictional broadcasting most of the media they referred to were television documentaries, film and press coverage. Their view was that there was a focus on a few outward things such as arranged marriages and the hijab which were always presented in a negative way. This is perhaps not an unreasonable point of view because in the white focus groups a memory of an arranged marriage in a programme always led people to conclude that the characters must have been Muslims. Both groups of Muslim women wanted to see more Muslim women who wore the hijab but who also had careers. One of the groups saw it as an opportunity to provide role models for their daughters but for both groups there was a feeling that by raising their profile there might be a greater understanding by non-Muslims:

A. I mean straightaway they just go Oh, poor thing, she's got to cover up. You know, this and that, look what their husbands are doing. They do not realise that we cover up for, so you can see the brains and not the beauty. That's the reasoning behind it.

(Edinburgh Muslim women)

Whereas the Muslim women felt that there was too much focus on the more obvious external markers of Islam the Sikhs felt that too often the external markers of Sikhism were missing. The Sikh men discussed a number of Sikh actors but it became clear that they were usually employed to play an Asian character of no particular religion. They also commented on the absence of Sikhs when programmes were based in an area where there was a large Sikh community. Taggart, which is set in Glasgow, was one such programme. Whilst there had been some Sikh actors none of them had been portrayed as Sikhs:

That's true. In Glasgow there are so many Asians but there's very, very, they're not represented at all basically in Taggart. And Taggart's, you know, set in Glasgow, the Gorbals and all this

They do not come forward

And there's thousands of Asians there and they haven't

They do not wear a turban. They are shown as Asians.

But they're still not on television in Taggart because that's set in Glasgow and it's like you know four or five times the size of the community that's in Edinburgh but they're still not represented in Taggart. Let's face it Asians commit crime as well.

We're not all law-abiding citizens. They do commit crime so why are they not being represented?

(Sikh Men)

One other absence in terms of external markers that was noted by a non-religious group and also by the Sikh men was the mention of any religious festivals. Whilst reference is made to Christmas and Easter no mention is made of Ramadan or Diwali or any of the four or five Sikh festivals that are celebrated each year. Although people felt that most of the references to the Christian festival were inadequate they did at least exist. Within fictional broadcasting the perception of interviewees was that none of these other festivals or religious events existed.

I referred earlier to the doxa amongst the non-Sikh and non-Muslim groups that Asian equals Muslim (or very occasionally Hindu). One of the men in the Sikh group made the following comment:

Because Asian people could be anybody. Pakistanis, Bengalis, Sikhs, Hindus.

There's several kinds of Asians and they don't recognise it as specifically one. But as you say with there being a turban it would really send a picture as a Sikh.

What was clear from the other groups was that there was a constant slippage between somebody being an Asian and somebody being religious. If they were Asian they were bound to be religious. In fact it was always a character's ethnicity which was remembered first closely followed by some of the storyline which meant they then made an assumption about religion. For instance Dev from Coronation Street was identified as an Asian. There had been a storyline where a young woman was escaping an arranged marriage so it was assumed that she must be Muslim and therefore he must be also (in fact Dev is supposed to be a Hindu but as I said earlier it was only the Sikhs and Muslims who identified him thus). It was the same with an Asian family who had featured in the early days of EastEnders. There was a memory of an arranged marriage and a violent husband but no memory of what religion they were. Yet they were mentioned in response to a question



about non-Christian religions. There were numerous references to the absence of Asian faces in most of the soaps and the concomitant absence of religion:

M. Yes it's all Christian or Catholic. There's no, especially EastEnders. East End of London you would expect some Muslim or Hindu or something

N. Or Jewish

M. But they are not shown at all. In any of the programmes. Even in Brookside, which Liverpool has got quite a large Asian population as well and Chinese population but none of these characters are in. There's Mick who's black but everyone else is - and Neesha who is Indian or something but everyone else is white and Catholic.

T. No there is remarkably little. In view of the variety of religions there are in this country, we don't catch a glimpse.

M. Yeah I can understand it not being a problem in Emmerdale or something like that. These rural communities are probably predominantly middle-class whites but in the East end of London it's impossible, if you walk through the East end not to, without noticing you're going to see a dozen different religions within 20 yards but that's not portrayed on EastEnders at all.

(Edinburgh Film Guild)

In conclusion then there are two sorts of absence. The first is related to the inadequacy of representations of Christianity and the perceived reliance on stereotypes to portray characters who are supposed to be the Christian. The second seems to be of a greater magnitude. Whilst portrayals of Christianity might be inadequate they are at least portrayed and reference is made to Christian festivals even if not everybody understands their religious significance<sup>13</sup>. For non-Christian faiths they hardly seem to exist in fictional broadcasting. There seems to be an assumption that ethnicity is the same as religion without any understanding of the differences amongst non-Christian religions. There is equally a lack of understanding that an Asian could be any religion or no religion. There also seems to be no awareness that adherents of other religions could be white (as was one

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<sup>13</sup> One of the interviewees told the following story which is quite amusing: You know I was doing a Nativity once when I worked with a family group and I was doing the Nativity with the kids at Christmas and one of the mothers came up to me and she said, what is this Nativity, she said, what pantomime's that? Honestly. She didn't know. It's unbelievable that people who don't know and you just take it for granted you grow up with it. (Oban Church of Scotland Group)

of the Muslim women) either on the part of the interviewees or from the content of the programmes mentioned in the interviews. In the next section I will discuss two areas because they were frequently elided into one area by interviewees.

### **Moral and Ethical Issues/Guiding Principles**

There was no difference between the religious and non-religious groups when it came to this area. There were however some differences in the explanations that were offered as to why particular issues were dealt with and the guiding principles that were deployed.

Some groups found it extremely difficult to distinguish between Moral and Ethical issues and Guiding Principles and consequently I occasionally abandoned this line of questioning. It seemed to me that people misunderstood Moral and Ethical issues for Morals and further clarification on my part still didn't seem to resolve the matter.

Teenage pregnancy, drugs, gay sex, incest, bad language, affairs, male/female rape, euthanasia and abortion were the main moral and ethical issues raised across the groups. The only two issues out of that list which were seen as being portrayed in a non-gratuitous way were male rape and euthanasia. Male rape was a story line that had been carried in Hollyoaks and euthanasia had been carried in EastEnders. The one interviewee who referred to the male rape wasn't just impressed by the absence of gratuity:

1. But that was like the whole moral dilemma. Do you assert yourself and yes this did happen and I want the person brought to justice or is it going to be easier for this male character to forget about the whole thing and that was a real moral dilemma.

(Oban Book Club)

Within this group the view was expressed that programmes aimed at teenagers tended to deal with more moral and ethical issues and unlike programmes aimed at adults were more likely to show the consequences of a character's actions for those around them. The euthanasia storyline was well received because the difficulty faced by Dot Cotton (should she assist Ethel to die or not?) was treated with great sensitivity. Only two groups expressed reservations about whether or not a Christian would assist in someone's death – one religious group and one non-religious group. However, the reserve expressed in the religious group was also bound up with concerns about showing a Christian behaving that way. It was not an image they wanted to see portrayed.



Why particular issues are dealt with was usually explained by reference to them being either a reflection of society or as something that would increase ratings, especially with younger people. A number of people referred to the influence of television and there was a strong feeling that despite what broadcasters might say they were setting the agenda so far as breaching moral taboos were concerned:

4. They seem to naturalise things that are immoral more than anything. If you look at Coronation Street just now, it's making it natural for, you almost feel that the characters aren't behaving properly if they do not sleep with somebody on their first date. Like the problem of teenage pregnancies, they do not show it as a problem. The girlfriend of the girl that got pregnant, you know she's into older guys and two-timing guys and from the oldest characters right down... it's all through the level of split families and you know, behaviour like that, it's making it seem as if there is not an alternative that's worthwhile.

5. I think it's reflecting the social change. I think a lot things that are happening in soaps with the idea of self being the most important thing, rather than self within a community, whatever that entails.. I think that's just a reflection of how society

3. The soaps are influencing that too

5. Well yes there is a two-way influence there.

(Oban Book Club)

This discussion continued for about 10 minutes and references were made to the 'soft porn' on television that wouldn't have been allowed 10 years ago. Again reference was made to the influence this kind of programming had on social values, although most of the concern was for younger people (nobody ever felt that television viewing had any influence on themselves!). The Pentecostalists provided the different view that it was a case of television reflecting the values of the world as opposed to God's values. One member explained at considerable length how God's values differed from the world and maybe 'light and darkness' do not mix. However there was still a feeling that television was setting the agenda so far as social acceptability was concerned:

A. I think a lot of these programme show things which make ordinary folk watching think that this is normal and I do not know if it is... I think that the

programme makers would say that they are just reflecting society but I think they portray things that a lot of society would never have even have heard of, if they were not watching the programme...all these incest and lesbians and gay relationships and so on. I mean when I was younger I never heard of these things hardly.

T. ...but what was socially acceptable when you were young... is totally different to what is socially acceptable today.

J. Is TV not making things more socially acceptable?

T. I think you've got a very valid point. I think you've got a great point. I think so.

Again this discussion continued for quite a while, moving on to gay sex scenes and the likelihood that it would influence adolescent boys in to trying out gay sex. As I said earlier despite their condemnation of many of the values of the programmes they watched, they continued to watch them; whereas the Muslim women avoided them. The younger women chose not to watch programmes that showed young people in multiple relationships or anything that they felt was risqué. The women who had children had taken a decision to censor their children's viewing:

2] I do not know. Since the story line of Brookside has been like, you know, they've actually been introducing like, gay relationships, I'm really totally like, it's against Islam so I've stopped watching that. I've stopped the youngsters from watching that as well. So I feel that would give the children ideas. It's like there was one scene where both of the ladies were quite close and my daughter was like oh mummy like, and she was really, really sort of interested and I thought no, I just switched the channel because I do not want her to, it's just

*Are there any other kinds of programmes where you've taken that kind of decision because you felt that they conflicted with your faith.*

2] I think all these soaps to an extent are like that. It depends on what's going to happen at the time but I think they're all conflicting very much with our religion. Hollyoaks, all these, aimed at the younger generation, most of it's against Islam.  
*Can you think of any which?*

1] Thinking of Hollyoaks again the changing relationships that's right against Islam.

2] Well girls in Islam they're not supposed to go on dates

1] Well girls or boys



2] Girls or boys but it's just the dating. The dating and relationships.

(Dundee Muslim Women)

Both groups of Muslim women preferred to watch ZeeTv (an Asian satellite channel) not only for the language practice but also for the culture and values which seemed to be more in tune with Islam. Unlike the GodDigital viewers they found it difficult to step outside of their religion even when it came to watching television.

When it came to Guiding Principles there was unanimity across all the groups – self and family were the two main guiding principles. Some interviewees felt that the obvious Christian characters referred to biblical guidelines but nobody else did. Apart from programmes aimed at children and teenagers (and The Vicar of Dibley) characters either considered a course of action in terms of whether it would benefit them or not or what the family would say. Personal happiness or self-gratification were the main issues and various storylines from Coronation Street and EastEnders were drawn upon to illustrate this. Two families from EastEnders (The Slaters and The Beales) were seen as exemplifying family-as-guiding-principle. Unlike Moral and Ethical issues only one explanation was offered and that was that it was a reflection of society. Whilst there was disagreement in some groups about whether or not everyone in society was self-centred nevertheless the consensus was that self was seen as the most important thing, for most people, in our society and that was why characters who considered other people or drew on religious guiding principles were extremely rare.

In conclusion there was no substantive difference between religious and non-religious groups when it came to identifying the Moral and Ethical issues and the Guiding Principles. The concern about some of the issues were related to a feeling that television was setting the agenda concerning what was and what was not socially acceptable. It was the coverage of some of these issues that caused the Muslim women to avoid programmes that contained them. Guiding Principles were seen to be self interest and family reflecting an aspect of society that most people found worrying. In the next section I will discuss the Explanations offered by the groups for the way religion is portrayed in fictional broadcasting.

## **Explanations**

Apart from the Sikhs and the Muslims the rest of the groups all had an explanation for the way religion was portrayed (or not portrayed) in fictional broadcasting. The closest the Sikhs came to offering an explanation was to lay the blame at their own feet. They thought that maybe members of the Sikh community had not been proactive enough in getting involved with the media though this didn't seem to be borne out due to the number of Sikh actors that they had seen, on television, playing Asians. Apart from a feeling that the media only wanted to stereotype Muslims the women had no other explanation to offer. This was not the case with the other groups.

Explanations were offered firstly for the way Christianity was shown (and it is worth mentioning that when groups referred to religion it was clear that within the context of the discussion they were actually talking about Christianity) and secondly for the paucity of other religions. This was the most surprising finding of the research and not something I had even remotely considered. First of all then, what were the explanations offered for the way Christianity was shown? There were three main explanations here. The first concerned ratings, the second concerned the experiences of scriptwriters and the third concerned social attitudes to religion.

### Christianity

#### *Ratings*

When groups mentioned ratings it was always in the context of what was the main concern of programme makers. If programmes were to be seen as successful they had to have high ratings. If topics were included which were thought to be unpopular with an audience then ratings would be damaged. Interviewees felt that programme makers saw religion in this light. The following quotation is a perfect illustration of this point:

A. I wonder if the scriptwriters feel that religious story lines are not terribly exciting? Not terribly interesting?

A. It's not what the general public want to watch.

A. It's not going to bring in the viewers.

A. No exactly, It's all about that.

(Dunblane Drama Group)



Two of the other groups offered an explanation as to why religious story lines might not be terribly interesting:

3. I suspect they're too scared to try it because they think people will think that's really boring. That they think the public wants people who are outrageous and breaking rules, moral rules or legal rules or whatever.

(Oban Book Club)

The Edinburgh Friendship group also thought that there was an emphasis on targeting youngsters and because they were less interested in religion it meant that religion was becoming increasingly excluded. The perception that programme makers wanted to concentrate on rule breakers was echoed by the Church of Scotland group and the Mixed Sikh group. One of the Roman Catholic women felt that religion was marginalised because it was a subject where people had strong opinions and if characters were to express strong opinions that would cause offence and therefore affect the ratings. This group also felt that religion was seen as a weakness so its inclusion would not be good for the ratings.

### *Scriptwriters*

There was a fairly general feeling that scriptwriters lacked experience of religion which was why so few of the characters reflected Christianity accurately. In the Church of Scotland group there was a disagreement about the irreligiousness of scriptwriters. One group member, drawing on a view of what 'must be', felt that there must be some writers who were Christian but perhaps they didn't allow their faith to influence their writing because, going back to ratings, religion wouldn't sell. The Mixed Sikh group referred to what could be described as laziness on the part of scriptwriters:

M. It depends on story lines as well. It's like Muslim marriages. That's usually stereotyped is not it? Or racism or whatever. It doesn't happen all the time so why portray that?

Again, the answer offered by other group members related back to ratings and the need for a shock factor in order to engage the audience. The absence of any direct experience of religion, on the part of scriptwriters, was referred to a number of times by the Roman Catholic women and this absence of experience made the topic too difficult for them to include adequately:

H. ...Because they give you the impression that the people who are writing the scripts have no direct experience of what they're doing. They have never experienced what it feels like, all the things that are important, as you say, in your life and how it completely changes your life. When you really are Christian and not just sort of going there to get married or, and you feel that these people do not really understand. They're trying to make a stab at it but they're not quite  
D. That's right.

The Drama Group and the Friendship Group also thought that an absence of experience was the most likely explanation for the way religion was treated. The Friendship Group, like the Roman Catholic women, thought that when religion was included it was as programme makers *thought* Christians were rather than as they *actually* were.

Whilst a couple of the groups felt that religion was included as something to be mocked the Arbroath Mixed Group were much more emphatic in their assessment, particularly in relation to children's programmes:

L. They are against religion.

D. They don't want to, at that age you know, sort of be accused of indoctrinating.

L. They keep it out.

M. They want to indoctrinate the other way.

L. You get the ones about witches you know.

Another member of this group saw it as part of a deliberate denigration on the part of the media:

G. Well no, I think that's how the media like to portray people, people who go to church are do-gooders because that way we can look down our noses at them and say, Oh typical do-gooders.

### *Social Attitudes*

This explanation had the smallest number of responses and also tended to elide with issues of racism and the coverage of non-Christian religions. The Roman Catholics and the Church of Scotland group felt that churchgoers and religion were seen as unfashionable and therefore believers were seen by other people as different. The Roman Catholics



described it as 'this current policy of politics that nobody needs God so therefore it's up to your own human resources.' This focus on human resources as opposed to divine resources was referred to by a number of groups particularly in relation to programmes like Frasier, Casualty and The Bill. Going for counselling or being in analysis was perfectly acceptable whereas prayer and confession were not. The Drama Group felt that Christianity got more coverage than other religions because it was the established religion of the United Kingdom and therefore it was 'fair game'. One of the Arbroath group made a similar point. She felt that when there was a more established, dominant group in a country it was easier to make fun of it whereas newer and less dominant groups were more sensitive. Interestingly, in light of the proposals to bring in a new law about religious discrimination, one of the Friendship Group made the point that Christians do not have any legal protection from 'micky taking' – "Do you get police or hospital programmes sent up like that? They pick on religion." It is impossible to agree with the first part of this statement but the second part was echoed by the white, religious groups. There was also a feeling within the Dunblane group (particularly in relation to Coronation Street) that viewers didn't want to see more Asians because they didn't want to see mixed race relationships. This then elided in to a comment about the public not wanting to see the religious side, so again, 'Asian equals religious' was brought in to play.

### Non-Christian religions

This was the section that provided the unexpected responses. Some groups made no contribution to this section because, despite repeated questioning about other religions, they referred to specifically Asian programming or their explanations only referred to Christianity. Given that the question referred to Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Muslims (none of whom are necessarily or solely Asian) I was surprised to hear the references to Asian programming. However, this subsuming of all religions into a homogeneous Asianness was a recurring theme. With the Friendship Group I tried to discuss the absence of non-Christian religions and whether or not it was problematic for other faiths in the same way that they saw the treatment of Christianity as being problematic. Their response didn't seem to make sense because they repeatedly talked about a hypothetical situation, which doesn't exist, as if it does - "if they stuck to Christianity and didn't portray other religions then they'd leave themselves open to criticism". "Same way as police do not have enough coloured; they'd have the same thing; they'd say they'd have to widen their horizons; have to take in other religions or they'd be open to criticism." Despite pointing out that this is what they had already agreed was

actually happening they couldn't seem to get away from an equal opportunities concept: "Perhaps at first they might get away with it but after a while the ethnic minority leaders would complain and then maybe somebody could bring some Muslims in and that's the way it would evolve and then maybe they could have a Muslim soap or something." Again, there was the reference to Muslims as if that was the only non-Christian religion that had to be taken in to account.

The Pentecostals and the Church of Scotland group both made reference to Asian broadcasting, which was aimed at 'them' rather than 'us'. It was also clear after questioning that the programmes they were referring to as examples of programmes about other religions were actually Asian as opposed to being religious. As I have said already, Asian was assumed, by the white groups, to be the same as religious (even though I repeatedly listed all the faiths I was interested in) and the religion that Asians were most frequently identified with was Islam. There was also repeated use of the words 'they', 'them', 'their', and 'us', 'we' and 'our' by all of the white groups. The following quotations were in response to a question about other faiths in fictional broadcasting and are illustrative of this point. The second quotation relates to some Asian programming A. had seen:

T. I was going to say does it not depend on your geographical area with your local televisions?

--- A. Aye; they would have their own programmes wouldn't they?

T. I mean somewhere like say Birmingham, Manchester, whatever would probably have more ethnic programmes than what we would have up here because we do not have an ethnic minority.

A. It wasn't targeted to us particularly.  
(Fraserburgh Pentecostals)

The fear of causing offence to other faiths was the most common reason given for not including them. However, no matter which faith was mentioned the propensity for offence to be taken was explained by reference to Islam. In the Drama Group one member felt it would be very hard for directors to portray other religions because 'their religion is so sensitive to being misrepresented'. In that phrase other religions changes into a single



religion. She then referred to 'a Buddhist or whatever' and when another member suggested they could research it she said:

I. But even so the amount of red tape and the research they would have to do might be off-putting. You think about Salman Rushdie or anything like that, you just have to say anything slightly controversial.

The reference to Salman Rushdie and a documentary that had been on television many years ago, *Death of a Princess*, were also echoed by the Arbroath Group:

G. I still think there's a lot, after Salman Rushdie and that other thing that happened with that TV programme about twenty years ago

*Oh Death of a Princess about the Saudi?*

G. *Death of a Princess*, the Saudi Arabian thing. People have got incredibly sensitive.

Even though I pointed out that these two things only referred to Islam and asked about sensitivity towards Hindus and Sikhs the reply was that they would put out a fatwah. Again, something which is only associated with Islam. The discussion continued to refer to 'their religion' and 'they're really sensitive' as if there was one homogeneous religion. There was a resonance with the comments made by the Friendship Group about the complaints that 'they' would make if they weren't fairly represented:

M. I was just going to say that perhaps because they're in a minority perhaps they feel that they have to defend themselves rather and not exactly take offence but indicate their displeasure if they're not portrayed in a very idealised way.

(Arbroath Mixed Group)

There was a clear feeling that programmers were sensitive to potential offence-causing because 'they' took their religion very seriously. There also seemed to be a suggestion that whoever 'they' were, they complained about less than flattering portrayals. This could only be based on a historical reference because the examples of portrayals of other religions were so few and far between. However, the Arbroath Group in particular drew on the experience some members had of Asians, in different parts of the country, to provide additional reasons for the absence of Asians/other religions in fictional broadcasting. These

were concerned with men not allowing outsiders to have contact with their families, limited education of women and the inability of many Asians to speak English. These were all seen as reasons why scriptwriters would be prevented from proper research, which would enable them to write suitable scripts.

This feeling that it is not possible to write parts for non-Christian religions if you are not part of that religion was echoed by the Film Guild. The feeling was that if whites wrote anything satirical about non-whites it would be perceived as racism. Equally if an Asian family was included in a soap, and they were made religious, it would be seen as tokenism. So that dual fear of tokenism and racism meant that it was preferable to exclude them, at least for the time being. I said in an earlier section of this chapter that the one programme which was consistently mentioned in relation to other religions was *Goodness Gracious Me*. It was raised in this area as an example of something that was written by Asians and therefore it was acceptable. Only the Drama Group really seemed to notice that they were saying that sensitivity was displayed to non-Christian faiths, for a variety of reasons – some more negative than others were – whereas none was shown towards Christianity. Equally there was barely any awareness that some of the explanations offered might have been relevant when it came to portrayals of Islam but were totally irrelevant when it came to Buddhists, Sikhs, Jews or Hindus.

In conclusion then, explanations for portrayals of Christianity were divided into three categories: Ratings, Scriptwriters and Social Attitudes. Ratings were seen to be the driving force behind programme makers, and interviewees assumed that they thought religion was unlikely to be a ratings winner. Scriptwriters (and occasionally programme makers) were perceived as having either no religious experience or it was really, out of date, which explained why the portrayals were so inadequate. Explanations in Social Attitudes referred to a view of the world that said Christianity was unfashionable and Christians were odd. They also referred to an increasing reliance on either self or other human resources for problem solving rather than a reliance on a divine or clerical source.

Explanations for the portrayal/absence of non-Christian religions were based around issues of otherness. There was either an assumption that these religions had or should have their own programming or that they were so different that they had to be treated with far greater sensitivity than did Christianity. The basis of that sensitivity was somewhat disturbing. No matter that all non-Christian religions were asked about, explanations referred to a fear of



possible Muslim reprisals should they be shown insensitively. There was also a sense in which other religions were seen as taking their faith far more seriously than did Christians, which meant that an incorrect portrayal of a religion would be seen also as an attack on a cultural way of life. There was also a clear linkage between religion and race with only one acknowledgement that this was spurious. At the same time there was a recognition, following questioning, that most characters who were assumed to be religious (on the basis of ethnicity) were probably only included as a racial representative. The only difference between religious and non-religious groups was that the explanations for the way other religions were covered came from the non-religious groups. However, most of those explanations came from members who were Christians. In the next section I want to look at Fit, which is concerned with how well representations fit with interviewees' experiences in real life.

## **Fit**

The purpose of this section was to find out how closely television representations of religion fitted with interviewees' experiences of real life religion. What experiences did they bring to their reception of television images, which affected the way they decoded those images? What were the mediating factors and was there any difference between religious and non-religious groups? This was the section where there was the most contradiction within groups. The majority of contradictions came from either the religious groups or religious members of non-religious groups so I will begin by looking at what these interviewees had to say.

Most of the groups began by objecting to the way religious people were portrayed on the grounds that it was either 'over the top', relied on stereotypes or suggested that there was something odd about religious people. For the Sikhs and the Muslims there was the added dimension that there were so few representations of their religions that the absence itself did not fit with their own experiences. The reliance on stereotypes was the main problem because they failed to show the complexities of faith for all of the religions. There was also a feeling that for many people their religion is not something that they announce; rather it is quiet and deeply personal. Even though all the women in the Mixed Sikh group wore traditional dress, which would be a signifier of a non-Christian religion to most non-Sikhs, they took the view that religious sensibilities were not visible:

B. You can't just look at someone and know they're religious. You've got to get to know them.

V. Like just because they come from a Sikh family or whatever they shouldn't really be expected to be religious because they could have their own beliefs in it.

In response to these comments some of the men made the point that the way religion was shown on television suggested that religious people were strait-laced and tried to force their religion on others; which was not the way they saw religious practice in their own community. The Sikh Men also made the point that the limited representations of Sikhs did not adequately reflect the variety of professions in which they were employed. Neither did it reflect their involvement in everyday leisure pursuits with non-Sikhs.

Some of the ways in which portrayals of religion did not fit with people's experiences have been addressed in the absences section. Regular worshippers knew that young people were involved in churches even though the majority of worshippers might be older, although that does seem to be more relevant for Christians than it does for Sikhs and Muslims. They also knew that churches, mosques and temples were involved in social justice issues as well as social action. The only obviously religious character who engaged in this kind of action was Harold Bishop from Neighbours.

The other big way in which portrayals did not fit with their own experiences was in the portrayal of spirituality and the quieter kinds of religious expression as well as the support that a faith provides:

D. You know, and I don't understand this. I do not know how these characters, I sometimes think if they were real how they would actually survive you know going through their life like that because religion actually is not actually about being dotty and so on. It's a big part of your life and I don't think they get that over... they don't actually seem to make a programme where the people are quite normal and this is part of your existence you know.

(Edinburgh Roman Catholic Women)

However having noted all of the above ways in which portrayals did not fit with interviewees' experiences when it came to talking about particular characters contradictions occurred. Interviewees always began by objecting to the portrayals as being



unrepresentative. One person would then remember somebody who fitted that portrayal, others would disagree but by the end of the interview (apart from the Sikhs and the Muslims) they had all remembered people they knew or had known who were remarkably similar to some of the less attractive characters. However, apart from the Drama Group who said they knew some working members of the clergy who were like the less attractive television clergy, the other groups were remembering clergy who had long since retired:

D. But we've had them in Arbroath you know. Lovely, lovely, sincere ministers but they have this, they had the voice. Remember?

M. Excruciatingly dull.

D. I heard one minister in Arbroath praying for the vicarious, vicious vandals. That was it.

M. You've got the Vs right

D. It was something vicious vandals. And you know that tone of the voice. The tone that used to be censorious.

B. He was sincere was he?

Yeah

B. That was always the ministers when I was little. It was.

Yes

Yes

(Arbroath Mixed Group)

For interviewees who had a faith there was a historical as well as a current knowledge of Christianity. Again, Christianity dominated because of the dearth of portrayals of Sikhism and Islam. They didn't have the range of characters to comment upon so it was not possible to say that the portrayal of Sikhs and Muslims harked back to an older style of religiosity, which is what many of the Christians could do. All they could say was that the portrayals were very limited and characters were either included to show ethnicity or to draw on religious stereotypes which were not typical of their experiences. When it came to members of the laity in fictional broadcasting Christians always began by denying that characters like Dot Cotton existed in real life. However, they always remembered somebody who had similar markers of religiosity. Two factors seemed to mediate here. Firstly there was an awareness that they were more representative of times gone by, when church attendance was seen as something that was socially desirable. Their memory of those days was that there was greater formality and a need to be seen to be doing the right

thing. With the change in patterns of church attendance over the years it was felt that social acceptability was no longer a part of church attendance, which meant that people took the spiritual side of their faith more seriously; something which was not reflected in many of the characters they had mentioned. Secondly, people who had experience of church attendance seemed to be more tolerant of these old-fashioned characters. This was usually demonstrated by them saying that the character, for all their faults, had a heart of gold. Again, this seemed to relate to their own experiences of older church members who might have had some unattractive qualities but when push came to shove they would help people out. Underpinning this was an awareness that people go to church because they are not saints rather than the other way round so tolerance had to be extended to other people.

The only group I interviewed which had a majority of atheists was the Film Guild but even so they had nearly all had some experience of people who were religious. Some of the more negative portrayals of Roman Catholics were seen by one ex-Catholic as remarkably similar to her own and her mother's experiences of Roman Catholicism many years ago. Only two of the men had had no experience of religious people, so far as they were aware, and what they saw on television, particularly in relation to the stereotypical representation of the religious character being older, female and single, did actually fit with their own observations, despite D's final comment:

D. Never see them. I go food shopping to Tesco's on Sunday. I go quite early and it's always, the bus is always packed with spinsters going down to the Murrayfield Church. So that's the only time I ever come in contact and obviously nothing's said. So things like Dot Cotton doesn't exist for me.

The other man also made the point that because he had been brought up without any religion it had never impacted upon his life. The interview though had made him think about where people like him got their ideas about religion and he decided that it was through the media and all he could think of was priests abusing young boys. It seems clear then that when people do have direct and current experience of religion they are unhappy with some of the portrayals but they bring to the decoding a tolerance for human weaknesses based on their understanding of their own faith. For those without a faith or a bad experience of faith in the past there is far less tolerance. The more negative characters act as a reinforcement of their own position which is either, 'this has no relevance for me



because I have nothing in common with the practitioners' or 'It's just like the last time I was there – narrow minded and unfriendly'.

One other area of reinforcement seemed to be operating and that was in relation to non-Christian faiths. When interviewees had very little experience of other faiths as well as people from different ethnic backgrounds the absence of these other faiths, from fictional broadcasting (in any significant sense), seemed to reinforce a sense of 'them' and 'us'. They became the exotic 'other' who were not a part of daily life. Because they were absent or relatively invisible in real life their absence from fictional broadcasting was unnoticed – until it was raised in the interviews. For some of the groups it also seemed to reinforce a perception that non-Christian religions were all identified as Asian and that Asian equalled Muslim.

In conclusion fictional portrayals of religion rarely fitted with the real life experiences of interviewees with a current experience of religion. This was not only in terms of quantity but also of quality. Most of the portrayals in soap operas were seen as being representative of a former age. The absence of spirituality and a concern for social justice were seen as the two most glaring gaps in portrayals particularly for lay characters. The greatest discrepancy over clergy portrayals was between the Pentecostals and the other religious groups. The weaknesses, which endeared *The Vicar of Dibley* for instance, to the other groups, were seen as totally unacceptable. This is clearly due to the way the Pentecostals interpreted their faith. Whilst the observations of the few atheists in the interviewees fitted with what they saw on television it is only fair to say that they weren't interested in how religion was portrayed. The limited portrayals of all religions (again in terms of quantity and quality) merely reinforced their view that religion was irrelevant for most of the world and the way they saw it portrayed did not make it any more attractive to them. The very limited portrayals of non-Christian faiths also served to reinforce a perception that they were an exotic 'other' who (referring back to Explanations) were prone to taking offence easily. Their invisibility on the screen reflected their invisibility in reality for many interviewees.

### **Unusual/Extraordinary**

One of the features of semi-structured and unstructured interviews is the space that is allowed for interviewees to digress. It is in these digressions that researchers can discover

concerns that would not have emerged if a more structured format had been followed. In this section I want to look at some of the issues that emerged from the interviews.

The question of media effects was raised by some of the groups. Other researchers have found that media effects are more often ascribed to other people (Svennevig, 1998). This was the case in my interviews. There was either a concern for a younger age group or a concern for society as a whole. In fact most of the issues covered in the section could be described as being related to concerns about media effects because either their absence or their presence was seen as being influential in some way. One member of the Church of Scotland Group referred to the power of advertising. A dentist friend had told him how adverts to improve dental hygiene had been particularly effective. On that basis he felt that the way the church was portrayed on television was bound to have an effect on people's perceptions. Whilst other members of the group agreed that more positive portrayals could only be good for the church they were less inclined to agree that negative portrayals would have an impact, despite everything they had said about negative portrayals being off-putting to non-churchgoers. The Pentecostals, The Book Club and The Edinburgh Muslim Women all commented on the impact that television had on social attitudes; and it was seen negatively. It wasn't just a question of values, which I discussed in an earlier section, rather it was the perceived formation of attitudes. It was felt that an atmosphere was being created by television (as opposed to being a reflection) which made previously unacceptable things acceptable, for instance the use of sex to advertise products. The Muslim women referred to an advert for Haagen Daz ice cream, which is deliberately sexual. They would have preferred to see someone eating the ice cream normally rather than sexualising the experience. This leads in to the next issue to be raised.

A number of groups commented on the way sex was portrayed on television. This was usually raised in the context of discussing moral and ethical issues. Every group that raised this topic felt that television was pushing boundaries in an extremely influential way. Sexual topics were not only mentioned but frequently they were depicted. There was some comment about the portrayal of gay and lesbian relationships. It wasn't just a question of taste and decency. For some interviewees there was a possible cause and effect:

M. Aye, like Tony and Simon in EastEnders kissing on TV in front of millions of viewers was disgusting. You actually seen him kissing. Two young folk, loons



especially, growing up, with their hormones running wild would maybes be thinking is that right?

A. It's saying it's all right to do that

M. It says. It was saying it was all right to hae two loons kissing, ken and the same wi', fit was it, Brookside where there were the lesbians?

T. You've also got homosexuality in Emmerdale as well if you look for it

A. That's right aye

M. Oh aye they got married

A. Zoë

M. The two gay men, no they never got married, they got blessed

T. Yes they got blessed. So I mean it's there for you to see

J. It seems that they are dealing incrementally with society's taboos.

(Fraserburgh Pentecostalists)

Whilst other groups didn't express their feelings quite so emphatically as this group nevertheless there was still a very strong feeling that some programming bordered on the pornographic because of content and explicitness of portrayals. The inclusion of different sexualities as well as an acceptance that multiple and serial relationships were the norm, by broadcasters, made a lot of fictional television especially problematic for the Muslim Women. It was not a lifestyle they could identify with and was not something they either wanted to expose themselves to or see other Muslim women being exposed to. This seemed to lead to a greater reliance on channels such as ZeeTv where the cultural benefits outweighed the occasional lapses in values.

Some of the groups, when they were discussing why religion was portrayed the way it was, talked about the ways in which religion could be shown positively so that, as viewers, they would enjoy watching. Some of the time this came out of a discussion about what would not work. For instance just including a religious family who didn't do anything other than focus on their faith would not be interesting. Equally to show a Jewish person shopping for kosher food would be distracting because the viewer would be wondering about the shopping and miss the storyline. However, everyone said that to include either a family or a character whose faith informed their decisions would be really interesting (for those who watched Brookside and Hollyoaks this was something that was being done with The Murrays and Brian). A couple of The Book Club interviewees made the point that because having a faith was not socially expected any more, they found people who chose to be

religious extremely interesting and this opened up endless dramatic possibilities. The Sikhs in particular felt that it would be perfectly possible to include a Sikh family in something like EastEnders and at the same time have the occasional storyline which was specifically related to Sikhism. For instance issues of dating someone who wasn't a Sikh and whether a young man would cut his hair or not. I said earlier that the Muslim women felt that it should be perfectly possible and desirable to show more professional Muslim women who wore the hijab. Not only would it provide role models but also it might go some way to dispelling some of the myths and prejudice that they had experienced.

The primacy of self-help was referred to on a number of occasions. Groups varied between seeing this as the fault of the media or the media merely reflecting society. Again this was a topic that was touched on in the Moral and Ethical Issues. Therapists and counsellors were seen as the most appropriate forms of support when characters had problems. Whilst it could be argued that relying on somebody else for support hardly indicated self-help there was a feeling amongst interviewees that turning to clergy for support removed the focus on self. In a discussion of Frasier and the role of the psychiatrist J. made the following comment which is reasonably reflective of other interviewees:

J. ...and basically it's actually very anti-Christian because, I wonder why I watch it. Because they put self first all the time. It absolutely promotes self to the end. It comes to the point where you've got to go and talk to somebody and have him agree that everything is OK with your life so that you can continue in this pursuit of self. The number of folk in America who are in analysis, I'm talking seriously, is incredible. And it's just to justify a godless existence. It's as simple as that...  
(Fraserburgh Pentecostalists)

This focus on the acceptability of counselling or psychiatry leads in to the final area.

Across most of the groups there was a feeling that religion was rarely shown as something that could be a source of strength, which might explain why the emphasis seems to be on counselling or psychiatry. The perception was that religion was shown as a crutch for weak human beings and concentrated on 'thou shalt not' all the time. A couple of the groups also commented on the absence of male characters who were strong and had a faith. Men tended to be shown as clergy and as such, if they weren't comic characters like Father Ted, they were shown as either weak, pathetic or bullying. There were two concerns with this.



The first related to a question of effects. The more religion was shown as being the province of women the less likely it was that men would be interested in religion. The second related to dramatic possibilities. It was unusual to have a man who took his faith seriously but was also a well-rounded human being. If a character like that was to be shown it would be very interesting. However this all flows in to the explanations which were offered earlier relating to the perceived godlessness of programme makers and the marginalisation of religion in the search for ratings.

## **Conclusion**

The main findings from the focus group interviews were the perceived reliance on stereotypes of programme makers, the pre-eminence of Christianity, significant absences for non-Christian religions and the 'repressive Islam' explanation for those absences. The importance of habitus was clear. Not only did it affect the way in which bearers and markers of religiosity were understood but also for the white groups it affected their explanations for the absence of non-Christian religions. Limited personal contact, limited presence in fictional broadcasting combined with predominantly negative media coverage in the past all contributed to a perception of Islam as a repressive religion whose adherents would object if they were shown in anything other than an ideal light. It also produced one of the most confusing findings – the referral to 'repressive Islam' even when I asked about other religions. What I seemed to be uncovering was a general fear of otherness. Most people assumed that followers of non-Christian religions were Asian and that their cultural practices were very different from their own. There was also a sense that 'they' were less rational or reasonable (hence the repeated references to Salman Rushdie, Death of a Princess and fatwahs) – this was usually the point where personal anecdotes were offered to support this point of view.

These interviews were conducted pre-September 11<sup>th</sup> but they were analysed post-September 11<sup>th</sup> and I found them particularly significant. It didn't surprise me that people suspected the godlessness of scriptwriters or the widespread acceptance of secularization as being contributory factors in the way religion was portrayed in fictional broadcasting. It didn't particularly surprise me that Islam was associated with arranged marriages and the fatwah on Salman Rushdie. What did surprise me was the level of ignorance about non-Christian faiths and the assumptions that were made based on that ignorance. Writing about Islam and the media, Said comments:

All relationships between people and nations involve two sides. Nothing at all enjoins “us” to like or approve of “them”, but we must at least recognise (a) that “they” are there, and (b) that so far as “they” are concerned “we” are what we are, plus what they have experienced and known of us. (1981: xxvi).

In my view the evidence from the interviews demonstrates an absence of recognition that ‘they’ are there. Instead there is a misrecognition whereby all non-Christian faiths are subsumed into the one religion, Islam. It might be that in the wider population this misrecognition is less noticeable but there is evidence to suggest that it is not confined to my interviewees - as was seen in the attacks on Sikhs post-September 11<sup>th</sup>. Gross argues that minorities share a common media fate of relative invisibility and demeaning stereotypes (1998:89). Whilst no minority wants to be invisible I would argue that the invisibility of non-Christian religions, particularly in fictional broadcasting, is especially problematic these days. The riots in Bradford and Burnley last year, the small successes of the BNP in English local elections this year, arguments about faith schools and the ghettoisation of some inner cities, fears about immigration, and questions about the loyalty of British Muslims are all part of the context in which that invisibility exists. Making different religions more visible and making it clear that being an Asian is not the same as being a Muslim and having brown or black skin is not indicative of belonging to a non-Christian religion can only be positive. Not only because it will give people a chance to see ‘themselves’ on television but also because it will make them visible to others and perhaps lead to a reduction in the misrecognition that seems to exist. However visibility is not the only issue. The reliance on stereotypes was commented on by all of the groups.

It has been argued that stereotypical representations are part of an ideological process that enables dominant groups to exert their power over subordinate groups and contributes to their constitution in social life (Fowler, 1991; Bourdieu, 1992; Jakubowicz et al, 1994; Hall, 1996; Medhurst & Tuck, 1996; Gledhill, 1997; Lacey, 1998; Ferguson, 1998; Barker, 2000). I would argue that the limited ways in which religion is represented (and some of the significant absences) are part of the doxic position that secularization holds in this country. It is an argument that I will address in a separate chapter. It was certainly the view taken by many of the interviewees. For those who have to see themselves portrayed in stereotypical ways the message is clear – ‘you’ are not as important as ‘we’ are and as such ‘you’ can be mocked or ignored.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Faith Representatives**

The next two chapters examine the responses from faith representatives and broadcasters. Chapter Four focuses on the interviews with faith representatives, with a sub-section that, briefly, looks at some organisations which produce religious broadcasting. Chapter Five focuses on the interviews with broadcasters. It is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with the interviews with broadcasters of some of the fictional programmes, which were mentioned by the focus groups. The second part is concerned with interviews with broadcasters who are involved with either religious broadcasting or broadcasting generally.

#### **Introduction**

I said at the beginning of this thesis that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century broadcasting, as a cultural institution with an impact on people's daily lives, did not exist and that the churches, as cultural institutions, had a far greater impact on people's daily lives. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it would seem that not only have those positions been reversed but the power relations between those institutions has been reversed. Through an analysis of interviews with faith representatives and broadcasters it is possible to demonstrate that position reversal. Through the deployment of certain conceptual tools (which I will explain shortly) it is also possible to provide a theoretical explanation for the aforementioned reversal.

In *The Churches and The British Broadcasting Corporation* (1984) Wolfe says:

Broadcasting gave new stature to doubts and questions about the nature of religion and the relevance of Christian belief. The complex political disputes between the mainstream Christian religious institutions and the BBC from 1922 until 1956 comprise a struggle for supremacy. (xxiii)

He goes on to say:

...and yet however vigorous and often acrimonious their disputes with the Corporation, a thread of orthodoxy in broadcasting tradition had provided a workable basis for co-operation between them. Orthodoxy however, like many a fragile Grecian vase, was full of hairline cracks; broadcasting had become an ominous vibrant instrument with which Christianity had never had to reckon. (xxiv)

Doubts and questions, struggles for supremacy and orthodoxy all relate to the conceptual tools which I have deployed in seeking to understand the changing relationship between broadcasting and religion. They are borrowed from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and are fields, symbolic power, trump cards and habitus. Rather than explaining each term at this point I will offer an explanation as the introduction of each concept becomes pertinent.

According to Robbins (2000) Bourdieu developed the concept of field to signify in abstract the formal context in which every kind of capital must acquire its particular value.

Religious capital therefore acquires its particular value in the field of religion and broadcast capital in the field of broadcasting. Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) define field thus:

Field is defined by struggles and thus historicity. In a field agents and institutions constantly struggle, according to the regularities and rules constitutive of this space of play with various degrees of strength and therefore devise probabilities of success, to appropriate the specific products at stake in the game. Those who dominate in a given field are in a position to make it function to their advantage but must always contend with resistance claims etc. of the dominated. (p102).

As Wolfe noted there was a struggle for supremacy between the Church and the broadcasters. The tensions that exist today between religion (rather than just the church) and broadcasting are indicative of the struggles and historicity that Bourdieu & Wacquant see as being related to field. If we see the field of play as being television then religion and



broadcasting are (and have been) struggling over the product of representation, which is what is at stake in the game. What weapons are available in this struggle for supremacy and how they relate to the content of this chapter will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Symbolic power is another abstract term, which Bourdieu uses to explain the ways in which domination occurs:

It is as structured and structuring instruments of communication and knowledge that 'symbolic systems' fulfil their political function, as instruments which help to ensure that one class dominates another (symbolic violence) by bringing their own distinctive power to bear on the relations of power which underline them and thus by contributing, in Weber's term, to the 'domestication of the dominated'.  
(1992:167)

Whilst Bourdieu is referring to class I would argue that it is perfectly reasonable to substitute field i.e., the field of religion and the field of broadcasting. My argument throughout this thesis is that the field of broadcasting has come to dominate the field of religion. The distinctive power that broadcasting has is mass communication. In order to communicate effectively religion is dependent upon this power. Through a qualitative and quantitative use of that power it is inevitable that broadcasting will dominate religion. One of the features of mass communication is linguistic exchanges, which Bourdieu sees as being relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualised (1992: 40/41). If the language used by broadcasters, to portray religion, is negative (and at this stage it is not solely confined to fictional broadcasting) and, as will be seen in the interviews with faith representatives, religious representatives are cautious about expressing concern because they fear that they will be denounced in language which reinforces the negative message, then this is an example of the exertion of symbolic power through linguistic exchanges. In a discussion of language use in the news Fowler makes a similar point although he uses the term discourse:

The role of discourse in facilitating and maintaining discrimination against 'members' of 'groups' is tremendous. Language provides names for categories, and so helps to set their boundaries and relationships; and discourse allows these names to be spoken and written frequently, so contributing to the apparent reality and currency of the categories. (1991:94)

Eagleton (1991: 194) also makes the point that it is less the kind of language that is used than the effects that language produces – effects of ‘closure’ whereby certain forms of signification are silently excluded and certain signifiers ‘fixed’ in a commanding position.

The ‘naming’ and ‘fixing’ that Fowler and Eagleton refer to are described by Bourdieu as ‘constitutive naming’ which he sees as being one of the most typical demonstrations of the way naming things brings them into being (1990:55). Going back to the relationship between the churches and the BBC, in the early days, the churches had the power to name what was acceptable and what was unacceptable in terms of programme content and scheduling. Apart from guidance from the Broadcasting Standards Council (1999)<sup>1</sup>, to broadcasters, regarding potential offence to different religions in specific areas, the power to name has shifted to the broadcasters. Thus, in January 1925 instructions were given that all concert parties and entertainment’s were not to include adverts, dwell on drink or prohibition, make clerical impersonations, make political allusions and not introduce ‘vulgar or doubtful’ material. Nowadays every single one of those restrictions has been lifted and, pertinently for this research, clerical impersonations are a regular feature of television – two of the most frequently named programmes within the focus groups being Vicar of Dibley and Father Ted.

Bourdieu frequently refers to ‘the game’ or ‘the market place’ in order to illustrate more clearly how his abstract concepts work in a practical situation. One of the tools of ‘the game’ is the trump card. According to Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992:98) the force with which this card can be used varies. Some cards are valid, efficacious in all fields... but their relative value as trump cards is determined by each field and even by the successive states of the same field. So far as the field of religion is concerned the trump card is divine authority. Reith’s acceptance of divine authority meant that this was a valuable card for the field of religion in its relationship with broadcasting, in the beginning. However, as the ontological basis of this card was increasingly questioned (and Wolfe comments on the way broadcasting gave new stature to those questions) it became less valuable; to the extent that appealing to God’s laws as justification for the inclusion or exclusion of certain things was seen as invalid and lacking value. This difference of view is at the heart of many of the concerns expressed by religious representatives as well as members of audiences. It found relatively recent expression at the Church of England Synod (29/2/00)



when the relationship between religion and the BBC was debated<sup>2</sup>. Whilst a small handful of speakers suggested that focusing on all religions and spirituality rather than just Christianity would be a more useful way to progress, the majority of speakers not only focused on Christianity but took it as an absolute given that religion/Christianity should be included in the schedules and should be given a much greater priority<sup>3</sup>.

The internal structure of the BBC was part of the explanation of the perceived problems, offered by some speakers at Synod. For instance, genre governs marketing research planning, and religious broadcasting is not a genre so therefore no central objectives are set for religion. However the ethos within the BBC, so far as religion was concerned, was another part of the explanation – it was ratings driven and the view was taken that the BBC did not see religion as a ratings generator. The ethos within the BBC was also referred to by the ex-head of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, Rev. Ernest Rae, in a public lecture he delivered entitled “Faith in the Future” (3/11/99, Manchester). According to Mr Rae one of the reasons for negative coverage was the secularisation within the media. He described it as a questioning, secular culture, which mitigated against staff admitting to having a faith. This culture then led to the disregarding of people for whom faith was important – the audience couldn’t be spiritual because the producers are not spiritual. This secularisation was also highlighted in a talk given by Michael Wakelin, producer of *The Son of God* series (University of Edinburgh, 10/5/01). A senior member of staff, within religious broadcasting, who joined the production team asked if they had to do all this religious stuff about Jesus? Couldn’t they just focus on the clothes he wore and what games he played as a little boy? For many people of faith the appointment of Alan Bookbinder as Head of Religion and Ethics at the BBC, a declared agnostic, was further confirmation of the secularisation of the company and the denigration of religion<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There are also producer’s guidelines for the BBC and the commercial television companies, which deal with the use of religious language, most notably as swear words, and religious imagery.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that not only is the Church of England the established church but historically it had very close links with the BBC. The Archbishop of Canterbury was the first clergyman to be approached by Lord Reith in his attempt to ensure the success of the fledgling broadcasting organisation.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2 for details of the motion passed by the Synod.

<sup>4</sup> Predating the appointment of Alan Bookbinder by a few months the following letter was printed in The Daily Telegraph, with the headline, Same old secular BBC: Sir, Lorraine Heggessey, controller of BBC1, says that the proposed television series *Son of God* epitomises the new BBC1 (report, March 27). This is very honest of her, since it shows that the new BBC1 will be just like the old BBC1. The programmes, she tells us, “dare to ask surprising questions of the traditional Christian stories”. But this is just what the BBC has been doing for 30 years. It would be really daring if the BBC asked questions about another religion, say, Islam, or questioned its own secularist values. It would also be surprising if the BBC broadcast some genuine Christian programmes. For the third year running, there was no midnight or other Mass on television last Christmas. More people go to church services every Sunday than watch football on a Saturday, but you would not think so to judge by the BBC. In Roman Catholic circles now, the talk is of the vast numbers of people who are acquiring American satellite television to watch real Christian programmes. Eric Hester, Bolton, Lancs. (March 31<sup>st</sup> 2001)

The importance of the personal as well as the corporate in terms of broadcasters is related to Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which he describes as a set of historical relations 'deposited' within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action (1992:16). In *Sociology in Question* he says:

The social determinisms of which the work of art bears the traces are exerted partly through the producer's habitus, referring back to the social conditions of his production as a social subject (family etc.) and as a producer (schooling, professional contacts etc.), and partly through the social demands and constraints inscribed in the position he occupies in a particular, more or less autonomous, field of production. (1993: 141)

Although Bourdieu refers to works of art, there is no reason why it can not refer to television programmes. The habitus of individual producers has an impact on how importantly they see religion. Are they religious? Have they been brought up religiously but rejected it? Have they never embraced it? The example of the senior staff member (who apparently was an atheist) on *The Son of God* series is a good illustration of the impact of habitus. In terms of wider influences are they influenced by an ethnic approach to religion which not only means that religion is subsumed under ethnicity but also that greater care is taken when dealing with ethnic religions due to the social demands of racial awareness/equality? Bourdieu makes it clear that there are also social demands and constraints within a particular field, which relate to producers' positions in that field. Going back to the comments from Synod, Mr Wakelin and Mr Rae, if personal faith is seen as less than desirable amongst broadcasters (and if Bourdieu is correct) then those who wish to have successful careers will be affected by those constraints. How then do these sociological explanations relate to the findings of my research? In the next section I will discuss the findings from the interviews with faith representatives.

### **Faith Representatives**

I explained in the introductory chapter that it was impossible to find figures that provided an accurate breakdown of religious affiliation within Scotland. Christian churches had membership figures but figures for non-Christian religions were frequently elided with ethnicity, which was not only misleading but clearly excluded groups like Buddhists to say nothing of native converts. In the end the decision was a judgement based on informed discussion. The Christian church was represented by Roman Catholics, Church of Scotland



and the Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC). Other faiths chosen were Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jews.

The Roman Catholics, Church of Scotland and the Buddhists (Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) all had either Press Officers or Communications Officers who were the most obvious people to contact. Following the interview with the Church of Scotland Press Officer she suggested two other people, who were members of different Church Boards, who might also be useful contacts. One was the Press Officer of the Board of Social Responsibility and the other was a member of the Church and Nation Committee (which up until about two weeks before our interview had a media sub-committee). At the time of the interviews the SEC did not have a Communications Officer so the Primus (senior Bishop) was interviewed. The Jewish contact was obtained through contacting the Glasgow Synagogue who suggested the Clerk to the Synagogue would be the most appropriate person. Finding an appropriate representative of the Muslim faith was much more complicated. What I was not aware of at the time was that Muslims do not have the equivalent of a Chief Rabbi, Primus or Cardinal and therefore have no central religious organisation. Each mosque acts independently. It was suggested that there was an elderly Imam in Glasgow who might be seen as a spiritual leader in Scotland but I was advised not to contact him because of his age. In the end I interviewed the President of the Central Mosque in Edinburgh. Accessing the Sikh community proved to be the most complicated of all. Although I had a contact within the community who advised me to write to the President of the Temple I had to be interviewed by a number of the men before I could be introduced to the President. I then had to arrange a follow-up meeting. I was expecting to meet the President in the company of my contact but in fact it turned out to be a meeting with about eight of the senior men in the Temple<sup>5</sup>.

The interviews with the faith representatives were far more open-ended than the focus group interviews. Whilst my initial interest was in discovering whether or not the different faiths had a developed policy in relation to broadcasting and whether they were proactive or reactive, subsequent questions were to a large extent dependent upon the responses to those initial questions. Hence the variation in subjects covered, as can be seen in the transcripts.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 3 for list of interviewees.

<sup>6</sup> There were problems with the recording of the Primus' interview. However this was not too much of a problem. I am a member of the Communication and Information Board of the SEC and during my time on the Board have had numerous discussions in this area so my own knowledge of the church's approach is more than sufficient.

### Presence or absence of broadcasting policies and reasons for this.

Even when there was a Press Officer the policy tended to be reactive. The main focus was on the print media and the issuing of press releases in order to raise the profile of their faith or to respond to relevant issues. However, engagement with television and radio tended to be equally reactive. These two kinds of responses were mentioned by the Jews:

We tend to be pretty reactive. Probably I suppose in two different ways. Every now and then one or other, mainly radio stations but occasionally TV will get in touch and say we need somebody to do a Thought for the Day slot. Or some specific religious programme, like Eikon or whatever, will ask for somebody to take part in a round table discussion. So we're reactive in the sense that we're responding to an invitation. And the other kind of reactivity is if there's something somebody hears on a news bulletin or a documentary or a magazine programme that they'll then get in touch with the producers and say this isn't on.

(Ephraim Borowski)

Taking part in religious programmes was also one of the ways in which the SEC engaged with the media. This clearly varied in different areas of Scotland with some being much more welcoming of clergy than others. The Roman Catholics and the Church of Scotland also had involvement with religious broadcasting but outwith that it was a question of either trying to get information out or trying to ensure that when journalists were seeking information they were given a proper explanation, which would not propagate misunderstandings. How successfully people felt this was done will be addressed later on. For the Buddhists there was not only the problem of being a fairly small religion (approximately 130,000 in the UK according to Vishvapani) but there was the problem of a lack of cohesion amongst Buddhists which meant that speaking with one voice was very difficult. They occasionally feature in radio religious broadcasting but financial resources prevent them from being proactive. Whilst Sikhs are heard on religious broadcasting the Sikh community in Edinburgh seems to have no contact with the media whatsoever. In fact it was an issue that they had never really considered before; although it was clear, in the course of the interview, that some of the men had thought that their community would benefit from greater coverage in the media. Yaseem Mohammed (Muslims) seemed to



have a reasonable amount of contact with the media though I got the impression it was either documentaries about Islam or religious broadcasting.<sup>7</sup>

Reacting to either journalistic enquiries or responding to events in the news, from a faith perspective, were the main ways that broadcasting policies manifested themselves. Having said that, not one interviewee described their organisation as having a policy. When it came to fictional broadcasting there was either a complete absence of policy or occasionally they were put in the position of having to respond to a media agenda. The Jews, Sikhs and Muslims had a complete absence of policy in this area. It seemed to be down to individuals to respond to broadcasters if there were something they were unhappy with. Father McLaughlin (Roman Catholic) took the view that something would have to be really extreme, in fictional broadcasting, before they responded to it but a response after the event was not likely to be that effective. He referred to the making of the film *Priest*, which had upset many in the Catholic Church:

There were concerns raised for example when the filming of *Priest* was being done, about how involved the Church should get in that. It really all took place down in England. We were just told about it to be warned, if you like. And at that time the church took a stance not to cooperate with the filmmakers. It was felt it was an unfair portrayal perhaps. I think that was the wrong decision. Or at least perhaps that's the only sanction we have if we're dealing with a programme at the making stage. You either cooperate or you don't cooperate. If you cooperate then you have a limited input; if you don't cooperate then you have no input or control.

Although Father McLaughlin is referring to a film, in this instance it is indicative of the situation that all of the faith representatives identified. Programme makers were the ones with the power. The faiths could provide information, which might make a programme historically accurate (what did Church of Scotland missionaries wear; what colour robes would a Cardinal wear?), and even then it would still be reactive but they could not influence the content of the programmes. The programme makers were the ones with the

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that post September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 the number of Muslim groups, which have appeared, on television has been quite amazing. Yaseem was in part of a news item on Islam and attempts by politicians to convince the Muslim community that the war in Afghanistan was not a war against Islam. However, at the time I was trying to find an interviewee members of the Muslim community told me that there wasn't one particular group or person who would be representative of the community. It perhaps begs the question of just how representative some of these groups are or whether in fact it is a case of the media needing something and making what they find fit their agenda.

power to 'name', which is of course one aspect of symbolic power and one of the ways in which one field dominates another.

Pat Holgate (Church of Scotland) provided an example of the way the church is often pushed into a reactive position due to media perceptions of the church:

What they want is us to be outraged Ailsa. There is no doubt about it and they get quite miffed if you are not... It was a newspaper and it was something they thought was outrageous... It was Claudia Schiffer and somebody or other were going to be involved in some drama they were doing about Adam and Eve and wasn't this outrageous? And well, no, why?

*Why?*

Well why, why would it be? Ah well, well you know they didn't know why, they actually didn't know why they wanted to be outraged. They just did. There really wasn't a story. OK so Claudia Schiffer and whoever the guy was were going to play Adam and Eve, so what?

Again this is an example of press journalists but their response clearly affects the way the different faiths think about (or don't think about) broadcasting. This was articulated by Mr Sinclair (Church and Nation Committee) and quite clearly by Hugh Brown (Board of Social Responsibility) when he was explaining the absence of a policy or mechanism for dealing with problematic broadcast representations:

I think the difficulty with having any kind of mechanism, if we were to set that up, we ourselves would end up becoming the prudes. Oh it's only the Church of Scotland, they must be against this, they must be against that.

It seems clear that so far as faith representatives are concerned the field of broadcasting, as a structured and structuring instrument of communication, brings its power to bear in the way that the different religions feel unable to either respond effectively or influence effectively fictional portrayals of religion. The absence of mechanisms for providing input, pre and post production, and the fear that those they seek to criticise have the power to make their criticisms look ridiculous conspire to keep them in a defensive and less powerful position. In the quotation from Wolfe (1984) at the beginning of this chapter he referred to the orthodoxy of the church, which 'like many a fragile Grecian vase, was full of hairline cracks'. It does seem as if one reason that religion finds itself in this less



powerful position is because those 'hairline cracks' widened and the vase ended up in separate pieces, with little idea of why it broke or much awareness that it could mend itself (to stretch this metaphor to extremes) and present a united image.

#### Specific problems encountered with the media.

All of the problems that were mentioned relate, again, to linguistic exchanges and naming. There is the added issue of the habitus of broadcasters, not only in terms of their own socialisation but also in terms of their professional situations. All of the interviewees, in some form or another, characterised their experiences of the media (rather than just broadcasting) as being on the receiving end of either laziness or arrogance. Laziness had two aspects to it. The first centred on an interest in getting sound bites rather than in-depth explanations. The second related to ignorance and a refusal to seek out correct information or an intellectual inability (which was the kinder explanation) to understand or a wilful disregard for the explanation (which was seen as the more likely explanation). Arrogance was not dissimilar to the refusal to seek out correct information but it had the added dimension that the broadcasters were right and therefore didn't need to seek out information.

Father McLaughlin (Roman Catholics) was quite clear about the consequences of broadcast images of the church that were only partial:

And if you're talking about soaps or comedies or whatever you are dealing with, well the people who watch them have no, well the vast majority of them presumably have no great background in the particular teaching of a particular church so they are hostages to whatever is coming across. So it becomes very difficult to distinguish between what Father Ted says the Catholic Church says and what the Catholic Church actually says.

Although some of the examples given by interviewees were related to press journalists they were usually extrapolated out to the way religion was portrayed fictionally. Examples of laziness, in whatever form, were: Yaseem Mohammed (Muslims) felt they only wanted to show the repressive side of Islam; David Sinclair (Church and Nation Committee) felt they only wanted the church to express outrage over sex and drugs (in terms of press journalists, they would either twist things or get a more outrageous speaker); Ephraim Borowski (Jews) raised the problem of stereotypes, which was part of broadcaster's laziness. If the alternative to a limited presence was to have an increase of stereotypical

representations of Jews was that any kind of gain or would it in fact play to people's prejudices? Yaseem Mohammed's view, in this area, was that absence was better than presence, particularly in relation to soap operas – the moral values of, and the behaviour in, soaps were incompatible with Islam and it would only encourage further stereotypes of repressiveness.

Hugh Brown (Board of Social Responsibility) and Pat Holgate (Church of Scotland) identified the marginalisation of religion in broadcasting/scheduling as being indicative of broadcaster's secular arrogance, whereby religion was unimportant to them, therefore it must be unimportant to everyone else. Vishvapani (FWBO) spoke about a combination of laziness and arrogance in relation to Buddhists. Whilst Buddhist iconography tended to be a feature of advertising, Buddhists rarely appeared in fictional broadcasting. The iconography (serene, meditative, transcendental, picture of Buddha) created a myth of 'exotic otherness' which bore no relation to the way western Buddhists practised their faith. However these signifiers of Buddhism led to arrogance when broadcasters wanted to portray it fictionally because they 'knew' better than Buddhists what was representative of Buddhism<sup>8</sup>.

Whilst stereotypes were seen as being part of fictional broadcasting – part of the fictional shorthand that is employed in drama – there was, nevertheless, a feeling that the range of religious characters on offer were extremely limited. The Sikhs, Jews and Muslims were all concerned about stereotyping if the profile of their religions were to be increased. I said earlier that Yaseem Mohammed (Muslims) felt that no portrayal was better than a stereotyped portrayal. The Sikhs however felt that, providing stereotypes weren't always negative, a raised profile was better than no profile. Ephraim Borowski (Jews) touched on the fact that frequently religion is only understood in terms of its prohibitions. If characters are not visually distinguishable in their religion then their religious distinction has to be portrayed somehow. It is likely to be in terms of focusing on the negatives or prohibitions. Ally that to extreme religious behaviour and his feeling was that this was more likely to be the kind of Judaism that would end up being portrayed because it was what broadcasters (and audiences) saw as more dramatically interesting. I spoke earlier about the habitus of

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<sup>8</sup> He had been approached by the makers of *Absolutely Fabulous*. One of the characters was going on a retreat which was based on a type of Buddhism known as sokogatai (or designer Buddhism apparently! – spelling provided by V ishvapabi). They asked what a shrine room would look like and were told to keep it simple. They said no, we've got to have a Buddha image, so they said well that's all. What ended up on the screen was not remotely accurate. The fantasy of Buddhism was seen as being more accurate than the reality.



broadcasters and the possible impact of an equal opportunities schemata. In relation to this Ephraim felt that it was quite likely that those kinds of portrayals would not be done:

...and then of course what will happen will be that producers will, for reasons of political correctness in a good sense rather than a bad sense, will say well hang on, we don't want to do that because by the nature of the thing it's a negative stereotype.

Presence was less of a problem for Christians but the use of limited stereotypes was. Father McLaughlin (RC) and Bishop Cameron (SEC) commented on the way the religious characters were always odd, especially in soaps. The Church of Scotland interviewees felt that clergy were not well portrayed being either buffoonish, 'goody-goodies' or 'Holy Willies'. There was also a feeling that portrayals of Roman Catholic priests were more human and accessible than portrayals of Church of Scotland ministers. The portrayal of SEC clergy (never mind the SEC) was not even an issue as nobody could ever remember seeing one.

The final area in which the habitus of broadcasters seemed to affect religion was their inability to deal with the divisions that occur within religions, and particularly within denominations like the Church of Scotland where there is no clear hierarchy. For those whose habitus includes religion there is an awareness that not everybody 'sings from the same hymn sheet' all of the time and this is something that is a blessing as much as it is a curse. However for those broadcasters who are outwith religion the demands of the field are such that destructive conflict is seen as more interesting than constructive conflict. Again, many of the examples related to press coverage of internal differences. According to Bishop Cameron (SEC) their experiences with the former Primus, Bishop Holloway, and the media were an extreme example of this and were part of the explanation for them keeping a low profile in the months following his retiral. However, this focus on destructive conflict seemed to be at the basis of many fictional portrayals of religion – arranged marriages were always forced marriages; priests' friendships with women (or men) became sexual temptation; disapproval of someone's behaviour would be judgmental to give but a few examples. The realities of religion and the inability of the media to cope with this were commented on by Father McLaughlin (RC):

But when it comes to the kind of religion dealt with as religion, as opposed to this thing that impacts on real life, which in some ways they're quite reluctant to

regard as religion or religious in any way, then yes, I think it does fall back on the outspoken comments or the caricature...

He goes on to discuss the best kind of religious broadcasting, which he sees as being more oblique, less obviously religious and makes a connection, again, with the way this impacts on audiences:

...and the problem then is that's what happens in things like soaps, is that in a sense that the portrayal of religion is coming at you from an oblique angle and from a very skewed perspective and it must have an impact because if that is the portrayal that is continuously coming across on programmes that have the highest ratings of all then either Marshall McLuhan got it wrong or yes, it's having some sort of effect.

It was a concern expressed by all of the interviewees. None of them could be described as extreme or fundamentalist in the practise of their religion. They all emphasised the difference of a lived religious life from a televisual portrayal and on the whole they concluded that the media either could not or would not provide more representative portrayals.

### Other Issues

There were a small number of issues that were not universally mentioned but which were interesting, partly because they were also mentioned by the focus groups.

*Religion/Ethnicity.* This was mentioned by the Jews and the Sikhs. The Sikhs had difficulty in thinking of any Sikh characters on television but what they could do was identify an actor whom they knew to be a Sikh in real life. They made the point that he was usually included in dramas as an Asian and had even played a Muslim at one point. Ephraim Borowski (Jews) referred to the blurring of religion and ethnicity, which exists in society and gave the following example:

Well I was giving an example to the Minister this morning. This is the third Minister I've told this story to in the last fortnight. The recently published report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Police in Scotland had a number of recommendations. I mean, obviously it's very much dominated by the Lawrence or post-Lawrence culture and so forth. But one of the recommendations,



recommendation 18, is that they've got to be ethnically sensitive and they should have halal meat meals in their freezers in police stations. And I said excuse me, what's this got to do with ethnicity. That's a religious requirement. And it's only in there because you identify Asians with Muslims when in fact the majority of Asians in the UK, not in Scotland but the UK, may well be Hindu. I don't know. Nobody knows, but it's a possibility.

If such a high level report can mistake ethnicity for religion it doesn't seem surprising that so many people in the focus groups assumed that an Asian must be a Muslim.

*Religion too boring/nice.* Hugh Brown (Board of Social Responsibility) and Ephraim Borowski (Jews) both commented that showing ordinary religious people would be too boring for television. People being nice is not interesting and television is only interested in things that are interesting hence its focus on the weirder aspects of religion. What is interesting about Hugh's comments is that he wanted to see more religious portrayals, which more accurately reflected the ordinariness of religious people's lives. Part of the problem seems to lie with the fact that he hadn't thought about this before, he hadn't seen anything previously that he could draw on and he wasn't a scriptwriter. Interestingly, some of the focus groups did suggest ways in which this could be done and, as will be seen in the interviews with the broadcasters, two of the soap operas have found a way of dealing with this.

*Religious discrimination.* Whilst everybody recognised that there was an imbalance in the way non-Christian faiths were portrayed the comments about discrimination came from the Christians. Father McLaughlin (RC) and Pat Holgate (Church of Scotland) were talking more about sectarianism. Father McLaughlin referred to the long history of sectarianism in Scotland and the fact that religion was rarely discussed in public. He also made the point that whilst it was unacceptable to 'call someone a black b you can call someone a fenian b... you can't get done for that whereas you can get done for the first'. There is no protection from religious discrimination. Which of course ties in to current debates about the desirability of introducing legislation which will make religious discrimination an offence. Pat Holgate's view, however, was that Roman Catholic priests tended to be portrayed in a more positive light than Church of Scotland ministers who were usually seen as being very cold and Calvinistic. Father Ted might take the mickey out of priests but it didn't lose them respect whereas the image of the Church of Scotland could cause people to dislike the church. David Sinclair (Church and Nation Committee) was the only one to

refer to discrimination against the Christian church, 'There is a sense that greater care is taken with other faiths'. Again this was a feeling that was echoed within the focus groups.

*Falling Standards.* Hugh Brown (Board of Social Responsibility) was the only person to mention this and in some ways it was not surprising, given the area of interest of the Board. He mentioned Channel 4 and Channel 5 in particular for the amount of explicit sex which they show; things which he felt the ITC would not have let pass a few years ago. His feeling was that in the search for ratings the 'shock factor' had to be constantly increased. At one point he referred to the campaigning of Mary Whitehouse sympathetically. The media were responsible for falling moral standards but equally he acknowledged that the churches did not complain enough and certainly not in a united way. Again this concern with falling standards was something that was echoed within some of the focus groups.

### **Christian Broadcasters**

If, as I had initially wondered, people were dissatisfied with mainstream broadcasting what kind of alternative viewing would they engage in? It was not my intention to interview any of the producers rather to inform myself about what was on offer. Accordingly, I contacted all of the companies listed in the ITC Handbook, which were described as providing religious programming. However, I discovered that one of the companies (GRF Radio) was based in Glasgow and I secured an interview with the Programming Controller. In the end I had information on four organisations: GRF Radio, GodDigital, CCN Europe and SAT7.

#### GodDigital, CCN Europe, SAT7.

All of these organisations are concerned with Christian programming. However SAT7 is a satellite television service for the people in the Middle East. According to their information the aim of the service is to address 'all life issues from the perspective of the "mind of Christ" and under the guidance of the word of God'. Their stated aim is not to proselytise or to undermine any other religions. It is primarily a support for Christians in the Middle East who want to practise their faith within a specific culture.

GodDigital and CCN Europe are both evangelical Christian organisations. Although I had access to CCN Europe newsletters there was little information about the kinds of programmes they either produce or deliver. They use all media to convey an evangelical Christian message and most of the stories in the newsletters refer to revival meetings where conversions take place. GodDigital are very strongly in favour of Christian broadcasting and their response to the government's White Paper on broadcasting makes this very clear.



They offer a range of programmes from Christian music (in all its forms), to coverage of revival meetings around the world, to ‘wholesome’ entertainment, to children’s Christian television. They also have a radio satellite service which aims to cover many of the former communist countries. The emphasis in their publicity is on family entertainment (looking at the final sentence it seems to be a very traditional family,):

Why GodDigital? As we enter the new millennium – it is increasingly apparent that the media is the single most powerful tool of influence in its bid for the minds and souls of 21<sup>st</sup> century mankind. The media’s daily assault on the moral fabric of British society with sexual innuendo, violence and humanism only serves to propagate a gospel that conflicts on almost every level with the biblical message of Christian truth that every practising Christian family values... [we offer] a wide choice of Christian viewing around the clock on a platform that is safe for your spouse, safe for your children and safe for you<sup>9</sup>.

One of the aims of GodDigital is to have dedicated Christian channels available for everyone in the UK. Whilst their long-term aim, clearly, is to turn the UK in to a wholly Christian country their short term aim seems to be to encourage Christians to turn away from secular broadcasting and to move into a ghetto of Christian broadcasting. However, as the focus group interviews showed, viewers of GodDigital have not rejected secular broadcasting although they value what it has to offer.

### GRF Radio

When I went to interview Brian Muir, GRF Radio, I assumed that his organisation had similar aims. I was completely wrong. Rather than being a Christian radio station they were actually independent radio producers of religious broadcasting and had been in existence since 1948 (making them the oldest in Europe). Their view of Christian radio is that it is ghetto broadcasting although they will provide them with programmes. However one of their main objections to Christian radio is that mainstream broadcasting would withdraw from religious broadcasting if it existed nation-wide, thus increasing the ghettoisation of religion. He also made the point that UCB (the company behind GodDigital) was extremely expensive to run and he saw this as a waste of resources especially when there was a potential audience, for the whole of the UK, of less than 1 million. This estimate was based on his knowledge that Premier Radio (based in London)

only gets 100,000 listeners out of 7.2 million potential listeners. The difference in approach between GRF Radio and GodDigital is quite clearly theological and reflects different understandings of evangelism. It is interesting that not one speaker at the Church of England Synod, referred to earlier, suggested Christian broadcasting as an alternative to the perceived inadequacies of the BBC. Achieving a higher profile within mainstream broadcasting was seen as far more important and far more theologically sound.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this chapter on the faith representatives it can be seen that none of the religions has a clear policy when it comes to fictional broadcasting. Instead it is seen as the responsibility of individual members to make comment. There is a strong feeling that broadcasters are unable to deal with the complexities of religion and for a number of reasons resort to either stereotypes or caricatures. There is also a strong feeling that broadcasters are not interested in getting religion right either because it is unimportant or because they have an agenda into which they want religion to fit. It is also clear that the absence of policies within individual religions mitigates against the possibility of all religions coming together in order to challenge the broadcasters. However there seems to be very little desire for dedicated religious channels because they would contribute to the invisibility and ghettoisation of religion in mainstream broadcasting. In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings of the interviews with broadcasters.

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<sup>9</sup> Their publicity package is quite fascinating not only for its aggressive promotion of Christianity above all else but also for a number of factual errors, the first of which is to designate John Reith a Reverend!



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Broadcasters**

#### **Introduction**

Who to interview as far as fictional broadcasting was concerned was based upon the results of the focus group and faith representatives' interviews. Which programmes were mentioned most frequently and what issues had been raised in relation to those programmes? Having identified the main programmes, I then contacted the programme makers (see Appendix 4 for list of non-respondents). I was unable to secure an interview with anyone from *The Vicar of Dibley* but a few months after the interviews were completed there was a documentary on television about the programme. Accordingly, I have referred to this programme in this chapter. I also interviewed people who were involved with religious broadcasting (and general broadcasting) partly because I had access and partly because of the historical significance of religious broadcasting. Current attitudes to religious broadcasting might shed some light on current attitudes to religion in broadcasting. Like the interviews with the faith representatives, the broadcasters' interviews were very open-ended and varied considerably. Some were telephone interviews, some were e-mail questions and responses, and some were face to face. The time allowed for interviews varied from fifteen minutes to just over an hour. Most of the interviewees stressed that they were offering a personal opinion and not necessarily speaking for the programme, even though they worked for the programme and I had made it clear that I wanted to talk about their particular programme. Accordingly, not all interviewees will be identified by name.

## **Interviewees**

The following programmes (with the relevant character mentioned if appropriate) provided an interviewee: Brookside (The Murrays); Coronation Street (Dev, Emily Bishop); Hollyoaks (Zara, Brian); Peak Practice; Taggart (D I Jardine); EastEnders (Dot Cotton); High Road (Mrs Mac). The main areas that were covered in the interviews were:

- Constraints – finance, time, planning
- Knowledge of religion
- Dramatic limitations
- Reasons for inclusion
- Reasons for omission

Within those areas a number of audience perceptions/misconceptions were addressed. Some perceptions/misconceptions on the part of the broadcasters were also addressed. These will be explained shortly. Having listed the main areas, it is important to note that not all of the interviews either covered the topics or were able to explore them in detail due to limits on the interviewee's time. This was particularly true of the shorter telephone interviews.

## **Constraints**

Within the field of broadcasting there are particular practices that affect the way in which programmes are made. However, ratings govern everything. If ratings start to fall, a programme is in danger of being cancelled. When there are well-established formulae which audiences clearly respond to there is very little incentive to alter radically those formulae. For the independent companies especially there is a clear link to advertisers. The spokesperson from *Peak Practice*, in response to a question about the desired effect of the programme said:

The answer is simply to retain, and increase if possible, the ratings. Without a reasonable share, the advertisers will go elsewhere. You might have noticed an additional commercial break in the PP hour...the drama now has 4 acts. This is purely a commercial move...more ad space to sell.

A similar point was made by Mark Grindle, Executive Producer of *High Road*, when discussing the constraints he was under concerning the programme's development and production,



...and for a start it would be a brave producer who killed off Mrs Mac. So straight away you can see the audience like her, which for a commercial organisation which is chasing advertising, that's a character that we don't mess with.

He went on to discuss the nature of production which he likened to a machine which had to work at a particular rate,

...but should you slow it down, try to do something different with it, then the machine starts to slow down and there are economic knock-ons. But within that once we accept we have a budget we do try as much as possible to get it right. It's a commercial organisation and the money comes from advertising revenue.

David Hanson, Senior Producer of *Brookside*, made the point that although they are trying to get away from sensational storylines these days so much of what drives programming is linked to ratings and sensational storylines do get the ratings. Ratings were also a consideration for *Taggart*'s Executive Producer, Graham Gordon. However that programme seemed to have a very specific audience demographic and the aim was to maintain that. Clearly then faith representatives' comments and focus group comments about ratings being the most important issue and sensationalising issues (particularly religion) seem to have some basis in the reality of production. Those working in the field have to conform to the practices of the field.

Financial and time constraints regarding the amount of time that can be spent researching particular storylines are also a consideration. Some programmes have bigger budgets to work with which allows them to spend more time researching background information. *High Road* was one programme that had to work with a fairly small budget because it was a regional programme so although the Executive Producer would have liked to have more research it was not possible. However, he did say that the majority of writers at the time of the interview were Roman Catholic and the 'feel' for religion in the programme came from their experiences. He also talked about the time constraints which affect things – there are between fourteen and twenty-three characters and six storylines which have to be dealt with in a two week period, which does not leave much time for research. For the rest of the programmes time constraints seemed to be more relevant. *Hollyoaks* for instance has five or six issues that have to be researched over a two-week period although with long term stories the research would be continuous. As far as the character of Brian was concerned there did not seem to be anybody on the production team with direct knowledge of young

Christians. Instead, they did extensive research based on newspaper articles, speaking to various religious organisations, using the Internet and books. This information is then passed on to the writers and producers who incorporate it into their storylines and subsequent scripts. All of the issues that are covered are backed up by extensive research notes. *Brookside* and *Coronation Street* also have extensive research for different storylines. However, in relation to religion and the Murray family in *Brookside* the series producer, Paul Marquess, had his own knowledge of being a Catholic, which fed in to that process. In *Coronation Street* there seems to be little research as far as Emily Bishop's religious practise is concerned. Instead, they rely on the fact that some of the writers are Church of England. However, when Dev was included the Asian community was consulted in order to ensure accuracy. Nevertheless the decision seems to have been taken that he should be primarily western and secondarily Hindu – which might go some way to explaining the inability of white focus group members to identify his religion.

Dot Cotton in *EastEnders* seems to be as similarly under-researched as Emily Bishop. The view was that quoting the bible was one of the markers of Dot's religiosity and it provided the writers with a tool when they needed to make a point. Whether in fact she was representative in any way of the modern Church of England did not seem to have been addressed. There was an awareness that congregations were getting older and that there were more women in churches, but how they actually practised their faith was not seen as important. In fact, for most of the interview the view was taken that my interviewees had got it wrong if they saw Dot as being negative, rather than the possibility that the broadcasters might have got it wrong, if that was the way people saw Dot. It became clear that the commitment to research Christianity accurately was not as strong as it was for other faiths. In discussing the possible future inclusion of a Sikh family, it was clear that extensive research was being entered into in order to avoid causing offence. They also wanted to make sure that an interesting storyline could be developed which reflected the complexities of Sikhism without it becoming religious broadcasting. Resource or time constraints did not seem to be a problem rather it seemed to come back to an equal opportunities or anti-racism ethos from which Christianity was excluded.

What does exist with all of the programmes mentioned so far is long-term forward planning and a very clear idea of what characters are like and how they have behaved in the past. This meant that when Alma died in *Coronation Street* they were able to look at her biography and decide that she would definitely have had a humanist funeral. *Peak Practice* operates slightly differently because although there are regular characters with



some ongoing storylines each episode will have stand alone stories which achieve resolution in that episode. The emphasis on ratings also means that “there is constant shifting from plot-driven to medically-driven to character-driven storylines.” Although much of the writing and production takes place in Derbyshire, the overall decision making comes from London. This metrocentric view of the world dominates much of what is included in the programme<sup>1</sup> and that seems to affect the limited presence of religion. The metrocentric view is that they are not interested in religion and therefore viewers are not likely to be interested. This is ‘supported’ by the fact that they do not receive letters requesting religious characters, monitoring of their website<sup>2</sup>, and talking to viewers.

*Taggart* is completely different from the other programmes in that it is totally plot-driven. It also has no long-term future and only a short-term past. Graham Gordon had only recently taken over as Executive Producer and familiarisation with past events was through discussion with other executives and watching between six and eight previous episodes. This means that if an aspect of a character has not emerged in those six or eight episodes then it is lost forever (unless, I suppose, the new producer has watched the programme for many years). Which not only explained Graham Gordon’s amazement when I told him that D I Jardine had been identified as a Christian by the focus groups but also explained the certainty and confusion of the focus groups. Long term viewers remembered when the character was definitely Christian so they were certain about that but they were confused as to whether or not he was overtly Christian now. However, in light of what they ‘knew’ they still interpreted his actions through a Christian lens – although it had obviously been a few years since any of the producers ‘knew’ of his Christianity.

Other planning constraints relate to shooting time and how much preparation time is available. There is no consistency amongst the programmes in this area so it is impossible to draw any conclusion other than to say it has an impact on the amount of research that can be done. The one programme where these planning constraints actually had an impact on the inclusion of a religious character was *High Road*. Given where this programme is meant to be set (slightly north of the central belt of Scotland) there should be a Church of

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<sup>1</sup> A script was submitted to London where a cairn was to be built on the top of a peak to commemorate a dead child. The response from London was, why couldn’t they just plant a tree? Nobody knew what a cairn was or how inappropriate a tree would be on top of a windswept Derbyshire peak.

<sup>2</sup> Having looked at the website I’m not surprised that nobody asks for religion as it seems to be a place where viewers talk about their favourite actors and insult contributors to the discussion list who are critical of favoured actors. It seems a little disingenuous. Not unlike a school canteen, saying nobody wants smoked salmon because they don’t ask for it. If all that is on offer is fish and chips, they are not likely to realise that asking for smoked salmon is a possibility.

Scotland minister who probably serves three or four charges. This means they would make irregular appearances in the programme. However whenever a new shoot is due to take place actors are contracted for 17 weeks and irregular appearances are more problematic financially and less attractive to actors. Nevertheless *High Road* does have a commitment to a quasi-reality so at some point those problems will be overcome and a minister will be included again.

### Knowledge of religion

To some extent, this area has already been addressed in the previous section. The question arose out of a presumption in the focus groups that one of the reasons for the absence of religion (or the negative ways in which it is portrayed) was due to the habitus of producers – secular and dismissive of religion. From the interviews with the broadcasters, this was not always the case. *High Road*, *Coronation Street* and *Brookside* all had either writers or producers who had a faith background, which was drawn on in the development of storylines and scripts. The personal faith of the series producer of *Brookside* seemed to be the main driving force behind the decision to include a Catholic family in the programme. He was of the view that there was not any representation of ordinary religious people and so he wanted the Murrys to be an ordinary, working class, Catholic family. In *High Road* the variation in the faith of the scriptwriters meant that the way religion was presented would be debated until a consensus was reached, which not only satisfied religious sensibilities but also satisfied dramatic considerations.

The interviewee from *EastEnders* was unaware of the religious background of the production team but stressed that their knowledge came from extensive research and close contact with the Church of England Communications Office. However, as I said earlier, when it came to the way Dot Cotton practised her religion it seemed to bear very little relationship to contemporary Anglicanism. Despite *Coronation Street* having writers who were Anglicans, a similar point could be made about Emily Bishop. *Peak Practice* and *Taggart* rarely included religion. For *Peak Practice*, this seemed to be based not only on the metrocentric attitudes, to which I referred earlier, but also to an awareness of declining church membership, which provided a justification for the omission of religion. The executive producer of *Taggart* was personally ignorant of religion, although not antagonistic but again, because of the nature of the programme, storylines with religion were rarely seen as relevant. They were also very aware that the expectations of their audience had to be conformed to and the use of religious profanities was something that



caused a great deal of upset<sup>3</sup>. There was however a different kind of sensitivity about including non-Christian religions. For instance, they would be very cautious about using a Muslim as a killer because they are part of a minority group and equally they would not have Jews murdering Arabs – “We don’t go there!”

*Hollyoaks*, in response to a question about personal religiosity in the production team, did not mention anyone. Again, their knowledge was based on research and a commitment to create a rounded character for whom religion was part of their life. None of the interviewees I spoke to mentioned having anybody in the team who came from a non-Christian faith and that lack seemed to be part of the sensitivity that was expressed regarding the inclusion of other faiths. For *Peak Practice*, the inclusion of other faiths was seen as being irrelevant given the setting of the programme but at the same time there was another example of the blurring of religion with ethnicity. It was assumed that a character from a non-Christian faith would be ethnically different and therefore the programme would have to deal with racism, which they did not particularly want to do.

Whilst focus group explanations of irreligiosity were true in some instances it was not the case across the board. What did seem to be true was that overall greater efforts were made to research non-Christian religions than Christianity. Details about Christianity were seen as important. For instance, how would the Anglican Church respond to the marriage of a transsexual? Yet, the practise of Anglicanism seemed less important. This ties in with comments from the faith representatives about being consulted on detail but not on theology.

### Dramatic Limitations

The main concern for *Taggart* is to produce a murder mystery, which at the end of the day is a morality tale. They include very few topical issues and seek not to offend their audience or alienate them. It is very much a plot-driven show so to include a religious dimension to a character would be out of character with the show’s aims. Although *Peak Practice* shifts the focus of the show in terms of plot and character their main focus is the accuracy of the medical storylines, with a sub-focus on the problems of different kinds of employment in the Cardale area (the fictional setting of the programme). The programme has been described as a medical drama in a rural setting and the introduction of topics which would disturb that description are seen as a potential risk to viewing figures. The rural setting is also part of the potential foreign sales of *Peak Practice*. It appeals to ex-

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<sup>3</sup> Words that producers are particularly warned against including gratuitously are: God, Damn, Hell, Goddam,

patriot nostalgia, especially for viewers who live in high centres of population. To include topics which might be contentious (and religion would seem to be one such topic) would be to upset that nostalgic potential.

Something I had wondered about and which had also been raised by some of the focus group members was why characters would say they were off to the pub but you never heard them saying they were off to church or some other marker of religiosity which didn't have the same negative connotations as bible-quoting (something which seems to be done fairly routinely in *Neighbours*, with Harold Bishop often attending Salvation Army events, which nobody sees). For those programmes which had chosen to use markers of religiosity (*Coronation Street*, *High Road*, *EastEnders*), rather than making religion an integral and interesting part of a character, the not unreasonable response was that it was poor drama. Mark Grindle from *High Road* and *Coronation Street* made the point that doing that would 'clog up the drama' with detail which prevented the viewer from working things out. However, for *Brookside* and *Hollyoaks* their different approaches allowed for a different dramatic approach which can be addressed more usefully in the next section.

#### Reasons for inclusion of religion

Both *Brookside* and *Hollyoaks* took the view that religion can make good drama. There was an awareness in *Brookside* that there was a history of tending to make religion as either something comic or sinister. It was felt that to include a Catholic family with interesting characters would mean that viewers would recognise either themselves or somebody they knew. A family like the Murrays, where some members were religious, would not only provide a wide age range but would also provide differing points of view within that family, most notably the debates around IVF and abortion. Equally, the view was taken that their encounters with other people in the Close would ensure that they had a point of view that was different from the rest. Interestingly the interview with *EastEnders* and the discussion about a Sikh family seemed to be following similar lines. The potential for interesting debates amongst characters, when one of them was religious was also mentioned by the focus groups as having dramatic potential and being highly entertaining.

*Hollyoaks* had taken a similar view to *Brookside*. One of the aims of *Hollyoaks* seems to be to challenge stereotypical views and to challenge viewers' preconceptions. None of the other characters was religious and to have that as a facet of Brian's character would make



him stand out and hopefully lead on to new stories that would bounce off other characters. The method of Brian's introduction was explained thus:

We knew that Zara was to return from Scotland as a Goth, and that she would return with her musician boyfriend, yet this would have been a typical teenage rebellion story. We decided to highlight the preconceptions that would go with this story, by reversing the roles of who is shocked by this revelation. Brian, we would presume is there to annoy Mrs Morgan, but instead it annoys Zara that he is a Christian. By doing this we have shown how there are accepted ways of seeing people, by all age groups, and hopefully shown that this needn't be the case... We are constantly striving to be innovative and new, but also remaining reflective of the society which we represent, therefore we have a willingness to create characters that do not fall into stereotypes. The point you raise, about religious characters being too boring has been acknowledged by Zara's initial reaction to finding out that Brian was a Christian. She like most of the viewers (I would think) thought that he was a little strange, and probably unable to have a good time. The fact that we have put him in a rock group and shown that he is fallible (Steph) [another character with whom he had sex] will probably dispel this belief.

It seems clear from these two programmes that it is possible to think differently about portrayals of religion and to see dramatic possibilities. It was also clear from the televised interview with Richard Curtis (writer of *The Vicar of Dibley*) that he saw not only dramatic possibilities in the story of a woman vicar, but that his desire to produce the programme was informed by his conviction that the ordination of women was right and proper. The Church of England had first ordained women in 1992 and according to Curtis he wanted the programme (which was first broadcast in 1994) to challenge those who continued to oppose the ordination of women.

Despite arguments about increasing secularisation in the UK it seems unlikely that any community exists where there are no religious practitioners. As far as this research is concerned, the absence of a totally non-religious group in the focus groups would seem to support that statement. Nevertheless, both of these programmes felt that there were difficulties with including non-Christian faiths. For *Hollyoaks* it seems that the creation of a new character has primacy and if religion would make sense for that character then it would be included, rather than deciding they needed, for instance, a Muslim and then trying to develop appropriate storylines. This seems to me to be a fine distinction, which

allows for the continued exclusion of non-Christian characters. For *Brookside*, the view was taken that it was better to be knowledgeable about what you are writing and in terms of *Brookside* Catholicism is the most likely faith. However the concluding remark that 'these are the kinds of family that people know' would seem to suggest that the perceived audience is predominantly white with affiliations to Christianity.

### Reasons for Omission of Religion

To some extent the reasons offered in this section echo explanations offered in earlier sections. *Taggart* is sensitive to the portrayal of religion for fear of offending their audience. As far as the main characters are concerned, it is not seen as particularly relevant because the murder mystery is paramount. The partial portrayal of religion in *High Road*, notably the absence of a minister, is a question of financial and planning constraints. *Peak Practice* is a combination of producers' habitus and dramatic constraints. As far as 'other religions' are concerned, the following explanation was offered:

...once again, taking into account the type of individual responsible for storylining, and considering the viewers' expectations, it is understandable why these issues are omitted. I don't believe that this is due to proactive avoidance, but rather a passive omission, if that makes sense.

This decision by omission was also mentioned by *Coronation Street*. It seemed as if Emily Bishop was only included because, as an older character, she provided a link with past characters like Ena Sharples and a time when the programme was more moral and religious. Passive omission does make sense in a context where religion is not seen as either relevant or capable of being included in a dramatically interesting way. The *Brookside* interviewee suggested that an explanation for omission could be that other people have not seriously thought about or do not have the knowledge of religion. This would seem to be borne out by most of the explanations offered.

The following example is not exactly an omission but it is illustrative of an absence of understanding of audience perceptions on the part of programme makers. There was a storyline in *EastEnders* where Dot Cotton was asked to assist her terminally ill friend, Ethel, to die. After much agonising Dot obliged. It was the one storyline where Dot was seen sympathetically by the focus groups because for the first time it showed the tension between her beliefs and her actions. My interviewee insisted that it was nothing to do with religion but was a struggle between legality and friendship. Given that Dot was seen by the



programme makers as essentially humorous, with markers of religiosity that did not impact upon her behaviour, then this is not surprising. However, this was not the way audiences responded to her so the situation between Dot and Ethel was interpreted through a religious lens.

In conclusion then, despite audience assumptions, not all broadcasters are irreligious and see religion as irrelevant. Nevertheless, if there is not a commitment on the part of broadcasters to include religion in a positive way then there is a feeling that including markers of religiosity, in characters, is sufficient. There are however constraints upon broadcasters, most notably financial (which is ratings related), temporal and structural. There is also an assumption that non-Christian faith is synonymous with racial difference, and a sensitivity towards issues of race (again, that blurring of religion with ethnicity) means limited coverage of those faiths.

### **Non-fictional Broadcasters**

In this section, I want to discuss the findings from the interviews with non-fictional broadcasters and one member of a broadcasting advisory committee. The interviewees were: John Gray (ex Chief Assistant, BBC Scotland), Andrew Barr (ex Head of Religious Broadcasting, BBC Scotland), Alan Bookbinder (Head of Religion and Ethics, BBC), Lord Melvyn Bragg (Religious and Arts programme maker), Simon Cherry (Religious and Arts programme maker) and Professor Tom Carberry (Religious Advisory Committee for STV and ex member of Independent Broadcasting Authority and Broadcasting Complaints Commission). The age range of the interviewees also meant that I had information about broadcasting experiences from the days of Lord Reith right up to the present day.

One similarity across all of the interviews was the impact of structural constraints on programming. During the early years of broadcasting, John Gray was in charge of outside broadcast recordings of church services in Scotland. The physical limitations of their equipment meant that they could not record any more than four minutes at a time so they had periods of silent prayer in between. There is no evidence but it does not seem unreasonable to assume that audiences would have viewed that period of prayer as deliberate rather than contingent and might well have missed it when the broadcasting equipment became more sophisticated. In more recent times, Andrew Barr blamed the impact of Birtian economics and production costs within the BBC. He was quite clear that there was no theological reason for the shift in approach to religious broadcasting. Religious broadcasting was required to have a 35% share of the network audience in order

to justify their continued existence. Manchester, where the religious broadcasting department is based, has to look after a brand and make sure that the brand appeals to a particular section of the population. Professor Carberry also mentioned the impact of Thatcher legislation on religion and broadcasting. His view was that the promised vigilance about religious coverage in news had not worked out and had led to an increased focus on sensationalism.

Budgetary constraints were also mentioned by Lord Bragg. Religious broadcasting has lower budgets than other areas and does not feature very highly in the hierarchy of broadcasting. Tying in with Rev Ernest Rae's comments about the ethos of the BBC, Lord Bragg felt that moving in to religious broadcasting was not seen as a very good career move therefore ensuring its lowliness in the hierarchy. Religious broadcasting has no input into fictional broadcasting according to Alan Bookbinder neither are there any quotas in terms of religious representation. However it is not something he would want to see.

Another structural constraint relates to the way in which religious broadcasting is constituted. According to Andrew Barr, over the years there has been a shift from Christian to religious. There was also another shift under the auspices of John Lang as Head of Religious Broadcasting, from casting a religious eye on the world to taking a journalistic view of religion in the world.<sup>4</sup> This was the background to programmes like *Anno Domini*, *Everyman* and *Heart of the Matter*. Certainly, in the archival work it is clear that programmes were broadcast with a religious eye on the world as opposed to religion in the world. Professor Carberry's earlier comments about sensationalism would tie in with this more journalistic approach. He quoted Ed Morrow, 'Nobody stands outside my house unless it's burning' to illustrate the media interest in negative (and therefore more sensational) stories about the church. In a more positive way, this latter approach has underpinned the work of Lord Bragg and Simon Cherry. Rather than just accepting and explicating religion, they have a desire to introduce more rigour in examining the fundamental tenets of religion. This means that the nature of religious broadcasting, as they produce it, is much more questioning and discursive. One of the difficulties of this approach however is the problem of producing balance.

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<sup>4</sup> It was a shift that might have been helpful for John Gray and his colleagues during the war and cold war. For instance broadcasting Roman Catholic services to Yugoslavia was seen as a political act rather than just a religious act. During the cold war it was a little while before it was realised that the Polish Service (part of the Overseas Service) always had a different saint in the prayer which turned out to be the patron saints of



Simon Cherry made the point that it was much easier to provide a programme with apparent political balance because of the existence of political parties. Religion lacks that kind of clarity. Viewers will write in and ask why the programme doesn't have proper Christians included which, he argued, translated to, "I'm a Catholic so I want a Catholic point of view" or "I'm an evangelical Christian and that's the point of view I want." Political consensus is easier to represent although he also said that there are religious lobby groups who believe that consensus is what they think. The question of pressure groups is something I want to return to shortly. Diversity of religious points of view in broadcasting emerged slowly, over the years. Andrew Barr made the point that despite what many Christians believed it was actually the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC) which made the diversity recommendation to the Annan Committee. It is interesting to note that diversity of religion does not seem to have spread to fictional broadcasting.

Talking of his experiences on Advisory Committees Professor Carberry charted the changes that had taken place concerning religion. Although a more iconoclastic approach to religion began in the 1960s, he felt that there was still an expectation in the 1970s that religion should not be used in fictional broadcasting or at least it should be used respectfully. However, the 'carving up' of religious broadcasting amongst the mainstream religions and denominations and the exclusion of others might be part of the explanation as to why certain aspects of religion are missing from fictional broadcasting. Unless one is a practitioner of the 'other' one's most likely source of information will be the media and if the 'other' is excluded then one will be unaware or, at best, vaguely aware of its existence.

There were a number of other general issues, which were not raised by everyone but which resonated with either other broadcasters or the focus groups. Andrew Barr talked about the demands that were made for religious broadcasting for the 'shut-ins' (housebound) and children<sup>5</sup>. These were always second hand, never originating with either group and children most definitely did not demand religious broadcasting. Brian Muir (GRF Radio) had spoken about their provision of RSL training sessions. They got many people coming to them who wanted to set up local Christian radio. The first morning is spent asking those people about their own media consumption. It is always the case that they want to provide things that they do not consume themselves – a case of 'do as I say and not as I do'. Contradictions of a different nature were mentioned by Professor Carberry. The

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towns in Russian occupied Poland. This was construed as a political act that was utilising religion and it was brought to a stop.

<sup>5</sup> See the second paragraph of the Church of England resolution in Appendix 2 for an illustration of this point.

organisations he was involved in received very few complaints about religion. They tended to hear them when there were public soundings but they were very often contradictory. This would seem to tie in with Simon Cherry's comments about the difficulty of finding consensus within religion.

Alan Bookbinder made the point that because religion has always been about putting limits on freedoms the most readily available drama is always negative. However, I would argue that this is a view of religion from either the outsider or the disenchanted. For many people of faith their religion gives them a great deal of freedom. For instance, the Muslim women in the focus groups spoke of their choosing to wear the hijab because it frees them from being seen as sexual objects – a view that many western women also resent. Whilst, as a non-Muslim woman, I would prefer to change social attitudes and would not see the hijab as a marker of freedom nevertheless I am aware that that is due to my position as a woman outside Islam. It would be interesting for me to see a drama that showed the hijab in a positive light. It would be equally interesting to see a drama that showed how many of the perceived limits on freedom can be seen positively rather than negatively.

Comments were made by the faith representatives and the focus groups, which suggested that people felt that greater sensitivity was shown to non-Christian faiths. Simon Cherry talked about the fear of treading into areas of racism when it came to dealing with other faiths. He said that there were different rules in the way that they would approach Islam and Christianity. Whilst care would be taken not to offend the latter greater care would be taken over the former. He questioned whether that was right. It is something that I will address in more detail in a later chapter but it does seem to touch on many of the issues that have been raised by the Home Office report on religious discrimination (Feb 2001), work by The Runnymede Trust (1997, 1994) and the recent report into the north of England riots (2001). How far is too far when it comes to sensitivity towards portrayals of non-Christian religions and ethnic minorities?

The limited use of minority casting, especially in soap operas, was offered as a partial explanation, by Simon Cherry, for the relative absence of non-Christian religions. Although again, this does not take into account white converts or religions where ethnicity is not an issue. He referred to an interview he had conducted with a producer of *The Archers* (BBC Radio 4), in the 1980s, regarding the absence of ethnic characters. Their fear was that if they included an Asian, for instance, they would have to deal with racism and many of the well-loved characters would be racist – which would upset the audience.



In the event, when an Asian solicitor was introduced it was a lesser-known character that was the overt racist and all the well-loved characters were supportive of her. However, this echoes one of the concerns that *Peak Practice* had about introducing ethnic characters. Simon also made the point that most of the audiences for these programmes were white. Feedback would come through focus groups, which would be predominantly white and therefore their favourite characters would be white. It is impossible to verify this statement given my limited resources but there is an argument for saying that as a producer of many years' experience he must have reasonably good knowledge of how these things work. It also ties in with the comments from *Brookside* about the kinds of family that their audience would know. Moving away from race he also commented on the limited representations of clergy<sup>6</sup> (usually open to temptation) and laity (usually eccentric) which echoed the findings from the focus groups. He also commented on the absence of a moral framework in decision-making and the privileging of family and self. Again, something which had come out of the focus groups.

Lord Bragg raised the issue of how religion could bring pressure to bear on broadcasters. This was in light of discussion about the way women had campaigned for wider representation. Although religion brought pressure to bear on the ITC, he wondered if it was the right kind of pressure. His view was that religion could be more questioning and questing. From my interviews with faith representatives, it was clear that little co-ordinated thought was given to the way in which they could or should deal with broadcasters. Echoing what some of the fictional broadcasters had said his view was that the best drama came from what people knew. Does this mean that for whatever reason people of all faiths are not well represented amongst writers or does it mean that they write about other things – things that seem to be more obvious ratings attractors?

The final area of interest was dedicated religious channels. Simon Cherry's view, based on viewing in the USA, was that it was not a good thing. It was too open to corruption and the propagation of half-truths. Lord Bragg however could see a place for a good religious channel but he felt that the best thing for religion was to hang on to the place they have in the big channels. This clearly echoes the views of Brian Muir (GRF Radio) and the concerns of the Church of England Synod – if religion moves any further out of the mainstream the mainstream will ignore it.

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<sup>6</sup> The voice-over for *The Real Vicars of Dibley* made the point that vicars on television had repeatedly been

## Conclusion

I said at the beginning of Chapter Four that the findings of the interviews with Faith Representatives and Broadcasters would demonstrate the reversal in power between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting. The close structural links, which existed between the mainstream Christian churches and broadcasting in the early days of broadcasting, are no longer as powerful. Religious Advisory Committees continue to exist but they can only advise and, in the face of a country which at a structural and bureaucratic level is effectively post-Christian, their views are seen as increasingly irrelevant. The non-fictional broadcasters identified a shift in religious broadcasting from being predominantly Christian to a more general focus on religion and more recently, spirituality. They also identified a shift towards a more journalistic approach to religion in the world as opposed to a religious view of the world. Whilst the first shift demonstrates a more inclusive attitude the second shift seems to have facilitated and intensified exposure of the cracks within and amongst religions. According to Bourdieu:

Specific revolutions, which overthrow the power relations within a field, are only possible in so far as those who import new dispositions and want to impose new positions find, for example, support outside the field, in the new audiences whose demands they both produce and express. (1993: 142)

Those within the field of broadcasting who wanted to maintain the importance of religion were undermined by those who did not and claimed external support from audiences who were willing to accept a more secular type of broadcasting. This appeal to the audience's lack of interest in religion was seen in some fictional broadcasters' perceptions of what would interest the audience and what would maintain audience ratings.

The use of ratings to justify the way religion is included or excluded allows greater symbolic power for the broadcasters. They have the power to decide how religion will be portrayed and those portrayals, so far as faith representatives are concerned, contribute to the way in which their respective faiths are perceived – especially for audiences with little or no knowledge of different religions. This power to name also affects the perceived ability of faith representatives to respond effectively. Apart from the fact that none of the religions had a clear policy with regards to broadcasting (as opposed to policies regarding the dissemination of information) it was particularly evident amongst the Christian



representatives that the fictional view of religion (and this is not just dramatic fiction but the fictions that are created through journalistic laziness or arrogance) inhibited them from responding to, or actively seeking dialogue with, broadcasters of fictional television. To do so would be to confirm and perpetuate negative stereotypes.

Another feature of the field of broadcasting, which seems to have had an impact on non-Christian religions, is the blurring of religion and ethnicity. A number of the broadcasters and faith representatives commented on this. Whilst attention was paid to not causing offence to religions, especially through the use of religious swear words, there was a greater awareness of anti-racist policies. This seems to have led to a situation where the inclusion of an ethnic minority character was seen to signify a non-Christian religion. At the same time, the fear of causing offence in a racist way led to the exclusion of non-Christian religions<sup>7</sup>. Having said that, when non-Christian religions were being considered for programmes, overall greater sensitivity was shown, in terms of background research, than was shown to Christianity. Again, the symbolic power of the field of broadcasting facilitated the constitutive naming of different religions.

The trump card of divine authority, which Lord Reith acknowledged, and which was and is a fundamental part of the field of religion, has clearly lost its force within the field of broadcasting. Limited awareness of religion and religious values is clearly part of the concern expressed by the faith representatives. From their point of view, religious awareness and religious values are essential to the well being of the nation. It was also clear that this was the view taken by the religious/general broadcasters. However, this was not the view taken by the fictional broadcasters. Religion only had value if it had dramatic relevance. I would also argue that, particularly within soap operas, the basis for decision making was either self or family. There was no reference to an external moral framework be it divine authority or even societal norms. Again, this was something that was commented upon by faith representatives and religious/general broadcasters. The focus on self and family served to further the view of religion as irrelevant.

It was not within the scope of this research to assess quantitatively the level of secularisation within the field of broadcasting but the anecdotal information from long-

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<sup>7</sup> Gary Younge writing in *The Guardian* (August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2002 – ‘Why are media depictions of Muslim life in Britain so distorted and discriminatory?’) argues that televisual representations of Islam share in the responsibility for negative attitudes to Islam: Muslim voices have rarely been heard and when they have been, as in the case of *The Satanic Verses*, it was usually in relation to an issue that had tension with the

serving broadcasters would suggest that there must be some truth to their assertions. The fact that religious broadcasting is not seen as a genre, that the budgets for religious broadcasting are fairly small and the way in which religious programmes are frequently shifted around the schedules indicates that within broadcasting organisations religious broadcasting is not seen as a priority – more of a statutory requirement. It would be impossible for those working in the field not to be aware of this marginalisation and it is not unreasonable to suggest that this contributes to a view, in other areas of broadcasting, that religion is irrelevant to most people<sup>8</sup>.

In conclusion, it can be seen that there has been a reversal of power between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting. Although there are constraints on fictional broadcasters which relate to the requirements of the field, which those outside it had not suspected, nonetheless the power to 'name' religion lies firmly in the hands of the broadcasters. Whilst the field of religion still has access to broadcasters through the Central Religious Advisory Committee (and the Scottish Religious Advisory Committee in Scotland) the faith representatives to whom I spoke were either unaware of these committees or the level of communication about them, within and amongst religions, was poor. The lack of awareness of the need for broadcasting policies (and some unity) combined with a fear of being further stereotyped if they were reactive seems to inhibit any possibility of proactivity so far as fictional broadcasting is concerned and continues to maintain the power reversal

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liberal, secular world at its root and religion as its primary obsession. We had no idea of how Muslims loved, lived or laughed... Before last year, a casual TV viewer would not have known they existed at all.

<sup>8</sup> What is interesting, post September 11<sup>th</sup>, is the increase in programmes about Islam. This seems to tie in with fears of race/religious riots and a view being taken, somewhere, that more informative and positive portrayals of Islam will defuse any potential tension. As yet however, there has been no increase in the number of Muslims appearing in any genre of fictional broadcasting.



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Broadcasting and Secularization**

Secularization is a concept that inevitably appears when there is any discussion of religion and society. It has a number of meanings ranging from a commonsensical, everyday understanding to the nuanced explanations offered by sociologists and theologians. As a concept it has featured either implicitly or explicitly throughout the course of this research. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the different ways in which secularization is understood and used. I will examine the impact that secularization has had on the relationship between broadcasting and religion. I will also demonstrate why the impact of secularization has led to an emphasis on social inclusion, which has actually led to social exclusion.

#### **The background to secularization**

Academic debates about secularization require a careful analysis of words like religion. They also require a clear understanding of exactly what is being discussed as far as secularization is concerned. The most current debate in this area lies with supporters of secularization theory (Bruce, 1999) and supporters of rational choice theory (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; 1987). Whilst drawing on some of the arguments deployed by both sides, in order to illuminate my own argument, it is not my intention to join the debate. The strengths or weaknesses of rational choice theory, in relation to religious practice, are irrelevant to my argument. However, what is relevant is the impact that secularization has had on broadcasting and religion (not to forget the impact of broadcasting on secularization). In this section, I will discuss the background to secularization. This will be

done through a brief examination of the work of important writers whose ideas have had an influential role in the understanding and perception of religion in society.

From the beginning of the debate about secularization, the focus has been on the practices of Christian Europe and North America, and modernisation. The argument was that increased modernisation would lead to a decrease in religious practice because the two were incompatible. Religion was an immature or irrational state and modernity was mature and rational. According to Stark (1999), Thomas Woolston, writing in about 1710, expressed his confidence that Christianity would be gone by 1900. Referring to Woolston fifty years later, Frederick the Great, in correspondence with Voltaire expressed the view that Woolston had been too pessimistic in his estimate and Voltaire replied that it would come within the next 50 years (Stark, 1999). Moving forward to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Aldridge emphasises the rationalist nature of the majority of classical theorists. Reason was the only path to knowledge. Knowledge through divine revelation was not possible (Aldridge, 2000:56) – neither was it desirable. Marx saw religion as an ideological system, which was used to maintain class oppression. Once a secularised proletariat revolted, there would be an atheistic society. He famously described it as the opium of the people. Whether or not one agrees with Marx's analysis the important point is the effect it had. His ideas were widely disseminated and, for his followers, class struggle was incompatible with religion so religion had to be displaced. This attempted displacement has been seen most clearly in countries that have adopted a Communist agenda. It is interesting to note, however; that with the decline of those Communist states, religion has reappeared in varying states of renewal and invigoration.

The work of Sigmund Freud also had an impact on the perception of religion in society. Freud saw religion as an obsessional neurosis in which people regressed to an infantile state of dependency on a projected father figure, God. He also saw the demands of religion as being impossible to fulfil because of a struggle between the id and the super-ego. The impossibility of these religious demands was the root cause of much unhappiness and aggression in society (Freud, in Bocock & Thompson, 1985). In terms of human psychological development, religion relates to object selection, the stage before maturity. Maturity is related to the scientific (Hamilton, 1995: 56). Again, like the work of Marx, one does not have to agree with Freud's analysis, merely recognise that it has had a significant impact upon understandings of human behaviour. It has also served to reinforce the view that religion is an immature activity and that the truly mature individual/society



will adopt a scientific worldview. The current debate (March 2002) about the teaching of creationism either alongside or in competition with Darwin's theory of evolution, at a City Technology College in the north-east of England exemplifies this approach. Those in favour of teaching creationism see it as being as legitimate an explanation as evolution. However, the opponents of creationism see it as pedagogically retrograde and incompatible with a modern, scientific world-view.

The work of Emile Durkheim has been particularly significant for the study of religion. Durkheim concluded that religion was effectively social cement. Social, moral pressure to conform was experienced as something external to the individual. This was misrecognised by the individual because it took on a spiritual and sacred nature that was unlike any ordinary external object or force. It meant that reality was perceived to be of two radically different natures, the sacred and the profane (Hamilton, 1995:101). Whilst Durkheim was not arguing that religion is false or an illusion he was arguing that the conception of the sacred was nothing more than society. Religion serves a function – social cement – and the rituals associated with religion reinforce that function. This explanation of religion inevitably leads to a position wherein the truth claims of particular religions are irrelevant. It is the socially binding nature of religion that is important. As Hamilton notes it might take any form as long as it fulfils an essential integrative function (1995:108). One of the important points made by Durkheim is reflected in the creationism/evolution argument in the previous paragraph and is a precursor of the debates about secularization – namely, that since the authority of science was established, it had to be reckoned with:

Faith no longer exercises the same hegemony as formerly over the system of ideas that we may continue to call religion. A rival power rises up before it which, being born of it, ever after submits it to its criticism and control. And everything makes us foresee that this control will constantly become more extended and efficient, while no limit can be assigned to its future influence. (Durkheim, in Bocock & Thompson, 1985: 58)

The work of Max Weber has probably been the most important, as far as later theories of secularization are concerned. Despite the fact that Weber was not solely concerned with European religion, Calhoun argues that subsequently there has been a greater interest in understanding capitalism than there has been in understanding religion (1999). Bearing in mind this caveat, Weber's analysis of the rise of capitalism focussed on the role of

Protestantism and especially Calvinism. Weber's argument was that the very nature of Protestantism ineluctably led to a capitalist society which, because of its increasing rationalisation (or bureaucratisation), led to the 'disenchantment of the world'. He goes on to say:

Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. (1970:155)

The consequence of this, according to Weber, is that religion 'has been shifted into the realm of the irrational' (1970:281). It has also been shifted into the area of the personal, away from the public sphere. The tensions between public and private, and a substantive or functional understanding of religion inform the debate about secularization.

I am aware that the above, brief description does not begin to do justice to the breadth of work those four men engaged in. It is not the aim of this thesis to explore their work in depth, merely to indicate the kinds of ideas they generated and, more importantly, what ideas were circulating when broadcasting was developing, and therefore competing with the doxic position of Christianity, especially in relation to broadcasting. Linked in to their work were the expanding realms of science and technology. Stark (1999) observes that for many years the view has been taken that science would free individuals from 'the superstitious fetters of faith'. Berger also links science and technology with the rational penetration of reality:

A sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and, eventually, of the astronaut. (1973:118)

As individuals and therefore society moved towards a more rational state, science would provide the ontological and epistemological bases for that society. The mass media are ideally placed to circulate ideas that support the scientific challenge to theological orthodoxies, which are part of religious institutions' social power. Nevertheless, according to Stout and Buddenbaum (1996), one of the issues that secularization debates have not addressed is how the media contribute to a religious institution's gain or loss of power in society. In order to address this issue, in the following sections I will examine first secularization and second the relationship between secularization and broadcasting.



### **Common sense understandings**

The dictionary definition of secular is: not concerned with religion, not sacred (The Oxford Dictionary and English Usage Guide, 1996), which seems straightforward enough.

However, an understanding of the definition requires a clear understanding of what is meant by religion. As I will show in this chapter, debates about secularization revolve around the definition of religion. Yet, when it comes to everyday usage, that precision of definition is lacking. John Reith, writing about the early days of the BBC, expressed concerns about the Sabbath and secularization (1924:193). In the 1920s and 1930s letters to The Radio Times and The Listener occasionally expressed concerns about secularism. Whilst it is impossible to know exactly how these people understood the word, within the context in which they were writing, it seems reasonable to assume that it was an expression of concern about people seeking alternatives to religious activities on a Sunday. For Reith, Sunday was a day for receiving spiritual and intellectual refreshment and, if people would not go to local churches for that refreshment, the BBC would provide it for them.

I would suggest that nowadays most people use the word in a similarly casual way. Everybody 'knows' we live in a secular society because religion exerts no social control. There are many of ways of leading your life and the religious institutions are irrelevant. This usually extends to a view that religion is irrelevant, even at a personal level. In some ways, it is circular. Nevertheless the generally accepted view of British society today is that it is a secular society and as a result certain behaviours and attitudes are taken for granted, especially in relation to broadcasting – nobody is really interested in religion anymore so nobody really wants to see religious characters. Despite the fact that there is no evidence to support this position and some to support the opposite (though very little due to the lack of interest in researching fictional representations of religion) the doxa of secularization holds such sway that the status quo is maintained.

One of the very noticeable consequences of September 11<sup>th</sup> has been the amount of coverage given to Islam. A society that has accepted the taken-for-grantedness of secularization (and been more than adequately assisted by the media in this stance) was confronted with the shocking realisation that religious identity can be an integral part of an individual's worldview. It is their habitus, not just a quirky marker that they adopt for easy identification. What seems to have been doubly shocking is that in the mass of documentaries and news items which have focused on Islam (and especially Islam in the UK) the non-Muslim viewer has been confronted with UK citizens who place religious

identity above national identity. This is not an attempt to make any kind of point about the loyalty of those individuals, merely to point out that the acceptance of the doxa of secularization makes the acceptance of a religious identity extremely difficult to understand. It is, in many ways, a complete shift from the position of people like Reith who accepted a doxa of Christianity. For them, there might be competition from secular interests and people might seek different styles of religious fulfilment but at heart, the country was Christian. Christian values underpinned the British Establishment and therefore the values of the British people. It is my contention that the unembarrassed religious language, used in the pages of *The Radio Times* and *The Listener* in their first four decades, illustrates this acceptance. Of course, the importance of a religious identity is not confined to Islam. However the doxic position of secularization in this country means that, at a social level, religious identity is often perceived as inadequacy and, at a fictional broadcasting level, at best it has been ignored and at worst it has been ridiculed.

### **Secularization Thesis**

In 1966, Wilson defined secularization as the process in which religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance. He argued that secularization was the logical outcome of increasingly diversified societies. Those diversified societies, in order to function adequately had to demonstrate tolerance and tolerance led to secularization. He wrote:

When large numbers effectively ceased to be religious, all religious movements were reduced to the status of denominations and sects. (1966:153).

He went on to argue that churches, with secularization, are faced with being reduced to being relatively small, heterodox groups who practice and believe things which are alien to the majority. He also suggested that these groups would lack the intensity of commitment, which could be found in sects. For Wilson secularization was a phenomenon that was clearly linked to modernisation and rationalisation as he argued more recently:

Secularization, as the process by which religion loses its significance in the operation of the social system, has been a phenomenon most marked in the most advanced countries. (2001:38).

He goes on to say:



Secularization is the process in which religion ceases to exert control over other social institutional spheres as these become autonomous and clearly distinguished one from another... As the modern state develops, so these institutions become recognizable as the major departments of social organization, linked, but now relatively autonomous, under the central political authority... This form of social integration – as the way in which society is ‘held together’ – replaced the former dependence on social cohesion, which was achieved by the diffusion of shared values, procedures and rituals, and the cultivation, through religion of a common *mentalité*. (2001:43).

For Wilson secularization is clearly linked to a decline in the power of religious organisations and the removal of religion to the private sphere. However, even when it is in the private sphere its adherents would be out of step with the majority.

Another proponent of the secularization thesis, writing at about the same time as Wilson, was Peter Berger. In *The Social Reality of Religion*, he defined secularization as:

...the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. (1973:113).

In terms of society and institutions, he highlighted the divorce of Church and state, the expropriation of Church lands, and the separation of education and the Church. In terms of culture and symbols, he argued that it affected the totality of cultural life and of ideation, which could be observed in the decline of religious content in the arts, philosophy and literature and above all in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world<sup>1</sup>. His logical conclusion was that the secularization of society and culture led to a secularization of consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> I have previously referred to the debate about the teaching of creationism at a school in the north east of England. The following is an extract from a speech, given by the science teacher at that school: “Note every occasion when an evolutionary/old-earth paradigm (millions or billions of years) is explicitly mentioned or implied by a textbook, examination questions or visitor, and courteously point out the fallibility of the statement. Wherever possible, we must give the alternative (always better) Biblical explanation of the same data.” Most definitely not a thoroughly secular perspective on the world! (Richard Dawkins, ‘Young Earth Creationists teach bad science and worse religion’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 18/3/02 - the website cited in the article, from which the speech is taken, was inaccessible two days after publication.)

## Competing definitions

Wilson and Berger both described the process of secularization in terms of a decline in institutional power and influence. This was part of the modernisation process, the increase in pluralism and ecumenism. However, the problem with this explanation for many subsequent writers is the focus on institutions as the central element of secularization. Hamilton (1995) provides an excellent overview of the debates and their background. The starting point is how one defines religion. Is it from a substantive or functional perspective? A substantive definition of religion would describe it as an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings (Spiro, 1966 in McGuire, 1992:11). McGuire goes on to say that it is often tied in with Western modes of thinking about religion where there is a distinction between the natural and the supernatural. A functional definition of religion states what it does, rather than what it is. Durkheim's concept of religion as social cement would fall into this definition. However, as Hamilton points out there are numerous variations within functional and substantive definitions, which render the definition of religion either extremely inclusive or extremely exclusive. At its simplest, it is nearly always the case that supporters of the secularization thesis take a substantive definition and its opponents take a functionalist position.

The difference between these definitions is not solely one of academic interest. It is relevant to common-sense understandings of secularization. It is such a taken-for-granted statement, that we live in a secular society, that the marginalisation of religion is concomitantly self-evident and natural. Of course, the problem with this is that it takes a substantive definition of religion. It looks at membership of religious organisations and notes the decline. It looks at the declining influence of religious organisations compared to state organisations. It looks at the role of science in explaining away theological verities. It sees the plurality of religions as requiring tolerance, which undermines the truth claims of any one religion, making religion less and less plausible. Berger was particularly clear about the relationship between pluralism and secularization and, by extension, the development of ecumenism:

One may then say that, as we have seen, secularization brings about a demonopolization of religious traditions and thus, *ipso facto*, leads to a pluralistic situation. (1973:139).



He goes on to argue that this places religion in the position of a commodity that must be marketed and that therefore the religious organisations must become marketing agencies (a point made by Bourdieu in his discussion of the Roman Catholic Church in France, 1998). This leads to increasingly bureaucratised organisations with the consequence that 'irrespective of their various theological traditions, [they] increasingly resemble each other sociologically' and this lays the foundations for 'ecumenicity' (1973: 143/145). Ecumenism might well have a theological explanation but for Berger it was, at heart, an outcome of secularization and at the same time contributed to secularization because it served to undermine the universal truth claims of the previously monopolistic religion. From this perspective then, the changes to the composition of CRAC and their remit, stemming from the Annan Report (1977), were evidence of pluralism and ecumenism and were not only the outcome of secularization but also the inevitable precursors of the declining importance of religion.

Whilst the difference in the definition of religion between substantive and functional standpoints is important for understanding arguments about secularization, for those who challenge the secularization thesis it is not the only point. There is the added question of whether secularization can be seen to be a global norm or whether in fact secularization is a deviant European phenomenon that needs to be explained. This relates back to questions of modernisation and assumptions that as societies became increasingly modernised they would become less religious (or irrational) and more rational (or less religious). Beyer (1999) argues that secularization has to be understood in relation to globalisation. Davie (2000) also argues that the global situation has to be taken into account. She argues that the work of Bruce in particular, (as a supporter of the secularization thesis) tends to concentrate on predominantly Western democracies at the same time as failing to take into account the widely divergent forms religion takes in these countries.

Beyer suggests that the work of Dobbelaere (1981) provides a more useful way of examining secularization by recognising that it can refer to three relatively independent dimensions: that of societal systems or laïcization, that of religious organisations (religious change), and that of individual religious involvement (Beyer, 1999). It becomes clear that this renders an understanding of secularization infinitely more complex and is part of the definitional problem to which I referred earlier. As Beyer notes at the beginning of his article:



...different people use the word in different ways all the while assuming that we all mean the same thing. (1999)

If we use Dobbelaere's framework it becomes easier to understand why secularization has been accepted as a given. The three dimensions have become subsumed into one within everyday usage (the assumptions to which Beyer refers) and the media, as part of the circulatory framework of knowledge, contribute to this lack of precision<sup>2</sup>. Explaining how or why a particular idea achieves dominance is outwith the scope of this study, nevertheless it is clear that, despite the debates about definitions and the inevitability of secularization, broadcasters have contributed to its doxic position. This was done in fictional broadcasting through the airing of topics and attitudes that were antipathetic to the idea of shared Christian values. In religious broadcasting, it was achieved by challenging the Christian monopoly as well as challenging a religious world-view.

Whilst I have argued that much of the tension between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting can be explained in terms of struggles for power, the strength of the mass media lies in its ability to circulate information to a mass audience, be it numbered in thousands or millions. Broadcasters in particular have had a power that has been denied to all other social organisations. The range of genres that is available to broadcasters also means that social attitudes can be challenged through discussion, reportage, drama or comedy. Once religion (and Christianity in particular) lost its privileged status so far as entertainment programmes were concerned (in 1963), it could be satirised or parodied in fiction, whilst deeper exploration of the tenets of that faith were being challenged by liberal clergy on the discussion programmes.

I noted in a previous chapter that the 1960s saw the development of a more liberal approach within broadcasting. This was set within the context of wider social changes. Jeffrey Weeks highlights some of those changes and their perceived relationship to secularization (1981). Weeks concentrates on the 1969 Divorce Reform Act, the 1967 Abortion Act and the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, all of which enabled a more liberal approach to various aspects of sexuality (although this is not to underestimate the degree of

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<sup>2</sup> This lack of precision was seen in the debates to which I referred previously about creationism and evolution. Creationism was used as an overarching description when in reality it should have been made clear that the issue was between old earth and new earth creationists – a distinction that was clearly articulated by Professor Richard Dawkins in *The Daily Telegraph* (March 18<sup>th</sup> 2002 – Young Earth Creationists teach bad science and worse religion.) Not that it seemed to have any effect on subsequent reportage or discussion of the events!



opposition and contention which have continued in relation to the three areas). For some, this was evidence of the inevitability of secularization and for others, it was evidence of the impact of secularization, (aided and abetted by the broadcasters) but not necessarily its inevitability. If broadcasters were seen as assisting the secularization process in the 1960s what had been the position before this period?

### **Broadcasting and Secularization**

As Director General of the BBC, John Reith did not accept the inevitability of secularization. His belief that his appointment was divinely ordained is sufficient evidence that he saw the new medium of broadcasting as being a tool in the mission field. His initial approach to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the subsequent formation of CRAC as the first Advisory Committee of the BBC illustrates the importance of religious institutions for Reith's strategy. Whilst there is an argument for saying it demonstrated an idiosyncratic approach to religion, which was not widely shared, I think the more convincing argument is that it reflected the institutional power of the churches at that time. Senior clergy were still very important figures within the social hierarchy; particularly for the Church of England with its close links to the monarchy. That church's view of divorce, for instance, was to have a profound effect on the country when it came to the relationship between Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson<sup>3</sup>. Whilst Reith did not see CRAC as an equal partner with the BBC he nevertheless saw the mainstream churches as being part of a very close relationship. Sunday and religious broadcasting was a very clear illustration of this closeness.

In 1924 Reith wrote that he had heard that religion was on trial. He dismissed that point of view. Instead he believed that people were '...merely repelled with what passes for the real thing and inconsistencies in the lives of Christians.' (p193). Broadcasting could provide religion that was unassociated with any particular creed or denomination. It could also provide quality preachers who were well respected by the public. The Rev Dick Sheppard was one such preacher who had endeared himself to many as an army chaplain, during the First World War; and perhaps epitomised Reith's assertion that broadcast religion was a 'thoroughgoing optimistic and manly religion'. A. R. Burrows, in the same year, described how hundreds of letters had been received from '...all classes of persons, equally the infirm and the physically fit [who testified] to the help and comfort which the Sunday

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<sup>3</sup> It also impacted upon Princess Margaret and her relationship with Peter Townsend. It continues to impact upon Prince Charles' relationship with Camilla Parker-Bowles. Unless changes are made it will impact upon Prince William, due to the Act of Succession, if and when he decides to marry.

evening talks invariably give' (p172). Moseley, writing in 1935, discussed Sunday broadcasting, which was perceived by large numbers of the population as being overly dull. Consequently people were tuning in to foreign radio stations. However, the BBC was, for some years, unmoved by these complaints. He goes on to note that the BBC was backed in its position by certain sections of the church and considerable numbers of listeners. The BBC Handbook (1928), in a discussion of broadcasting and religion, commented:

...there is now no item in the weekly programme 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...

[broadcasting religion] is not only keeping alive but giving new life and meaning to the traditional Christian character of the British people (131/133).

By the mid 1930s Sunday programming was beginning to change but, according to Briggs, 'mainstream religion' still accounted for a larger share of weekly broadcasting time than features or drama. Sunday morning programming was confined to religious services and the weather until 1938. If secularization involved a weakening of influence for religious institutions, it clearly was not having much of an impact at the BBC in those early years. Sections of the audience might complain about the dullness of Sunday broadcasting but the churches through CRAC, and the BBC under the guidance of Reith, felt secure enough to resist those complaints. Any concessions that were made were of the 'tinkering' variety as can be seen from the 1934 BBC Handbook (which refers to the first decade of religious broadcasting). It was noted that 1932 saw criticisms of sermons as vague and soothing platitudes. Consequently they introduced a series of lectures by the Archbishop of York, 'God and the World through Christian Eyes', although these proved to be too intellectual for some and a new series was planned using simpler language.

The war years did little to weaken the links between broadcasting and religion. A country that was under attack was seen to need spiritual support so the churches and the broadcasters worked closely to make that provision. Dr J. W. Welch, Director of Religious Broadcasting during this period, and Archbishop William Temple expressed the view that religion was concerned with men [sic] in society and therefore with politics and economics (Briggs, 1985:216). Christianity would clearly provide the perspective from which these subjects would be viewed. Welch and his predecessor F. A. Iremonger saw broadcast



religion as 'scattering good seed on the ground'. It was not to be seen as a substitute for attending places of worship; rather it was to complement the work of the churches. Whilst members of CRAC were selected by the BBC, its decisions carried great weight. Most notably in relation to the way that religion should be treated. There would be no airtime given to anyone who wished to attack or question the religion of large numbers of people. Equally the varieties of religion which had access to airtime was a joint decision between CRAC and the BBC. Accordingly, only mainstream religions had access and groups such as rationalists, Christian scientists, spiritualists, Mormons would not be given access. Neither would there be synagogue services or gospel religion (Briggs, 1985).

One unforeseen consequence of the war years' broadcasting was related to the lighter style of programming and scheduling which was provided for Forces Radio. Civilians also were able to tune in. As a result of these changes Welch accepted that after the war it would be impossible to return to a stricter Sunday. People had become used to more secular alternatives (however that is not the same as saying that secularization had taken hold) and would expect them to remain once the war had ended. Nevertheless there was no doubt that religion and broadcasting were inextricably linked and the former would have an effect on the latter, and vice-versa. In 1948, Sir William Hayley, Director General of the BBC, addressed the British Council of Churches (BCC). In the course of his speech he stated that the BBC had two obligations. The first was to avoid what would undermine Christian morality and the second was to foster an understanding of the Christian religion. The justification for this position was that the BBC was a public company functioning in a Christian country. His response to those who protested was that the state hadn't repudiated Christianity as the religion of the country. He also cited the 1944 Education Act with its religious training specification as further justification (this speech was subsequently drawn upon by the BCC in a report into Christianity and Broadcasting in 1950).

Despite the close links, challenges were beginning to be made against the authority of CRAC. The new Light Programme had defeated CRAC on the issue of the Sunday evening service. The appeal to the audience rather than the wishes of the religious authorities could be seen as part of secularization. The decision, taken around the same time (and discussed more fully in Chapter Two), to allow more discussion about the tenets of Christianity seems, with hindsight, to have contributed to the process of secularization. It could be argued that this was the point where the broadcasters contributed to a reduced reliance on religion for the production of shared values, which Wilson saw as part of the secularization

process (2001:43). As I said earlier it was not the intention of either CRAC or the broadcasters that this opening up should weaken Christianity. The assumption was that it would prove robust enough to defend itself hence the decision to allow a series of talks from the Humanist point of view in 1955. Nevertheless these decisions did seem to contribute to an inexorable marginalisation in broadcasting of Christianity initially and religion eventually.

The most powerful factors in weakening the relationship between CRAC and the BBC were the widespread availability of television post-war and the creation of Independent Television (ITV). Sir William Haley might have emphasised the BBC's commitment to Christianity but the new competitors were not connected, in the same way, to the Reithian ethos. However, religion was still seen as sufficiently important for CRAC to be involved with ITV, and religious programming was required to be included in the new schedules. Another factor that affected the close relationship between the churches and the broadcasters was the emergence of what Davie (1994) has described as 'believing without belonging' amongst the population. Martin refers to the abundance of research into working class attitudes towards religion, which he summarises thus:

Perhaps it should be said that these researches suggest a continuum of approval running from Christianity and religion on the positive side to church and clergy on the negative... 'You don't need to go to church to be a good Christian' is the nearest thing to a fundamental creed amongst working-class people. (1967:69).

Martin also suggests that broadcast religion has unwittingly contributed to a decline in church attendance due to the technical quality of what viewers and listeners received, compared to the standards that were/are often achieved in local churches. Davie makes a similar point although she also argues that religious broadcasting is a friend to religion:

...upholding the values necessary for the survival of the religious factor in contemporary society but offering a rival focus for such values. (1994:113).

She also points to the continued popularity of religious broadcasting with audiences – often to the amazement of broadcasters. It is also important to recognise that not all viewers and listeners were regular churchgoers or 'shut-ins'. For many people, religious broadcasting bolstered the view expressed by Martin above, 'You don't need to go to church to be a



good Christian' and Davie's description of 'believing without belonging'<sup>4</sup>. However, religious broadcasting was not an agent of secularization, rather it was the wider programming which was perceived as fulfilling this role.

By the 1960s, when the secularization thesis was beginning to circulate, television in particular was beginning to produce much more challenging programming. It wasn't just a question of style – plays no longer had neat endings – rather it was a question of content. In factual and fictional programming topics were being raised, which previously were kept hidden. The inclusion of liberal clergy in the former programmes only served to alienate more traditional believers. One of the most significant challenges to traditional conceptions of Christianity arose from the work of Bishop Robinson and his book entitled 'Honest to God'. All of this enabled critics of religion to argue that if traditional Christian morals were being questioned by the clergy then why was Christianity necessary? To reverse Martin's phrase the philosophy now was, 'You don't need to be a Christian to be a good person'. Holloway, looking back to the dramas of this time, comments:

[Various dramas in the 1960s] were all creations of the Greene era and were huge successes. They gave huge offence, too... there was a great amount of remarkable talent among broadcasters. But it lacked the constraints of an agreed value system. Much expressed itself in the form of criticism of the existing social order. (1987:130).

Greene was the Director General of the BBC and for people like Holloway and Mary Whitehouse if he wasn't the anti-Christ he was certainly closely related. Whereas Haley had committed the BBC to a Christian ethic, Greene was more interested in reflecting the diversity of values in British society. Mary Whitehouse and her supporters were frequently portrayed as dour moralists who wanted to spoil everybody's fun but Weeks (1981) provides a useful reminder that the issue was closely related to secularization. From the perspective of Mary Whitehouse and her supporters, sexual activity for instance, was a sacred private act between two heterosexual people. It took place within marriage and underpinned the family, which underpinned a strong, cohesive society. The broadcasters, through their increasingly explicit representations and the publicity they gave to 'deviant'

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<sup>4</sup> A few years ago I used to deliver the church magazine to people attached to the congregation who did not come to church. One elderly lady, who had fallen out with the congregation many years earlier, told me she didn't think it was necessary to go to church because she maintained her faith by watching Songs of Praise.

sexuality, were removing the sacred from sex and secularizing it. By secularizing such a central part of human life they were contributing to the secularization of society as a whole. From this perspective secularization was less about the power relations between institutions and more about the effect on individuals and thence society. At this point, I want to return to the debates around secularization.

One of the objectives of the Annan Report was the widening participation and inclusion of non-Christian religions in broadcasting. As far as religious broadcasting was concerned, *Everyman*, in 1977, to which I referred in Chapter Two, is a good example of these changes. It also ties in with those who argued that pluralism and secularization were inextricably linked. As Christianity lost its monopoly the producers of *Everyman* saw it as perfectly acceptable that there would be occasions when the church was attacked because they were taking a 'hard, objective look at religion'. There were and are people (mostly to be found in audience research) who took the view that it was Christianity which came under scrutiny whereas other religions were treated as 'exotic others' and not subject to the same level of criticism. With regard to religion and fictional broadcasting this would seem to have been true. In sitcoms, Christian clergy were the butt of the joke epitomising an old guard that was out of step with modern society – most notably in programmes like *All Gas and Gaiters*, *Hell's Bells* and *Bless Me Father*. Non-Christian religions did not appear in sitcoms although Judaism was covered in the plays of Jack Rosenthal. Why should this be? It is my contention that it was due to the acceptance that the UK was a secular society and that there were other issues, more important than religion, which needed to be addressed.

### **Social and legal developments**

Two legislative developments that impacted not only on society but also on broadcasting were the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act and the 1976 Race Relations Act. Following those two Acts the Equality Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality were set up. The Women's Movement in particular had been concerned about the representation of women in the media, as part of the campaign for equality. There were concerns about the quantity and quality of the representation of women. There seemed to be less of a concern with media representations so far as race was concerned but recent television documentaries, which have examined the coverage of race over the years, have

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In the course of a previous research project one interviewee used religious broadcasting as an alternative to church attendance whilst she sought out a church in which she felt comfortable.



included numerous comments from black viewers about their excitement when a black actor appeared on the television.

The remit of Channel 4, which began in 1982, was to provide a space for minority and disadvantaged groups. It was the convergence of these issues and events that facilitated the move away from religion and a move towards a discourse of equal opportunities. It is probably also fair to say that Christianity was particularly marginalised because of its perceived inability to address many of the concerns of women and ethnic minorities. Although some denominations had, by this stage, accepted women priests most had not and that made Christianity appear particularly archaic. There were also serious debates about contraception, abortion and a woman's right to choose which further polarised Christians and non-Christians. In many quarters, this reinforced the view of the Church as repressive and irrelevant. According to Alan Bookbinder (Head of Religious Broadcasting, BBC) the tendency of religion to put limits on personal freedoms has meant that it easily provides negative drama; because drama works best when it veers towards extremes. As for non-Christian religions these might well have been addressed more within religious broadcasting, and included in CRAC, but outwith religious broadcasting the dominant issue was race.

### **The move to 'race'**

The focus on race was not surprising given concerns about the existence of racism. It was also unsurprising that religion was not separated from race (or ethnicity). According to researchers at the University of Derby (2000), recent attempts to differentiate based on religion undermine what has sometimes been argued to be a more inclusive view of 'Black' as a political colour. They go on to say that it can also be seen as a threat to a modernist and secularist social project which seeks to differentiate between the public and the private sphere (this clearly ties in with arguments about secularization and the removal of religion from the public sphere). My own view is that there are parallels with the development of second wave feminism in as much as the initial focus was on women as a homogeneous group. Gradually there were challenges to this homogeneous view from black, disabled, lesbian, and working class women. Those who prefer the homogeneous 'Black' description fail to understand the importance of religious identity. It does also perpetuate the idea that religious identity is inextricably linked with 'blackness' when in fact this is not the case.

It would also seem to be the case that there is a link between liberal values amongst broadcasters (hence the provisions made for minority and disadvantaged groups on Channel 4 as well as attempts on other channels to address equal opportunities) and the privileging of secular issues (racism, gender inequality), which are of concern to a modern, rational society, as opposed to the traditional and irrational concerns of religion. As Parekh argues:

It is widely assumed that western modernity is the only valid form of modernity and that liberalism represents its only authentic idiom, and all non-western societies are expected to imbibe its basic ideas, such as individualism, scientific rationalism, secularism and progress. (2000)

Whilst Parekh is primarily concerned with multi-culturalism and western attitudes to non-western cultures I would argue that the inability of broadcasters (and audiences) to distinguish between religion and ethnicity, as well as the assumption that religion has little to offer modern societies, are part of what he is describing.

### **Fundamentalism**

In Chapter Two, I referred to an article in *The Listener* about the electronic church in America and the view that it provided a space for people who felt that their needs were no longer being met by a secular media. This phenomenon began in the 1980s. It was part of a process which supporters of the secularization thesis had not anticipated – the rise of fundamentalism. Whilst there are concerns about the use of ‘fundamentalism’ – ‘a term used initially to describe currents of conservative Protestantism popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in parts of the United States’ (Davie, 2000) it does seem to have become an accepted way of describing certain religious trends, and I will use it accordingly. As Davie notes there was an expectation that there would be decreasing levels of global religiosity as the 20<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close and that such religion as continued to exist would manifest increasingly ‘reasonable’ tendencies. This is not what has happened. According to Davie there has been:

... the emergence of a range of reactive, conservative religious movements, resisting, in some cases, the modernizing trends evident within the major faiths (modern biblical criticism for example) or, in others, the incursions of modernization (very often associated with secularization). (2000)



Gellner emphasises the difference between fundamentalism and other forms of religious practice:

Fundamentalism repudiates the tolerant modernist claim that the faith in question means something much milder, far less exclusive, altogether less demanding and much more accommodating... such modernism extracts all demand, challenge and defiance from the doctrine and its revelation. (1992:3).

Such an approach to religion is far removed from the Durkheimian concept of social cement. As McGuire (1992:Ch.6) notes, the social cohesion that fundamentalism can create for those on the inside can lead to social conflict. Not only with those on the outside of any religion but also with those who are not in their particular group. One obvious example of this is born-again Christians who reject any relativism regarding alternative faith claims (and most definitely reject the idea that being a good person is sufficient) and who use language in such a way that it identifies who is born-again and who is not<sup>5</sup>. In terms of broadcasting the exclusivity of fundamentalism (whatever the religion) is what leads to the development of specifically religious channels which include programmes across all genres that reflect the values of the fundamentalists. This is seen very clearly in the programming provided by GodDigital, to which I referred in an earlier chapter.

Whilst the emergence of the electronic church was linked to Christian fundamentalism in the United States, and has been extremely well researched (Gerbner et al., 1984, Fore, 1987; Hoover, 1988) a separate fundamentalism relating to Islam also emerged. It is only fair to say that all of the major world religions have seen a rise in fundamentalism (Kurth, 2001) but Christian and Islamic fundamentalism are probably the two most significant in terms of this research. They both challenge the secularization thesis but from slightly different perspectives. Although the electronic church was a US phenomenon, Christian fundamentalism was not and it has spread throughout the world. (It is worth pointing out here that at the time the electronic church emerged it would have been impossible for a similar phenomenon to arise in the UK due to broadcasting legislative restrictions.) Neither is fundamentalism confined to under-developed countries. It is a feature of thoroughly

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<sup>5</sup> During the audience interviews I asked participants to fill in a small form which would provide me with some demographic details. One of the questions asked if participants were religious and if so how would they describe themselves. One of the Pentecostals, who had self-identified as being born-again, took exception

modernised countries, which does not fit with the secularization argument. It also highlights one of the criticisms of secularization; namely, that it was primarily concerned with de-christianisation rather than a decline in religion per se. The emergence of all fundamentalisms also raises the question of European exceptionalism as far as secularization is concerned rather than the European model being the norm. Fundamentalisms also challenge the idea that pluralism inevitably leads to a devaluing of religion. It is a challenge that has been acknowledged by the main proponent of the argument, Peter Berger.

### **Changing positions**

In 2000 Berger delivered a lecture which was reproduced in *Sociology of Religion* (Winter, 2001). In this lecture he explains why he no longer accepts the secularization thesis and, whilst the phenomenon of secularization might exist, it is not the direct and inevitable result of modernity. For Berger the empirical evidence from different parts of the world made the thesis untenable:

As I see the evidence, the world, with some notable exceptions (of which more in a moment), is as religious as it has ever been, and in some places is more religious than ever.

He focuses in particular on the emergence of what I have called Christian and Islamic fundamentalism throughout the world and comments:

...where secular political and cultural elites have been established, they find themselves on the defensive against the resurgent religious movements – for example, in Turkey, in Israel and in India – and, last but not least, in the United States!

For Berger, secularity is mapped on to the pattern of religiosity in two main areas. The first he describes as a thin but very influential stratum of intellectuals with Western-style, higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences who have an almost incestuous relationship with each other. The second he describes as the exceptionalism of western and central Europe. Whilst people like Davie would argue that these areas can be

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to the question because he associated being religious with the mainstream religions; people who only went to church because they were supposed to or who didn't have a personal relationship with Jesus.



more usefully described as 'believing without belonging' (and this goes back to issues of definition in relation to religion and secularization) Berger believes that the European case can be subsumed under the category of secularization. He also explained his misunderstanding of the relationship between pluralism and secularization when he was first outlining his ideas:

Put simply, I would propose that pluralism affects the how rather than the what of religious beliefs and practice – and that is something quite different from secularization.

In a recent study of West African Pentecostals in London, Hunt (2002) provides an illustration of this point. His study showed that the majority of Nigerians who attended the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in West London had been members of churches in Nigeria, particularly Anglican, Roman Catholic, Free Church or a variety of Pentecostalism. This was not pursued when they arrived in England. Instead, they chose a church that reflected their cultural interests and enabled them to establish community and collective identities. In this sense pluralism provides a space for an individual choice whilst continuing to offer a communal dimension. Rather than leading to a decline in religious practice it merely alters it:

What has developed therefore, is what Bibby refers to as 'homogeneous clubs' – voluntary religious collectives comprised of individuals with similar life experiences and needs of self-expression and identity construction (Bibby, 1993). (2002:149)

One other point that Hunt raises is the growth of the RCCG. He says that it is one of the fastest growing religious movements in Britain and, in contrast to most churches in Britain, 93 percent of the congregation is under 41 years of age (Brierley, 2000:21). Unlike older, black Pentecostalist churches, the congregation is highly educated and fairly affluent. The genesis of RCCG probably serves to highlight further the exceptionalism of European secularization because the church was not instituted by the parent organisation in Britain. It was 'planted' by one of the parishes in Lagos, Nigeria. According to Hunt this was part of a deliberate strategy of evangelising the perceived 'dark continent' of Europe and an attempt to win over white converts (2000:151). In recent years Anglican missionaries also have been sent from Africa to some of the UK's cities.

It is apparent that secularization continues to generate much debate. Nevertheless I am inclined to agree with Berger about just how religious the world is these days. Beyer (1999) also makes the point that in global terms the notion of secularization as a straightforward loss for religion of all societal influence or significance does not apply. Although people like Davie and Hervieu-Leger (2000) might argue that European exceptionalism, in terms of secularization, is a question of interpretation the fact of the matter is that in this country the argument has been won and accepted, whether or not it is based on reality. I would argue that this is partly why broadcasters in the UK have focussed on ethnicity (as the currently preferred term to race) and marginalised religion.

### **Broadcasting and religion today**

At the Race in the Media Awards (7<sup>th</sup> April 2000) the Director General of the BBC, Greg Dyke delivered a speech entitled 'The BBC: Leading Cultural Change for A Rich And Diverse UK'. He said that he was going to 'talk about the BBC and its role in new Britain – 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, a multi-channel, multi-cultural Britain.' It becomes clear as the speech continues that the multi-cultural Britain to which he refers is concerned solely with ethnicity. He discusses research into the BBC's output, which shows that although the portrayal of ethnic minorities is proportionately fair there is evidence of stereotyping<sup>6</sup>. In fictional broadcasting he notes the greater tendency for ethnic minorities to be unemployed than whites. Nowhere in his speech does he mention religious diversity as part of multi-cultural Britain. The BBC website has a page entitled 'Cultural Diversity – have your say' which has comments from members of the public about Cultural Diversity. The difference between a religious identity and an ethnic identity was made by one respondent as well as making comment on the quality of the provision:

Muslims are not an ethnic minority but the BBC's portrayal of ethnic minorities who are also Muslim (e.g. Pakistanis/ Bangladeshis/ Arabs) are on the whole derogatory, especially in News and Current Affairs... invariably Muslims are portrayed in sensationalistic, stereotypical light (i.e. terrorist/ fanatic/ misogynistic)... On the other hand, the so-called 'Asian' programming on offer is

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<sup>6</sup> The Guardian Edinburgh International Television Festival 2002 included discussions about representations of Islam as well as ethnic minorities on screen and behind the screen. The conclusions were that little had changed: ...many media organisations pledged to do better. But almost none of their targets has been met... As C4's chief executive Mark Thompson bemoans television's 'creative deficit', he might well reflect on how broadcasting's own monolithic culture contributes to this. It also explains why many of the ethnic



mostly produced by, presented by and aimed at an audience of Indian origin (i.e. Hindu) and so has increasingly less relevance to an Asian Muslim audience. Adil Khan, London (March 19<sup>th</sup> 2002).

This approach is not confined to the BBC. In Channel 4's 'The Year in Review, 2000' the phrase 'multi-cultural' is synonymous with race/ethnicity. The programmes to which they referred were either celebrations of black achievements or explorations of racism. In their 'Statement of Promises for 2002' multi-cultural does not include religion. In fact it is quite difficult to find the reference to religion on the web page until one searches the menu under 'Under Represented Voices'. It then becomes clear that religion is seen as part of their religious output and unrelated to any of the other programming genres. ITV 1's 'Programme Review, 2001' is even more vague. Despite numerous statements about their commitment to the Cultural Diversity Network (what it is and how to access details are not provided) the section that addresses cultural diversity provides no explanation of what this phrase means. From the programmes they refer to it would appear to mean ethnicity.

In a more recent document, 'Statement of Programme Policy, 2002 – 2003' the section on Cultural Diversity refers to 'ethnic, cultural and regional' programming. Religion is only referred to in relation to religious and ethical programming. Ethnicity has been seen as the most important issue and the religious variations within ethnic minorities have been seen as irrelevant. Interestingly the 'ITV Response to ITC Consultation on Public Service Broadcasting' (July 2000) made the point that with the expansion of multi-channels religious and ethnic programming could be catered for in those channels and end up being excluded from public service broadcasting because they were not commercially attractive. The response went on to say that they needed to be supplied if any wider social or educational purpose was to be met.

The problem of marginalising religion specifically was referred to in the University of Derby research into religious discrimination. They made the point that 'whether welcomed or not, religion has increasingly been emerging as a significant factor in personal and social identities, particularly within the minority communities'. They go on to outline the problems of assigning religion to the private sphere (which is where secularization would place it, with its eventual disappearance) – society is deprived of the resources of religion

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minority characters who do appear on TV often play out stereotypes of 30 years ago (Losing The Race: BBC still fails to reflect its audiences, *The Observer*, Leader, 25/8/02).

and it can encourage insularity among religious groups (2000). This hardly seems to be a positive way forward for society but until broadcasters understand the important distinction between religious identity and ethnic identity there seems to be little possibility that programmes will be commissioned which reflect that distinction.

Millwood Hargrave conducted research into the portrayal of ethnic minorities on television in 1992. The study is not only interesting for its findings but also for the conflation of research categories. 47% of her respondents felt that they knew hardly anything or nothing about people from different cultures and backgrounds, and 51% considered television to be an important source. Bearing that in mind, it is worth noting that the 'heaviest' television viewers were the least likely to say that they knew about the various ethnic groups. Respondents also noticed the absence/tokenism of programmes like *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*. Asian males particularly wanted to see themselves in soaps, reflecting the views expressed in my interviews with the Sikhs and Muslim women. The conflation of research categories however rendered the study problematic at the same time as reflecting the confusion that seems to exist amongst broadcasters and audiences regarding religion and ethnicity. For example the following groups are listed together: Americans, Australians, Muslims, Asians, West Indians, Africans, Jews, Japanese, Chinese (1992:9). With reference to the points I made in the previous paragraph and as the contributor to the BBC web page observed, Muslims are not an ethnic minority.

A few months after Greg Dyke's speech, a public meeting was held in Bradford – The BBC Listens: Cultural Diversity (6<sup>th</sup> September 2000). The meeting was one of a series that were hosted around the country with the intention of listening to audiences and their views about cultural diversity. Ranjit Sondhi, one of the BBC Governors who addressed the meeting, made the point that there were not only national and regional boundaries but there were also other group identities organised along the axes of religion, language, culture and ethnicity. However it was significant that a subsequent speaker, Tony Hall who runs the BBC news operations around the world, described one of his roles as 'Race Champion [which meant that he would] make sure the issues we're going to hear and talk about are discussed and represented at the top of the BBC'. He was not alone in focussing on race as the central point of cultural diversity, despite Sondhi's comments. One of the group discussions did, however, focus on religion and the views expressed were remarkably similar to my own findings:



...there was a real consensus that religion is a way of life, a continuing way of life for people throughout the year and that should be reflected, particularly in mainstream output, particularly in dramas like *EastEnders*.  
([www.bbc.co.uk/info/bbclistsens/diversity.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/bbclistsens/diversity.pdf))

It was part of a desire that people had to see themselves represented on television. Unlike broadcasters, who saw religion or religious expression as a marker for a character rather than being integral to that character's attitudes and behaviour, the participants in this discussion recognised the importance of religion to an individual's self-identity. The evidence from those working in broadcasting (and this includes all channels) is that it is a secular environment which has a secular world-view. Berger (2000) referred to the small group of intellectuals who reinforce each other's secular world-view. I think there is a good argument for saying that broadcasters are subject to the same reinforcement and therefore have difficulty in understanding why the limited portrayals of religion are problematic.

### **Religious self-identity and broadcasting**

One of the most serious challenges to those who have accepted the main arguments of secularization – namely that religious organisations would lose their power and religion would lose its credibility due to pluralism, increased modernity and rationalisation – was September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. I have previously referred to the rise of fundamentalisms. Davie argues that changes to religious practice have produced a situation where membership is something that is sought after and chosen rather than assumed or taken for granted. In these instances the distinction between the sacred and the secular begins to harden and in its extreme form becomes a feature of fundamentalisms (1994:38). The variety offered by pluralism and the relativism offered in a secular society create a situation whereby those who have chosen their religion become particularistic – theirs is the only true religion. If their belief system contains a critical standard against which the social system and existing patterns of interaction can be measured (McGuire, 1992), and those systems and patterns are found wanting, rejection and proselytising are inevitable results. Whether the architects of the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> were religiously, politically or power driven is irrelevant at this point. What is relevant is the way religion was highlighted in the aftermath and the way in which religious identity was acknowledged to be more relevant, for some people, than an ethnic or cultural identity.

Whilst newspapers, radio and the Internet undoubtedly played their part in this acknowledgement and explication, the majority of the British public would have received the information from television. In the immediate aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> coverage of Islam and attempts to understand Islamic fundamentalists came through the news. According to recent research 66% of people receive world news and a minimum of 60% (Scottish viewers) receive national news through television. This compares to 16% for newspapers and 14% for radio (Towler, 2001). In the months following, numerous documentaries have appeared which have sought to understand and explicate Islam. Purely from the position of a viewer with an interest, as opposed to being a sociologist, it has seemed to me that most of these programmes have inevitably had to deal with the centrality of religious identity and the impact that has upon the praxis of daily life. It is an aspect of religion (all religions) that has been missing from television programming and most notably from fictional programming. Again, this would seem to come back to the attempts of broadcasters to be inclusive but in such a way that they focus more on ethnicity. By ignoring the importance of religion they end up excluding that part of the population that is religious and, I would argue, that they have contributed to either the misunderstanding or non-understanding of religion that is a feature of this country. This is exemplified in the predominantly inadequate representation of religious characters in fictional broadcasting.

Lest it should appear that Islam has been the only religion to have been in need of the consciousness-raising that the past few months have witnessed, it is worth remembering that a number of interviewees in the focus groups, who were Christian, expressed the view that being religious was seen as something odd and that its portrayal contributed to this view. In an article for the New Statesman, Christina Odone wrote about 'media-sanctioned anti-Christian bias in popular culture' (1999). She states,

I am the victim of the one kind of bigotry that our society sanctions – bias against Christians. If I were a Muslim the threat of the fatwa would check any disrespect; if a Jew accusations of anti-Semitism would shut people up. But as a Christian I must bear the burden of our secular society's contempt for all faiths... Tony Blair was wrong. The 20<sup>th</sup> century didn't belong to the forces of conservatism, it belonged to the forces of secularism.



The quotation above is interesting in a number of respects. Firstly, religious discrimination is not an offence in this country so people can legitimately be insulted on the grounds of their religion. It was a point made by one of the Faith Representatives – ‘you can not call someone a black b... but you can call them a Fenian b...’ This clearly relates to the privileging of race/ethnicity over religion. Secondly, the fear of the fatwa was clearly articulated in the focus groups. Again, this is part of a non or mis-understanding of a ‘foreign’ religion which was gained through the media. Finally, Christianity as the focus of social contempt (or as an easy target) was also referred to in the focus groups and by some of the Faith Representatives, and has been noted in audience research to which I have referred previously. It would seem that in the desire to further the aims of inclusion the impact of secularization has been to create exclusion.

## **Conclusion**

There can be little doubt that it is a taken-for-granted position that we live in a secular society. It is more or less accepted, at a common-sense level, that the secularization thesis is true. The problem with that position, as I have explained in this chapter, is that it depends on the definitions used and the hypotheses contained within the secularization thesis. Whilst accepting the existence of secularization, Berger now questions the secularization thesis and particularly the role of pluralism in leading to the declining credibility of religion. I have also referred to the importance of examining secularization in a global context. I am aware that there are those who argue that even the global context reinforces the strength of the secularization argument but as Aldridge comments in a discussion of objections to the secularization thesis:

Nothing is allowed to count against the secularization thesis. All evidence, it is said, is reinterpreted to fit the theory e.g. ecumenical co-operation is a product of their weakness and hastens decline... Far from showing the truth of the secularization thesis, this treatment of evidence perhaps demonstrates that what we are dealing with is not a testable scientific theory at all, but an anti-religious ideology – one which protects itself dogmatically against the force of any evidence whatsoever. (2000:2/3).

I do not have the space to address these arguments in detail. However it seems to me from academic research and personal experience that there is some truth in an anti-religious ideology. There might be some ‘belonging without believing’, there is probably more

'believing without belonging' but what is clear is that more people have a space for some kind of religious belief (be it Christianity, Hinduism or Wicca) than those who do not. A survey for the BBC by the Opinion Research Business found that 58% of the population described themselves as either spiritual or religious and 70% expressed a belief in either God, a life-force or something being there (2000). This can only be described as secularization if the focus is on 'believing and belonging' and an insistence that the private sphere is irrelevant. Nevertheless this is a view that has gained remarkable prominence and it is my contention that it has been assisted by the broadcasters.

The inevitable, inextricable connection between Christianity and broadcasting was a clear feature of early broadcasting. This was apparent from the programming and from the views expressed by broadcasters and church leaders; not to forget the letters from the audiences and the language used in official publications. Reith's comments about secularization most likely referred to the secularization of the Sabbath, which he saw as inappropriate and unhelpful for the intellectual and spiritual well-being of human beings. He did not appear to accept the inevitability of the secularization thesis. Instead he saw people as being disenchanted with the church rather than with religion and therefore broadcasting would be used as an antidote to disenchantment.

Whether the social changes of the 1960s were introduced or mirrored by the broadcasters is a moot point. The crucial point is that the broadcasters were involved and provided a space for alternative points of view. The power of the media lies in its ability to reach vast numbers of people and to facilitate the circulation of ideas. In the final analysis those ideas usually relate to questions of power. The changes that were taking place in the 1960s were about the power of individuals to control their own lives. The church in particular and religion in general were seen in many quarters as agents of control that deprived individuals of choice. The fact that the church seemed to be out of step in so many areas and that science seemed to be proving more useful than theology did not help the cause of religion either.

Why broadcasting should have embraced secularization does not have a single answer. If secularization has 'believing and belonging' as its central hypothesis, then the declining membership of the established churches would have been seen as evidence that there was a loss of institutional power. As broadcasting made space for a more critical approach to religion it became easier for religion to be criticised – not only in the programmes but also



in the workplace to the extent that a number of insiders have referred to what Rev. Rae (former Head of Religious Broadcasting, BBC) described as a secular, questioning culture which mitigates against people admitting a faith. One of the tools used in the power struggle between the field of religion and the field of broadcasting was the privileging of the audience over special interest groups, by the broadcasters. Evidence to support secularization (primarily declining church membership) was used to justify the marginalisation of religious broadcasting and, in relation to my own research, to justify the limited presence of religious characters in fictional broadcasting. Spaces need to be filled however and the space that was increasingly being created by the removal of religion from the centre to the periphery was filled by an attention to equal opportunities – for women and for blacks. This has now expanded to cultural diversity but it is clear from the evidence in this chapter that whilst a handful of people might recognise that this ought to include religion, from the point of view of the broadcasters it still means ethnicity.

In some ways arguments about the precise nature of secularization are actually an irrelevance. When people choose to belong to a religion their commitment is usually deeper than when it is just assumed. In a country where nobody is socially obliged to participate in religion, there are still millions who do, and the praxis of their faith is very different from when there was a social obligation. It becomes part of their identity, not something they take on and off as the mood suits them. By accepting the inevitability of secularization, broadcasters appear to have adopted a position whereby they are just waiting for religion to die out so religious representation does not have to be taken seriously or treated fairly. Unless religion is treated seriously, across all genres, religious people will feel increasingly excluded and, as I have said already, there is a danger of increased alienation and an increase in all fundamentalisms.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this research was to investigate whether or not representations of religion in fictional broadcasting have an impact upon social inclusion and exclusion. It was also my intention to address the gap in the sociology of mass media as far as religion is concerned. In this chapter I will outline the findings of the research and explain why they are important, not only sociologically but also socially. Also, I will address the fruitfulness of the theoretical concepts that were deployed throughout the analysis. I will conclude by suggesting ways in which this research can, and should, be taken forward.

Lord Reith's aims for broadcasting were that it should educate, inform and entertain its audiences. It is a feature of broadcasting that it can combine those three elements. The other important feature of broadcasting is that it can reach audiences of millions. The responsibility of educating, informing and entertaining millions of people should be taken seriously. It is here that academics should take an interest. The history of the sociology of mass media shows that there has been a great deal of academic interest in broadcasting. I demonstrated in the introductory chapter the developments in relation to media studies. Some of those studies were more concerned with the effects of the media on audiences. Some were more concerned with meanings inscribed into different media texts. Some were more concerned with the ways in which audiences used the media for their own ends. I also demonstrated the limitations of much of the work that did address religion and the media. Most, but not all, of those limitations were due to an ignorance of the requirements of good media research. Other work however recognised that focusing on one aspect of the triangular relationship of production–content–reception produced only partial understandings. Research that was going to be able to say something useful about that



triangular relationship had to look at more than one aspect. It also had to break away from a purely quantitative methodology, which is why, in Chapter One I discussed the relationship between quantitative and qualitative work. It was that model of research that I adopted within this project.

### **Effects of media representations**

Media research that investigates the effect of representation on audiences is usually based on a belief that media images do affect either people's behaviour or their attitudes. The complexity of the relationship between effects on behaviour and attitudes was addressed in Chapter One. This is why, over the years, there has been a proliferation of studies in to the way different groups in society are represented. Broadcasting, and particularly public service broadcasting, is where people expect to see themselves represented. However representation alone is not enough. The quality and quantity of those representations is important. Quality is important because it relates to the perceived value placed upon a particular group. Quantity is important because it relates to the perceived relevance of a particular group. In Chapter Three, I discussed the findings from the focus group interviews. Concerns about quality and quantity were raised in the focus groups. Their complaints about the use of stereotypes and the absence of different religions were two of the main findings to come out of the focus group interviews.

Christianity was the dominant religion to be represented in fictional broadcasting. Apart from three programmes, *Vicar of Dibley*, *Brookside* and *Hollyoaks*, all the bearers of religiosity had remarkably similar markers although the markers for laity and clergy were different. Had I chosen to modify the 'news game' (Glasgow Media Group) it was quite clear from what took place that groups would have created lay bearers who were female, older, single or widowed, interfering and bible-quoters. Clerical bearers would have produced greater variety depending on whether they were being placed in a drama, soap or comedy. Nevertheless, if they were Roman Catholic priests they would have been prone to sexual temptation with a fondness for alcohol (the three priests in *Father Ted* epitomised this). Anglican or Presbyterian clergy would be more likely to be portrayed as lacking in humour and lacking moral fibre (*The Vicar of Dibley* was clearly an exception to this although the Pentecostalists obviously felt she was lacking in moral fibre).

Non-Christian religions were notable for their absence. Focus groups remembered a handful of Jewish characters but for the most part they had been in dramas that had been shown some years ago. There was only one Jewish character remembered from a soap. The



white focus groups consistently blurred ethnicity with religion irrespective of the absence of any markers. Even when there were markers they were not recognised and consequently the religion that was identified was Islam. The Sikhs and the Muslims made the distinction, more easily, between ethnicity and religion. Although there were few characters who combined ethnicity and religion, their view was that most of them were very westernised and therefore not very religious. Whilst the Sikhs identified a number of Sikh actors it was clear that they were employed as Asians rather than as Sikhs. At the time of the interviews, there was only one Sikh character, in *The Bill*, but again he did not seem to be particularly religious. Although most Asian characters were identified as Muslims, it became clear that none of them were. The view of the Muslim interviewees was that Islam did not exist in fictional broadcasting<sup>1</sup>. Rather it was seen more in films, news and documentaries and was always portrayed in negative, and often false, ways. Muslims and Sikhs wanted an increase in the quality and quantity of representations of their religion.

Barker (2000) argues that there are problems with demands for positive images – they can be homogenising, they can be ambiguous and depend upon an epistemology of realism, which is not viable. The evidence from the interviews with the Sikhs and Muslims not only support his conclusion – the issue may be one not of positive images but of the representation of difference and diversity – but would also serve to invalidate the assumptions of the white groups about non-Christians only wanting to see positive representations. Whilst representations of Christianity can hardly be said to represent difference and diversity, compared to the other religions they do. There is also the issue of the blurring of ethnicity and religion. According to ITC Briefing Update No. 9, *The representation of minorities on television: a content analysis* the year 2000 had 46% of programmes portraying ethnic minorities. However, when repeat appearances were taken out of the equation the proportion changed to 6%. It seems clear that if there was an increase in the representation of ethnic minorities (and Asians seem to be particularly under-represented) then there would be inevitably an increase in religious representation. Nevertheless, I have said on a number of occasions that it is important to remember that ethnicity and particular religions are not necessarily the same thing. That distinction notwithstanding a greater ethnic minority presence might serve to undermine that false connection and produce a greater recognition of the difference between ethnicity, cultural practices and religion.

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<sup>1</sup> A sitcom, *The Thin Blue Line* (set in a police station), did have a Muslim, woman character. However, her



Concerns about the quality of representations were clearly linked to concerns about the effects of television. Echoing the views of Lord Reith regarding the way broadcasting could be a positive force, all of the religious groups felt that if more positive images of religion were shown people would find religion more challenging as a topic. The Muslim women, who wanted to see more positive images of the hijab so that their daughters would have role models, supported the findings of Srebenny-Mohammadi (1994) – women wanted to see more women on television because of the role model function for younger women. It was clear that most people believed that television could affect behaviour and attitudes, either negatively or positively although, as I have said previously, nobody seemed to think that it affected them personally. Most people saw their life-situation as having a greater effect. Having said that, some of them did acknowledge the influence of the media in their perceptions of religion but said it was mainly through news programmes or the press. Nevertheless, as I noted in Chapter One, television viewing does not take place in isolation and the images it offers can reinforce attitudes formed through different circumstances. For the religious groups the tolerance shown towards some of the less attractive characters was enabled because of their experience and understanding of the diversity of congregations. For the non-religious groups (or more accurately non-religious interviewees), previously negative experiences or an absence of experience meant that negative portrayals of religion confirmed their low opinion, and the irrelevance, of religion.

The explanations offered by focus groups for the ways in which religion was represented demonstrates the importance of research that addresses production as well as reception. Explanations offered by receivers are not necessarily the same as those offered by producers. The focus groups overwhelmingly concluded that lack of experience of religion, on the part of producers and writers, was one of the main factors affecting its portrayal. They also referred to the predominantly secular nature of society, which made religion appear uninteresting. Most interviewees however believed that religion could be included in fictional broadcasting in a way that made it dramatically interesting without resorting to stereotypes and caricatures. However, the most interesting finding from the focus groups in terms of explanations was the 'repressive Islam' explanation.



### **Blurring religion and ethnicity**

For some interviewees this was expressed as a positive concern about not wanting to cause offence to non-Christian religions due to lack of 'insider' knowledge. For most however, the explanation was based on a belief that there would be negative repercussions from Muslims if mistakes were made in their representation. There was a constant elision of ethnicity with religion. Discussion of either actual characters or future characters revolved around an assumption that the portrayal of a non-Christian character would require a non-white (usually from the Indian sub-continent) who would automatically be Muslim. There was little awareness that religion is not necessarily connected to ethnicity. There was even less awareness that the 'repressive Islam' explanation was irrelevant for Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs or Hindus. The persistence of this explanation had two contributory factors – lack of direct experience and previous media experience (*Death of a Princess* and the fatwah on Salman Rushdie being the two most significant media experiences). This finding supports previous research (notably the Glasgow Media Group, to which I referred in Chapter One) which has demonstrated the influence of the media particularly when there is a lack of direct experience on the part of viewers.

### **Effects on religious organisations**

In Chapter Four I discussed the findings from the faith representatives and I include them in this discussion of audience effects and reception because it was clear from those interviews that media images did have an effect on organisational responses. Having said that it was equally clear that when it came to fictional representations none of the representatives identified a coherent organisational approach to the media. The focus was predominantly on both press releases and public relations or attempts to impact on wider policy issues. Responses to fictional broadcasting were usually left to individual members of a particular religion. Organisational responses (especially if it was a complaint) were felt to be inappropriate because either they would perpetuate negative stereotypes of that religion or there was no unanimity within the religion/denomination. Lack of unanimity also served to inhibit a more proactive response because again it was seen to perpetuate negative stereotypes – religions/denominations are fragmented and therefore irrelevant, and that fragmentation (or more positively, diversity) is treated as negative conflict. The main contribution to fictional broadcasting was to provide information about religious details rather than substantive information. Their only sanction seemed to be to refuse assistance but even this was felt to be inadequate because production would go ahead regardless. The Roman Catholic Church and the filming of *Priest* were a good illustration of this.



It was also very difficult not to conclude that there was a lack of awareness amongst the different religions of the cumulative impact of fictional representations hence the focus on factual coverage and religious broadcasting. There was also a feeling that fictional broadcasting was taken less seriously than other forms of broadcasting and therefore not worth bothering about. A partial explanation here is that fewer of the faith representatives claimed to watch much fictional broadcasting, especially the soaps. This contrasted with the religious focus groups who obviously saw more of these representations and were more aware of the cumulative impact. Faith representatives did express more concern than the focus groups over what exactly would be representative. Possibly, because they had a greater understanding of their particular religion's diversity than did ordinary members. In conclusion, there seemed to be two factors that contributed to the ways in which religious organisations responded to fictional broadcasting. Firstly, there was the cumulative effect of negative coverage across all media, which made them reluctant to do anything that would serve to reinforce that negativity. Secondly, there seemed to be poor communication within and amongst different religions about broadcasting generally and fictional broadcasting specifically. This was evidenced by the limited awareness of the role of advisory bodies and in some cases unawareness that members of their own religion/denomination served on those bodies!

### **Effects on production**

I said earlier that the value of not focussing on just reception was that issues relating to production could be addressed. In Chapter Five I discussed the findings from the interviews with broadcasters. I explained in that chapter that I had not only interviewed people involved with the production of some of the programmes discussed in the focus groups but that I had also interviewed more general broadcasters, who could provide an historically contextualised background. It was clear that some of the explanations provided by the focus groups had no truth in reality; most notably the belief that all those involved in production had no experience of religion. *Coronation Street*, *Brookside* and *High Road* both had writing teams or production staff, with religious members, who drew on their own experiences to inform different characters and storylines. Whilst *Hollyoaks* did not have religious members, considerable efforts had been made to research the Christian character, Brian. Having said that, two of the explanations from the focus groups did seem to have some basis in reality.

The first was that there was an acceptance, by the producers, that British society was predominantly secular and therefore religion was not really interesting or relevant to



viewers. This secular view was used to justify the absence of religious characters or the stereotypical portrayal of characters as elderly women, particularly when talking about Christianity. The second was that more consideration was given to non-Christian religions and that greater emphasis was given to researching non-Christian religions for fear of causing offence. I am aware that there is a tension here. If there was an absence of non-Christian religions how could they be given greater consideration? In some ways, their absence was part of that greater consideration. For example the key bearer of religiosity in *EastEnders*, Dot Cotton, was seen as sufficiently Christian because she was white, elderly and quoted the bible (there seemed to be little awareness that Dot's portrayal might cause offence to Christians), whereas the possible, future appearance of a Sikh family was having a considerable amount of research devoted to it, for fear of causing offence. In the meantime, people who were specifically Sikh were excluded from the programme.

However, whilst Dev from *Coronation Street* was introduced to address the concerns of the Asian community in Manchester and was seen from the production perspective as being a Hindu, it was clear from the focus groups that his main function was to be an Asian. His religion was well hidden for those who knew little of non-Christian religions. Continuing the blurring of ethnicity with religion, the absence of non-Christian religions was usually justified on ethnic grounds – the programme is set in a predominantly white area therefore you can not have non-Christian religions (even if you wanted to include religion). It would also then mean that the issue of racism would have to be covered in a programme and that was often seen as undesirable.

This last concern was part of the production constraints that were not always considered by the audiences. Whilst audiences mentioned ratings as one of the factors governing production decisions it was a slightly more complex issue than they had anticipated. For some programmes, sensationalism was seen as being part of the drive for ratings and religion could be included in a sensational way. The alternative was that it was excluded because it was not sensational or extraordinary enough. For other programmes, however there was a very clear format and audience loyalty had to be maintained rather than antagonised, which the inclusion of religion (and its incorrect association with racism) might jeopardise. There were also more structural constraints related to budgets, shooting schedules and the complexity of actors' contracts. Despite the attempts by two of the programmes to produce more spiritually rounded characters, the acceptance of secularization (and the secular nature of the field of broadcasting to which the general



broadcasters referred) seemed to have a significant effect on the inclusion or exclusion of religion in fictional broadcasting.

### **Secularization and broadcasting**

In Chapter Six I described the impact of secularization on broadcasting through an analysis of the archival work and noted the shift that has taken place in broadcasting, from the doxa of Christianity to the doxa of cultural diversity, with an emphasis on race/ethnicity. I provided numerous examples to illustrate the importance of religion in broadcasting up until the 1960s. Following that period, the evidence showed that religion and religious values were increasingly seen as only relevant to religious broadcasting. Instead, there was a move towards equality of representation particularly with reference to gender, race and sexuality. Latterly the focus of broadcasters has been on cultural diversity and I provided examples from current policy documents that illustrated this as well as reinforcing my findings from the focus groups and producers – namely that religion is frequently seen as being synonymous with race/ethnicity. For example, Channel 4's '*Statement of Promises for 2002*' includes religion under the sub-heading, 'Under Represented Voices'. Not surprisingly it only refers to religious broadcasting but if it is an under-represented voice why wasn't it included in the ITC Briefing Update, *The representation of minorities on television: a content analysis* (a document that analysed output on BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5)? As with work in the sociology of mass media religion was ignored. Instead, the focus of the document was race, disability and sexual orientation. There was evidence from members of the audience (which the broadcasters seemed not to notice) that subsuming religion into ethnicity created a feeling of exclusion. When the only references to religion in broadcasting refer to religious broadcasting and, despite the work of religious broadcasters in reflecting the religious diversity of this country, religious broadcasting is seen as one the most flexible and marginalised components of the schedule (frequently shown late at night and subject to schedule changes at short notice) it is not surprising that religious viewers feel excluded. The reason for this lack of awareness of the importance of religion to many viewers and the desire to see it fairly represented across all genres (not just confined to the ghetto of religious broadcasting) was explained by the doxa of secularization at a wider social level and at a more specific structural level – the field of broadcasting.

I argued in Chapter Six that I was persuaded that secularization should be seen as a Western European exception as opposed to the rest of the world being seen as exceptional. It seems clear from the evidence that secularization is a doxa within broadcasting and this



clearly impacts upon the ways in which cultural diversity is perceived. It focuses on race/ethnicity and marginalises religion. Despite the numerous documentaries on Islam following September 11<sup>th</sup>, some of which looked at the primacy of religion in terms of self-identity, the logical connection does not seem to have been made. For people who are religious their religion is likely to be just as important, if not more so, than their ethnic identity and accordingly all religions need to be recognised in that way. They need to have representations across all genres in order to see themselves and in order to know that they are not considered irrelevant and of no value. This is not the way to promote social inclusion although it is a good way to promote social exclusion.

### **Fruitfulness of conceptual tools**

In Chapter One, I explained that I wanted to use some of Bourdieu's conceptual tools in order to analyse my findings and to provide a sociologically useful way of explaining them. My conclusion is that those tools have proved to be extremely useful. By using the concept of fields, I was better able to understand the tensions that existed between the field of broadcasting and the field of religion. The struggles within and between those fields, the alliances that were formed and the support that was drawn upon to justify different positions provided a clear understanding of the changed power relations for religion and broadcasting. The taken-for-grantedness that is incorporated into the term 'doxa' and its relationship to the power struggles between fields provided a means for interpreting not only the attitudes of early broadcasters and the language used in *The Radio Times* and *The Listener*, but it also provided a way of understanding the later marginalisation of religion in the move to race/ethnicity, within cultural diversity claims. It also proved useful in relation to secularization. If it was understood as a doxa within broadcasting and society then its taken-for-grantedness makes sense even when secularization seems to be a case of Western European exceptionalism. What it does not explain is how secularization achieved that doxic position. However, that is a separate research project.

My own research leads me to a view that the symbolic capital enjoyed by broadcasters has an impact. Not everyone is capable of creating their own cultural images so we allow others to do it for us across all fields of cultural production. Broadcasters create those images when they produce television programmes. Part of their remit is to produce images that will satisfy audiences but, in parallel with that, they are establishing themselves in the field. They are competing with other professionals and need to develop a 'feel for the game' as Bourdieu describes it if they want to succeed. The evidence from the broadcasters is that knowing that they are working in a secular environment that militates against the



expression of faith means that they accept that religion is not important. Accordingly, the cultural images they produce are less reflective of the audience and more reflective of the habitus of those within the field. The most important aspect of symbolic capital in this instance was what Bourdieu described as constitutive naming. The representation (or absence) of different religions is the product of habitus and the feel for the game. The images that end up on the television screen constitutively name those religions particularly for audiences who have no direct experience of them. Providing the programmes attract audiences and are seen as successful, as far as religion is concerned it confirms the view that nobody is really interested in religion otherwise they would have complained or demanded something different. It also confirms that the broadcasters have it right and for those without direct experience of religion, it contributes to the mediated pool of knowledge they have of religion and people who are religious. Having said that, I want to reiterate the very important point that television viewing does not take place in isolation. It is one factor amongst many that governs the formation and maintenance of attitudes towards any topic. Nevertheless, the fact that it is the most widely used medium in this country means that for those without direct experience it has significant symbolic power. It also highlights the severe limitations of media work, which celebrates the 'trickery' of the audience. In the words of Bourdieu:

Facility with the games of cultural criticism – their “I know that you know that I know” – is not universal. Nor is the ability to spin out elaborate “readings” of the “ironical and metatextual” messages cynically manipulated by television producers and ad people. Anyone who thinks otherwise has simply surrendered to a populist version of one of the most perverse forms of academic pedantry. (1998:8).

The concept of habitus has been referred to in relation to broadcasters. It was also useful in relation to the focus groups because it explained some of the differences amongst and within them. The advantage of habitus over other explanatory terms is the incorporation of all aspects of social conditioning rather than a solitary focus on class, age, gender or race. It is also significant because it emphasises the mental and corporeal schemata that are deposited within individual bodies and the impact they have upon perception, appreciation and action (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:16ff). It was clear from the focus group interviews that each of the variables of class, age, gender and race had an impact but it was equally clear that personal involvement with religion (and thereby possession of a particular ontology) affected the ways in which different programmes and characters were



received and understood. Habitus was also significant in determining the programming choices of the Muslim women. It is my contention that it is an extremely useful concept for gaining a better understanding of the processes of reception. Not only does it explain why particular 'readings' are made but it also explains why particular choices are made. Understanding how habitus affects choices and readings might well be useful for broadcasters in their pursuit of cultural diversity. Equally, an understanding of the impact of habitus on the production process, and its relationship to the doxas that operate within the field of broadcasting, might well open the way to more genuine cultural diversity.

### **The way forward**

This research project has been constrained, inevitably, by a number of factors – time and only one person doing the work being the most significant. There are a number of ways in which the research could be taken forward. It is not my intention to provide a list of mini research proposals instead I want to provide a brief, indicative list.

Including more religions. It was a source of regret that Jews and Buddhists had to be excluded from the study and I believe it would be extremely useful to carry out further work, which includes these and other religions.

Denominational variation. Within most religions there are denominational variations and these impact upon the way people view the world and the judgements they bring to bear. Interviewing the more fundamentalist members of different religions might well provide a useful insight into the kinds of programming with which they engage. This is particularly significant in terms of social inclusion and exclusion.

Geographical variation. This study was carried out in Scotland and was affected by particular demographic variables. Because religion is missing from the sociology of mass media, it would be extremely useful to extend the study to the rest of the United Kingdom where different variables pertain. It would also be extremely useful to extend the study internationally and especially to include countries where religion is either strong or growing.

Production. Gaining access to broadcasters was not easy but interviewing a wider range of producers would provide more evidence to either support or contradict the findings of my own research. Whilst I have reservations about the overall utility of content analysis, if it was linked to audience research it would provide evidence about the quantity and quality of religious representation, in fictional broadcasting.

Historical. A comparative study of The Radio Times, TV Times and different newspapers across the decades would provide greater insight into the degree of consensus that this research uncovered.



Media and secularization. One of the more tantalising findings of this study was the connection between the secular ethos of the broadcasting field and the social acceptance that we live in a secular society. An investigation into the role of the media in relation to the pre-eminence of secularization – by interrogating the habitus of producers and analysing the contents of their products – would be a fascinating study that would go some way to explaining the circulation of knowledge and the ways in which some ‘truths’ achieve doxic status.

Finally, I hope that what I have accomplished in this study has given serious attention to the role of religion in broadcasting. Concerns about social inclusion and exclusion have to take religion in to account, not only in daily life but also in the representations of religion that are provided by the broadcasters. The historical aspect of this study has, I think, given a greater sense of the social changes that have taken place throughout the history of broadcasting. Increasingly, broadcasting has developed fictional programmes that command very large viewing figures. The presence or absence of religious representation inevitably contributes to attitude formation amongst those large numbers of viewers. This thesis has tried to come to terms with the significance of that, and has taken the discussion of religion and the media beyond the usual parameters of religious broadcasting.

**Appendix 1**

**Interviewee Information**

(Please circle/tick the relevant choice)

Female              Male

Age:

12 - 19; 20 - 29; 30 - 39; 40 - 49; 50 - 59; 60 - 69; 70 - 79; 80 - 89; 90 plus

Occupation:

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-----

City/Town and Region where you live:

-----  
-----

Religious/Spiritual beliefs.

Would you please describe, briefly, what your religious/spiritual beliefs are e.g. are you part of a particular religion and denomination; do you attend a place of worship and if so what and how often; is it something private or less formal? Please feel free to say you have no religious or spiritual beliefs if that is the case.

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Television Programmes

(Please circle the ones you watch regularly and/or watch as often as you can)

EastEnders; Coronation Street; Brookside; Emmerdale; Neighbours; The Bill; High Road; The Simpsons; Hollyoaks; Friends; Vicar of Dibley; Father Ted; Frasier; Kiss Me Kate; Cold Feet; Family Affairs; Frasier; Holby City; Casualty; Taggart.  
Any other sitcom, soap or drama: \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix 2**

### **General Synod of Church of England February 2000 Session**

**Private Member's Motion: Religious Broadcasting. Nigel Holmes, Carlisle.**

**Motion Passed: 370 – 0, with amendments from the Bishop of Wakefield, Revd Peter Mullins (Lincoln), and Mr David Webster (Rochester).**

**Agreed text:**

**That this Synod:**

- a) Express its gratitude to broadcasters who have, over the years, accurately reflected and vastly enriched the spiritual life of the nation with coherent, intelligent, entertaining and engaging religious broadcasts;**
- b) Regret the reduction and rescheduling of certain religious broadcasts by the BBC and call on the Corporation, in the context of their public service commitments and statutory responsibilities to a changing society, to maintain and develop high quality religious programmes, for present and future analogue and digital channels which are made to high production values, designed for a general audience, including young people, and carried at peak listening and viewing times;**
- c) Call on the churches to support and engage with those involved in broadcasting in creative and imaginative ways, helping our culture to explore faith not as an additional element to an otherwise secular world but as an integral part of it; and**
- d) Ask the Archbishops' Council to develop, in co-operation with other Churches and interested parties, a mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the provision and quality of religious output by the BBC and the Commercial sector.**

## **Appendix 3**

### **Names of Faith Representatives**

- Father Danny McLaughlin, Communications Officer for Roman Catholic Church in Scotland
- Rt. Rev Bruce Cameron, Primus and Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney, Scottish Episcopal Church
- Mrs Pat Holgate, Press Officer, Church of Scotland
- Mr Hugh Brown, Press Officer, Board of Social Responsibility, Church of Scotland
- Rev David Sinclair, Church and Nation Committee, Church of Scotland
- Yaseem Mohammed, President, Central Mosque, Edinburgh
- Vishvapani, Press Officer, Friends of the Western Buddhist Order
- Ephraim Borowski, Hon. Secretary, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities
- Wege Singh, Liaison Officer, Sikh Temple, Edinburgh (and others).



## **Appendix 4**

### **Non respondents/Cancellations/Declined to be interviewed**

#### **Television programmes**

- Vicar of Dibley
- Father Ted
- Emmerdale
- The Bill
- A& E

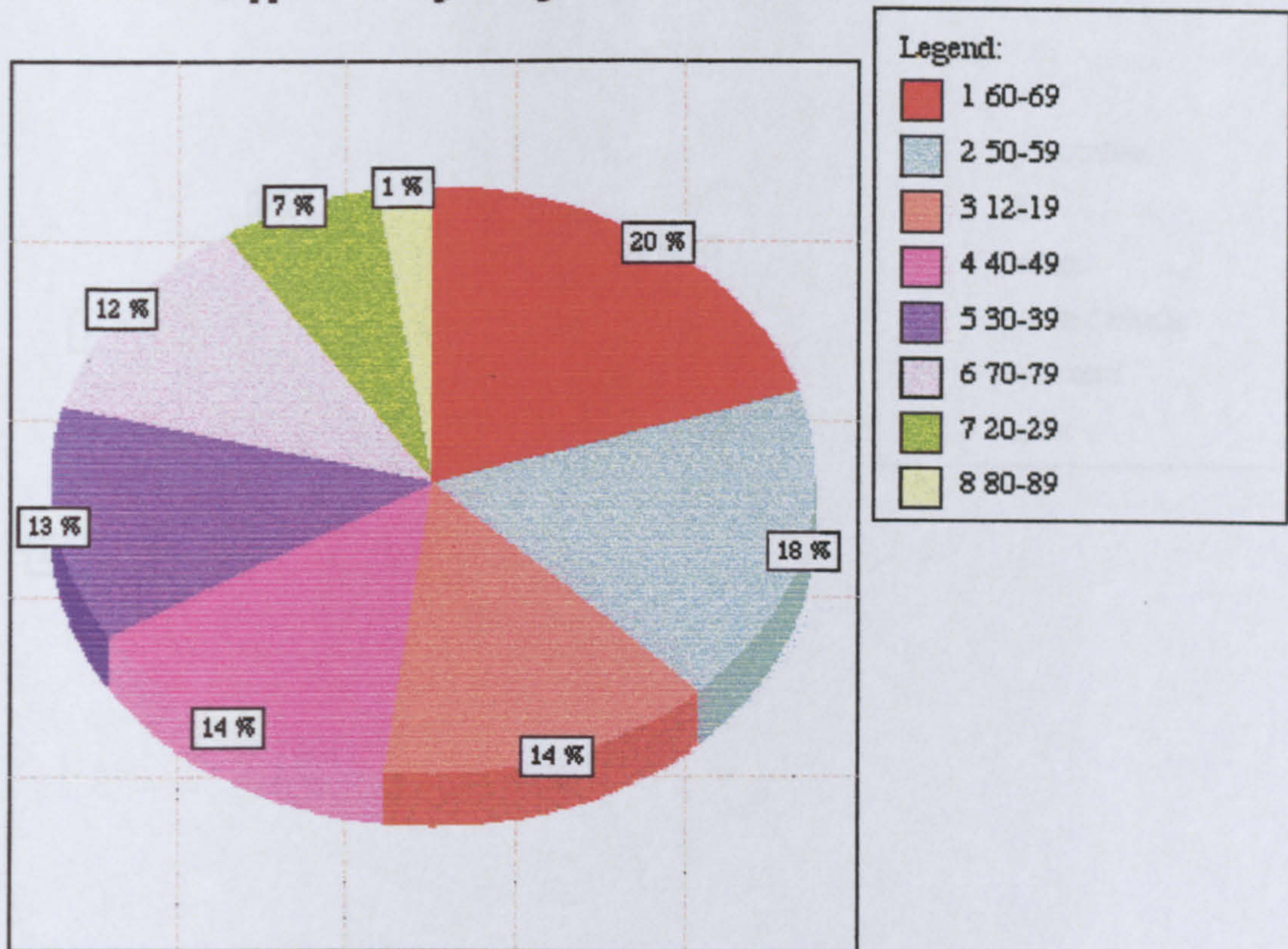
#### **Others**

1. Joan Bakewell - Broadcaster
2. Church of England Communications Office (I had a brief meeting at the beginning of 2001 and was promised information about the monitoring committee. Despite repeated e-mails this was not forthcoming.)
3. Bishop James Jones, Anglican Bishop of Liverpool
4. Greg Dyke, Director-General, BBC
5. HRH The Prince of Wales



## Appendix 5

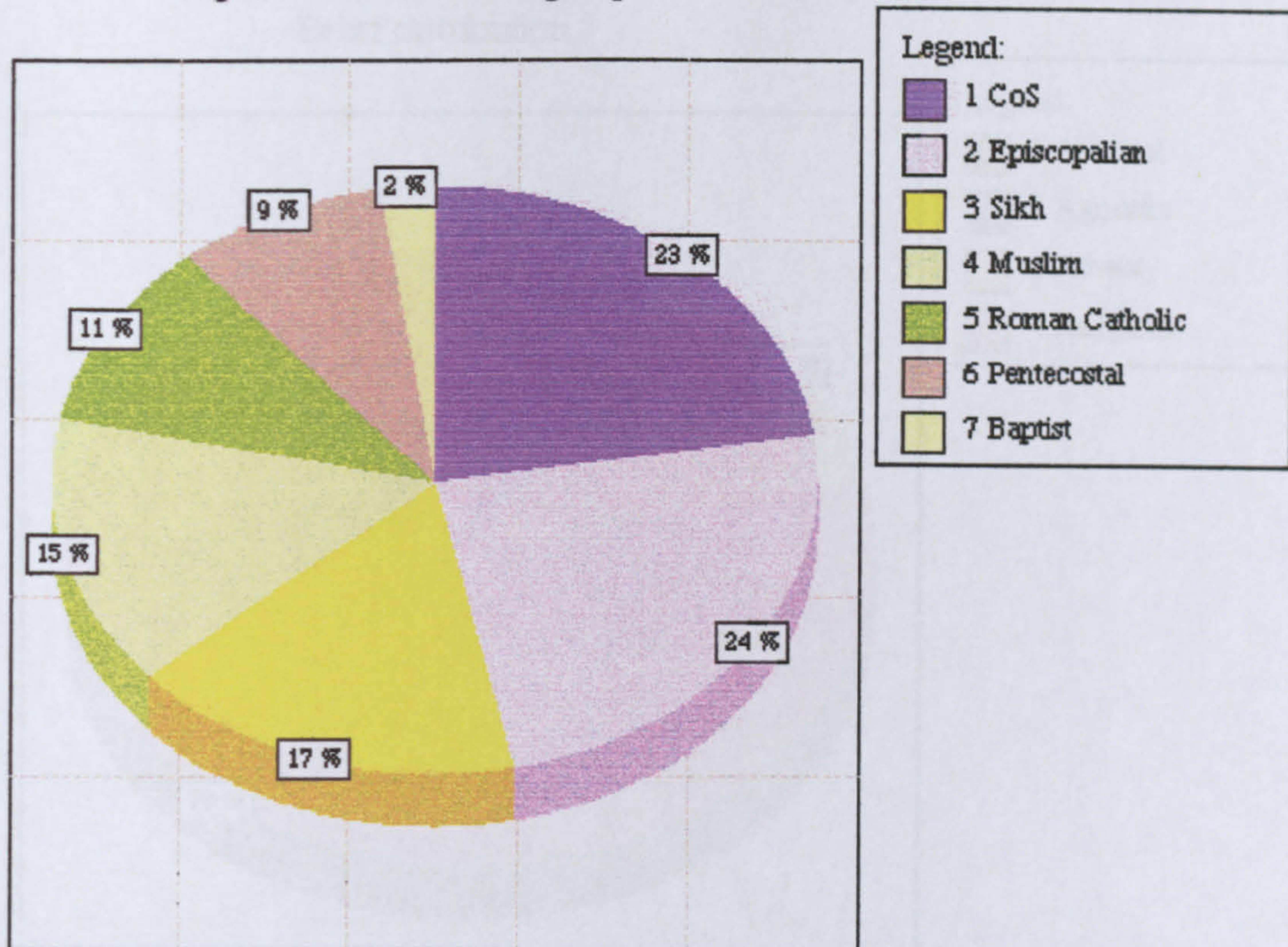
Appendix 5 Age Range





## Appendix 6

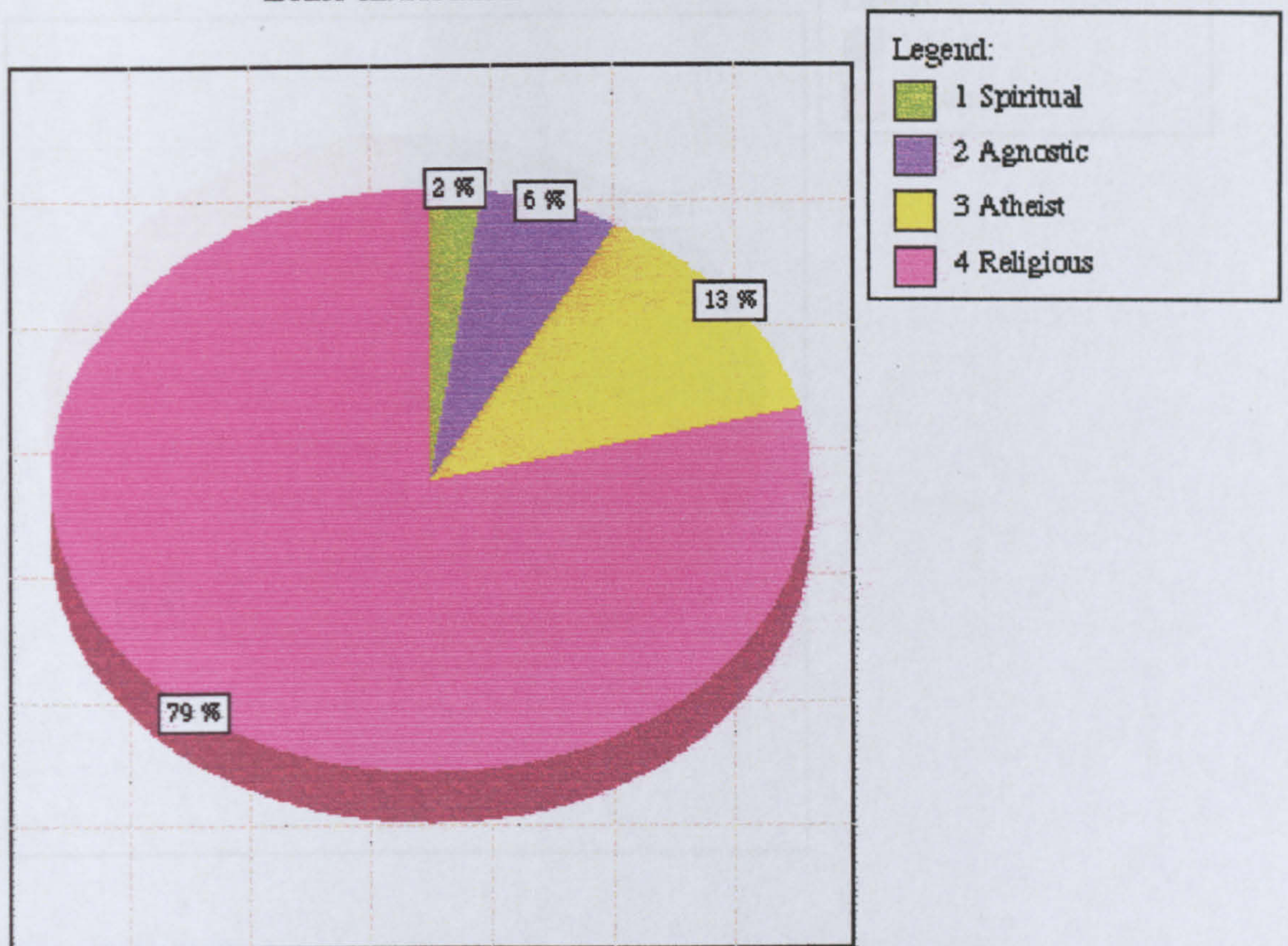
Religion/denominations in groups





## Appendix 7

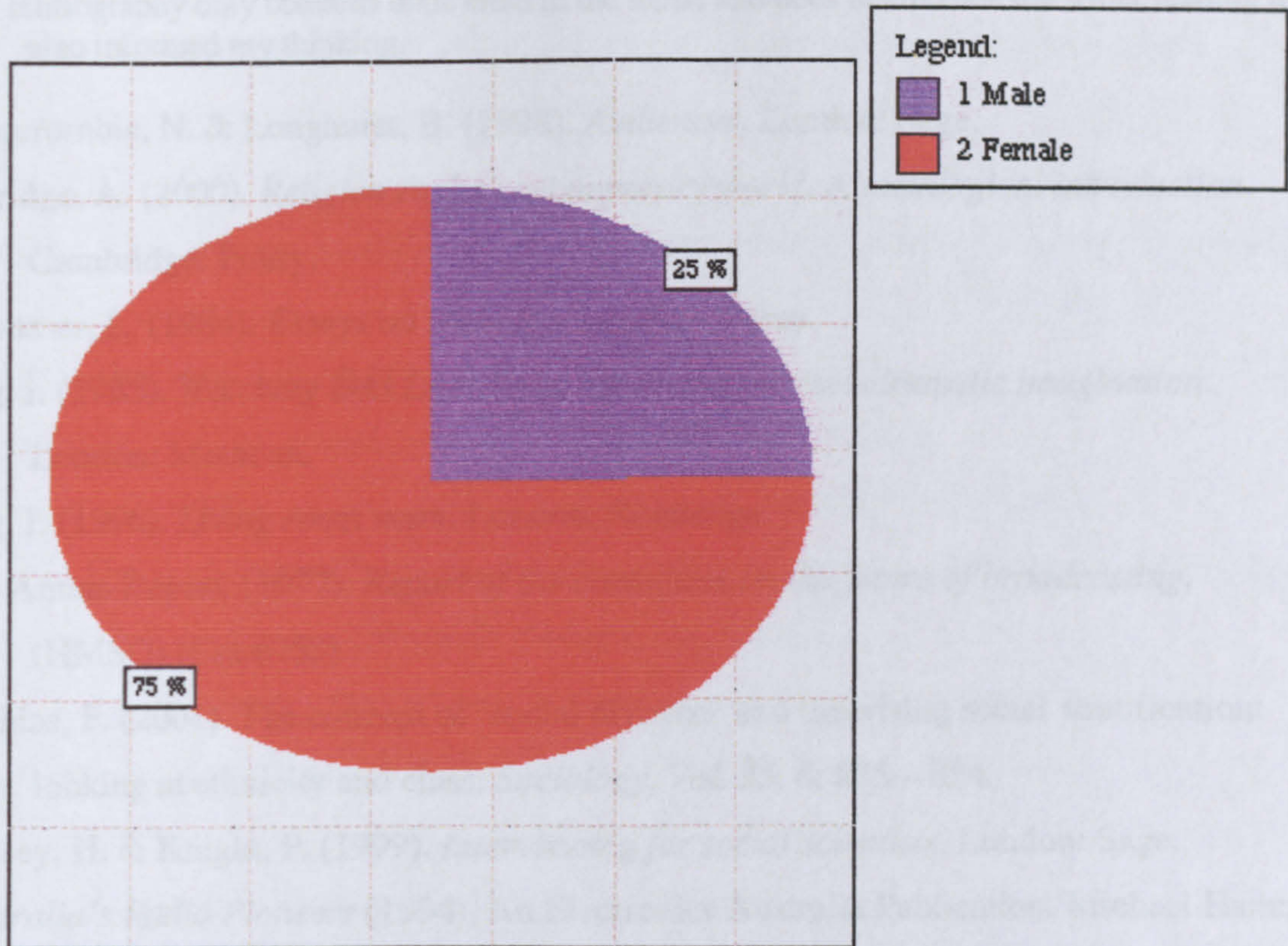
Belief distribution





## Appendix 8

Male/Female Ratio





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This bibliography only contains texts cited in the thesis and does not include the wider reading that also informed my thinking.

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