

***Thought for the Day. An argument for the inclusion of non-religious contributors and 'humanist thoughts'.***

**British Humanist Association, July 2009.**

*Legal and policy context*

For the last six years the Communications Act 2003 has been in force which, at section 264(6)(f) defines public service broadcasting as requiring 'a suitable quantity and range of programmes dealing with each of the following, science, religion and other beliefs...' and at section 264(13) defines 'belief' as 'a collective belief in...a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles...' During the passage of the Act, the responsible minister (Lord McIntosh) made it clear that this included Humanism. The BBC is also mandated by its Agreement with the Secretary of State to reflect 'religion and other beliefs', which includes Humanism.

Further, the Human Rights Act 1998 and national and European equality and anti-discrimination law give religious and non-religious beliefs, such as Humanism, equivalent status in law.

That *Thought for the Day* is, at present, reserved solely for religion clearly goes against both the spirit of the BBC Charter and also contemporary legislation.

*A balance*

One of the key rules governing *Thought for the Day* is that contributors are not allowed to attack other religions. They do, however, not infrequently attack non-religious beliefs. If humanists were allowed to broadcast, we should not be interested in attacking anyone but in putting forward humanist thinking. Further, allowing only religious speakers to contribute, with unquestioned statements and positions, some of which stray very closely to the line of political opinions, surely contravenes the BBC's guidelines for impartiality. It is unlikely that there is elsewhere in BBC output a strand that is devoted to a particular point of view, expressed without interruption and with no right of reply.

The BBC has failed to provide any explicitly humanist programmes, by contrast with the many hours of programmes that are explicitly religious. *Thought for the Day* might be an ideal place from which to begin to introduce and grow humanist broadcasting, helping to meet the needs of the audience as well as the requirements of the BBC's remit.

*The humanist tradition*

By including only religious contributors, the BBC clearly implies that humanists cannot offer a significant thought and that religious people, through no other virtue than claiming a religious faith or affiliation, have a monopoly on morality and ethics. This baseless and offensive implication ignores the fact that Western Europe has a tradition of non-religious ethical thinking that can be traced back some 2,500 years to the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks – outdating many of the present-day religions. This way of understanding the world, of finding meaning in life, and of grounding moral thinking can also be found in China and India and many other cultures.

Traditionally and today, many of the great philosophers, scientists and moral thinkers have been essentially humanist, because they did not accept traditional beliefs but thought for themselves and pushed human knowledge forwards.

The explicit exclusion of humanists and other non-religious people from *Thought for the Day* means that the huge body of philosophical, artistic, scientific, ethical, moral and much other thought drawn from the humanist tradition is ignored. The consequence of this is an impoverished *Thought for the Day*.

### *'Secular' and 'spiritual'*

An argument that the BBC makes against inclusion of humanist contributors is that the rest of the *Today* programme is (like most of what is broadcast by the BBC) “devoted to overwhelmingly secular concerns – national and international news and features, interviews and debate on issues of public policy” (BBC, 2009) and so it is “appropriate to offer a brief, uninterrupted interlude of spiritual reflection, founded on religious belief” (*ibid*).

First, in this context, the term ‘secular’ is being misused to suggest that a humanist thought would be properly categorised as analogous to the news, sport and weather rather than suited to *Thought for the Day*. The word can indeed be used to denote that which simply is not religious, and therefore literally anything in the world that is not religious (not just on the *Today* programme) would be described as secular. However, this meaning originates in the contrast between the eternal concerns of religion and the merely temporal (secular) ones of everyday life. In that sense humanist thought is not ephemeral but belongs to eternity. Moreover, it is ignominious to imply that the beliefs, morals, ethics and views, of non-religious people are best characterised simply as not religious, as opposed reflecting and drawing on the rich and varied non-religious traditions which continue to develop from millennia of human thought, evolution and society.

Second, there is no reason why a slot that purports to provide an interlude of spiritual reflection should not include non-religious thoughts. The term ‘spiritual’ is, nowadays, understood and used by many as meaning something like:

‘The non-material element of a human being which animates and sustains us and, depending on our point of view, either ends or continues in some form when we die. It is about the development of a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, meaning and purpose.’<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, there are many understandings of ‘spiritual’ outside of the theistic context and a wider interpretation is something that would surely benefit *Thought for the Day*.

### *Meeting the needs of the audience*

The BBC is currently failing in its duty to reflect the diversity of beliefs of its audience and the wider population. The well-respected British Social Attitudes survey recently found that over two-thirds of people (69%) either did not claim membership of a religion or said that they never attended a religious service. The Office for National Statistics’ Social Trends found that, in 2006, there were similar proportions of people (about half the population) who considered themselves as belonging to a Christian denomination as those who considered themselves not belonging to any religion. The figures for young people are even higher – 65% do not belong to any religion, according to a DfES survey in 2004. This pattern is consistently reflected in all reputable polls and surveys.

Non-religious people, who make up at least a large minority if not the majority of the population, simply do not have their views and ethics represented by the reflective slot in the *Today* programme as religious listeners do.

### *A religious Thought for the Day*

A final point. If (and this would be greatly regrettable) *Thought for the Day* is to remain a religious slot, then it should be named ‘*Religious Thought for the Day*’, which would therefore acknowledge that it does not meet the needs of non-religious people.

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<sup>1</sup> Ofsted: Promoting and evaluating pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, March 2004