

BHA BRIEFING 2009: BBC and Humanist Broadcasting

Lord Harrison's debate, Moses Room, House of Lords, 4th November 2009. Briefing from the British Humanist Association.

Lord Harrison to ask Her Majesty's Government, with reference to the Agreement of July 2006 between the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the BBC, what is their assessment of the extent to which the BBC has paid sufficient regard to the importance of reflecting humanism in its programmes, particularly in relation to Thought for the Day.

Summary

The BBC Trust has set up a committee chaired by its vice-chair Chitra Bharucha which (according to Trust Chairman Sir Michael Lyons on Radio 4's Feedback on 1 August 2009) "won't just be looking at Thought for the Day: they will be looking at the way the BBC serves the interests of citizens who are humanists and have no faith, as we are charged to do by the BBC Charter."

The Charter is actually silent on the point but **the Agreement with the Secretary of State requires the BBC to "have regard amongst other things to . . . the importance of reflecting different religious and other beliefs" – which plainly includes Humanism.**

The BBC Executive's plans for implementing the resulting "purpose remit" concentrate on religion and (bar one mention) ignore non-religious beliefs.

The BBC's output of religious programmes is large, including over 3 hours every week on Radio 4 alone of unmediated direct religious broadcasting – Christians talking Christianity to Christians. Humanism is rarely even mentioned and there is never any programme in which humanists talk Humanism to humanists.

What we want:

(1) Regular programmes specifically dealing with life from a non-religious, broadly Humanist perspective: programmes about Humanism – humanists talking Humanism to humanists – to balance the large amount of religious broadcasting of this nature. (*Not* attacks on religion.)

(2) Programmes about Humanism for an audience including not just humanists but also others interested, with discussion/debate about Humanism (the reverse of our usual relegation to reacting to discussion of religion).

Our arguments:

(a) from duty of Public Service Broadcasting:

"[In an increasingly diverse society] the importance of public service broadcasting in providing a forum for public discussion cannot be over-exaggerated. Society needs effective means to learn about itself, about changing circumstances and emerging challenges, and to communicate with itself and debate views and policies. Broadcasting offers by far the most important means whereby the members of a modern open society can communicate with each other and jointly address the challenges that face them. From the most trivial phone-in to the profoundest of philosophical

discussions it allows members of society to learn about each other and negotiate the terms on which they share their community. . .” [from BHA evidence to House of Lords committee]

(b) from law and public policy:

Human Rights Act sn 6 – requires public authorities like the BBC to respect Convention rights.

Communications Act sn 264 – public service broadcasting must cover non-religious beliefs.

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Agreement between BBC and Secretary of State (quoted above).

Equality Bill – bars religion/belief discrimination by public authorities like the BBC.

Entire trend of non-discrimination legislation and litigation.

Nature of Humanism:

Not an -ism but a label for a particular range of attitudes and beliefs. An ancient tradition with substantial intellectual and moral content. A lifestance that can provide as well as any religion a touchstone for living.

Importance of Humanism:

- Significant contribution to public policy (deeply thought out contributions on many topics including equality, non-discrimination, religious hatred, charity law etc)
- Growing public recognition (ceremonies, policy work)
- Growing following (expanding membership, response to atheist bus campaign, wide implicit acceptance of humanist beliefs and attitudes)
- As a counterbalance to religion, which has a the growing political influence despite its decline in active followers:–
 - Government support of religious schools
 - Government policy of contracting out of public services to religious organisations
 - Government subsidies for religious charities (“capacity building” etc)
 - Government emphasis on ‘faith communities’ for ‘social cohesion’
 - Ludicrous Census result, out of line with all other surveys
 - Largely unjustified Church protests of ‘persecution’, ‘Christianophobia’ actually occasioned by overdue loss of privileges and unwillingness to accept non-discrimination legislation

NB resentment at religious interference in ordinary life is largely ignored by the BBC – NB 2006 MORI poll¹.

BBC failures:

- BBC treats Humanism as a mere absence of religious belief, ignores the fact it is a positive non-religious belief
- BBC relies on census and ignores more reliable surveys of religious belief
- BBC argues that the vast majority of its output is ‘secular’ – i.e. about sport or makeovers or current affairs!
- BBC Executive ignores the Agreement with the Secretary of State and the Purpose Remit that require coverage of ‘other beliefs’ as well as religion.

The Humanist Argument

Humanism is a “religion or belief” in terms of the Human Rights Act – and sn 6 (read with Articles 9 and 14) places a duty on public authorities not to discriminate between religious and non-religious lifestances. Likewise and explicitly sn 52 of the Equality Act 2006.

¹ “People often comment on the level of attention the Government pays to certain groups in society. Which, if any, of the following groups of people do you think the Government pays too much attention to? Up to three responses allowed

Leaders of other countries 44%

Religious groups and leaders 42%

Newspaper headlines 35%” etc.

But we do not argue a narrow legal case.

BBC has a duty to “reflect the different religious and other beliefs in the UK” (Purpose remit no. 5). But in its elaboration of that duty in policy statements and the like it concentrates on religious beliefs to the virtual exclusion of non-religious ones, even in the very language it uses (“religious”, “faith” etc.)

We are *not* against religious broadcasting.

We *are* against the discriminatory provision of religious broadcasting – mainly but not entirely Christian - when there is no comparable provision for those with non-religious beliefs.

We hold that the BBC is

either as a matter of policy or neglect ignoring its duty to “reflect other [i.e. non-religious] beliefs in the UK”

or grossly underestimating the importance of Humanism as a non-religious belief in the UK.

We distinguish between:

(a) reporting religion, magazine programmes etc (where we sometimes get an insecure foothold, mainly as a foil for the religious rather than in our own right) and

(b) time devoted to what Mark Thompson himself called “liturgical or contemplative religious content” (in an address to Theos – 14 Oct 2008), – what we call Christians talking Christianity to Christians – of which there is **over 3 hours** in every ordinary week on R4 alone (and more for religious festivals), while by contrast there is never one minute for Humanism.

We consider that this is a grave disservice to a large part of the population. Only a minority are actively religious. Even on the Census figures the non-religious amount to 15% of the population – over 2½ times as many as all the non-Christian religions put together. But the ONS itself admits this is seriously misleading, and in all other surveys the figure for the non-religious is far higher – e.g., 46% ‘no religion’ in British Social Attitudes *Social Trends* 2006.

Admittedly, few of the non-religious adopt the label Humanist – but (we suggest) this is irrelevant, because Humanism is a belief you can hold in a loose, tentative way without knowing its name – see HUMANISM.

There is growing resentment at the imposition of religion and the privileges it enjoys. For example, see the massive response to the Atheist Bus Campaign earlier this year.

Even many of those who adopt a Christian label do so in the mistaken belief that religion is the only guarantor of morality.

So why do so few call themselves humanists? Partly because of a general reluctance to adopt labels, but mostly out of sheer ignorance of Humanism. Why?

For several generations both religious education and broadcasting have set up religion as the preferred basis for life and implied that morality depends on it.

Millions have rejected religion and but neither schools nor the mass media have provided any coherent alternative. So many end up confused and unsure about the basis of morality.

Many other people cling to a fading belief in religion as the only bulwark against crass materialism – a false message repeatedly purveyed by BBC religious programmes such as Thought for the Day.

As a result, very many people have a confused and unarticulated world-view at best.

But children are increasingly – and with official encouragement and the agreement of the churches – being introduced to Humanism as an alternative to religion in RE lessons in school.

For adults, the position is different. The principal means by which adults can find out about alternatives to religion is broadcasting - public service broadcasting.

Broadcasting offers by far the most important means whereby the members of a modern open society can communicate with each other and jointly address the challenges that face them.

The BBC at present is failing to deliver this public service.

As a direct result many millions of potential humanists never hear of Humanism or encounter a coherent expression of a non-religious lifestance but are left floundering in a post-religious 'sea of doubt', unable to articulate their beliefs and clinging to a meaningless merely cultural Christianity for want of anything else.

A high proportion of people contacting the BHA say that they "must have been humanists all their lives but they'd never heard the word".

But few such people are able confidently to articulate their beliefs, having had no access in the public media or at school to straightforward information about Humanism let alone any introduction to its philosophy and history.

This BBC failure is hugely damaging to society.

BBC Programmes on Humanism

The first and last time the BBC broadcast any programmes devoted to Humanism as a belief/lifestance was a series of six 15-minute interviews on the Home Service in 1965.

An Analysis programme on Radio 4 in March 2006 presented a critique of the broad humanist intellectual tradition but not of the personal lifestance.

Extract from BHA's evidence to Lords committee on renewal of BBC charter:

"To a small extent the BBC already covers matters of concern to the non-religious . . . , but largely only when we issue a criticism of some religious policy or initiative. For example, our criticisms of religious schools have been noticed – but our constructive alternative policy, prepared after wide consultation in the education world, has been ignored. Our influence in the reform of religious education in schools over many years and our current constructive role in helping forward the equality and human rights agenda have likewise been ignored. . ."

HUMANISM

Humanism is not an “-ism” – it has no source book of unquestionable rules or doctrine. You don't ‘convert’ to Humanism and then have to take the rough with the smooth. Instead, most people become humanists without contact with any humanist organisation or even knowing of the word. Rather, Humanism rather is a *label* for a range of beliefs and attitudes. To the extent that your beliefs and attitudes coincide with that range, then the label humanist is more or less appropriate for you.

Humanism's beliefs and attitudes make up an approach to life based on humanity and reason. Humanists recognise that **it is simply human nature to have moral values** but that in making moral particular judgements we need to interpret our widely shared values by the use of knowledge, reason and experience. Humanists make decisions after considering the available evidence and assessing the likely outcomes of possible actions, not by reference to any dogma or sacred text.

Humanists see the **naturalistic and provisional** explanations of life and the universe provided by **scientific enquiry and the use of reason** as the best available. They think it folly to turn to other sources – such as religion or new-age superstition – for answers to unanswered questions. Humanists are therefore atheists or agnostics – but Humanism is a philosophy in its own right, not just a negative response to religion.

Humanists believe that **this is the only life we have** and see it as their responsibility to make life as good as possible not only for themselves but for everyone – including future generations. They strongly support individual **human rights** and freedoms – but believe equally in the importance of **individual responsibility, social cooperation and mutual respect**. They endorse the idea of an ‘open society’ in which people of good will but fundamentally different beliefs and lifestyles live cooperatively together, with shared institutions, laws and government that are neutral on questions of belief.

Humanists create meaning and purpose for themselves by adopting worthwhile goals and endeavouring to live their lives to the full. They feel awe in considering the immensity of the universe and the intricate nature of its workings, they find inspiration in the richness of the natural world, in music, the arts, the achievements of the past and the possibilities of the future, they find fulfilment in worthwhile activity, in physical recreation and endeavour and in the pleasures of human interaction, affection and love.

Humanism, unlike any religion, is a philosophy of life that people can and typically do reach and adopt for themselves. It is inherent in living in a community. It re-emerges throughout history in different forms – Confucianism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, etc.

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