

WEDNESDAY 2 NOVEMBER 2005

Present

Fowler, L (Chairman)
Gibson of Market Rasen, B
Holme of Cheltenham, L
Howe of Idlicote, B
Kalms, L
King of Bridgwater, L
Manchester, Bp of
Maxton, L
Peston, L

Memorandum submitted by Senior Members of the Faith Communities

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Bishop of Southwark**, a Member of the House, **Dr Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad**,
Dr Mona Siddiqui, **Dr Indarjit Singh OBE JP** and **Reverend Joel Edwards**, examined

Q1 Chairman: Good morning, thank you very, very much indeed for coming. Let me just explain what we are doing. This is the second part of our inquiry. We reported yesterday on the first part which was a report which the Government had asked for by the end of the month, which we did. It was greeted with muffled applause from the Government; very muffled as far as I could see. Now we are looking into a number of other areas, because we could not do full justice to all these areas in the first part, and religious broadcasting is very much part of that. We should like to thank you first for your evidence which we have all read and I will not ask you to repeat that, but it might be useful if you just briefly introduced yourselves and then we will start the questioning. Tom Butler, do you want to start?

Bishop of Southwark: Certainly; yes. I am Tom Butler, I am Bishop of Southwark. I chair the Churches' Media Council and I am Co-Chair of the Inter Faith Network of Britain and Ireland.

Reverend Edwards: I am Joel Edwards. I work as the General Director for the Evangelical Alliance which represents a constituency of about a million evangelicals across the UK; I occasionally appear in one or two broadcasting guises, but that is my main work.

Dr Siddiqui: I am Mona Siddiqui. I work at the University of Glasgow, where until last year I was the Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. I do a lot of religious broadcasting for the BBC and I have just been appointed Chair of the Scottish Religious Advisory Council for the BBC.

Dr Singh: Indarjit Singh. I am the editor of the *Sikh Messenger*, Director of the Network of Sikh Organisations and I do some broadcasting and writing on religious issues.

Dr Ram-Prasad: I am Ram-Prasad. I teach Hindu religions and philosophy at the University of Lancaster and I sit on the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC) as a representative of the Hindu religions.

Q2 Chairman: Thank you very much. As I understand it, this paper that you have produced is a joint paper.

Bishop of Southwark: Yes.

Q3 Chairman: May I just start by asking you something about the number of people that you estimate have religious beliefs in this country? You are basically saying in the second paragraph "... 77 per cent of the population consider themselves to be members of a faith community". Some would say that is pretty rose-tinted, given that our next series of witnesses comes from the British Humanist Association who gave us different opinion polls which show that a populist poll on churchgoing says that 47 per cent of the nation never go to

church and as far as young people are concerned, a poll in *The Guardian* showed that, in answer to the question “Do you believe in God?”, 35 per cent said yes and 45 percent said no. *The Telegraph* had a rather different poll because it was the 18-plus, but they also showed 35 per cent saying no. Do you think that figure of 71 per cent is pretty rose-tinted?

Bishop of Southwark: It was an objective figure coming from the census, so it is not our figure, but it is a figure. I do not think we would want to put our main argument on the fact of numbers; we would not want to get into that argument. Our position is that for very many people in this country and around the world religion matters immensely and it is the responsibility of the public service broadcasting service to reflect the world as it is. In the world as it is, religion is something very significant and that is why we are giving attention to this. So whether it is 71 per cent or 60 per cent or whatever in a sense is irrelevant: it matters to a lot of people.

Q4 Chairman: As you rightfully say, one does not want to get into an argument on statistics, but I think it can be taken that there is a high number of people who have no beliefs, like the Humanists who have beliefs but of a different kind. Would you, in saying that religion is important and therefore a public service broadcaster has a duty to express that, support people like the humanists being also given time to express their views on radio and television?

Bishop of Southwark: I think my own reaction to that would be that they have an enormous amount of time because the kind of standard mindset of the media, and particularly the broadcasting services, is the mindset of metropolitan secular humanism. That is the mindset which is reflected in most of the output. Therefore the question of the alternative religious perspective on the world perhaps does need careful attention because it is counter-cultural in our own society. So broadcasting is not excluding the humanist voice, I would say that that is the standard mindset of most of the programming.

Dr Ram-Prasad: Colleagues in my department recently brought out a book which has received some attention internationally called *The Spirit Revolution* in which they go to the heart of the matter, which is that what we mean academically, in a scholarly way, by the study of religion and its place in peoples lives is not always got at by asking questions about god, for example. After all Buddhists do not believe in god, neither does a Shinto so it cannot turn on the notion of god, it cannot even turn on a notion of church attendance. There are some fairly persuasive studies to show that probably by the 14th or 15th century church attendance was roughly the same as it is now after the 19th century spike. Even if we accept that something formal like the Humanist Association has a point of view, I am not quite sure whether that would represent the views of those who answered in the negative when asked certain kinds of traditional questions about the nature of their religious beliefs. We need to have a very much more nuanced understanding of quite how people perceive the role of the sacred in their own lives and that might actually give figures which are very different to the cut and dried questions which often put people off the track of talking about themselves.

Q5 Chairman: Take *Thought for the Day* which appears to be the acid test as far as religious broadcasting is concerned, at least on one level. That is fairly general – as I listen to it, it becomes more and more general – and surely someone from the British Humanist Association could put a message there just as easily as someone from a religious background.

Bishop of Southwark: I get slightly puzzled by that question. Let us put it alongside your earlier question which in effect was: is religion that significant in the world today? We may get on to how popular religious broadcasting is or is not. One cannot have that alongside the fact that *Thought for the Day* is very popular and it is the religious reflection upon the news. I would maintain that the rest of the two and three quarter hours are reflecting the secular humanist mindset. What makes *Thought for the Day* very popular is that it is giving an alternative viewpoint and a religious viewpoint on the news of the day at its best; a

theological or spiritual input. I think all of us here take part in that. It is an indication that religious broadcasting, when it is done well, can be very, very popular and valued in today's world.

Q6 Lord Holme of Cheltenham: A problem which vexes me is that in one sense you ladies and gentlemen are a sort of trade union group; you represent churches, in other words, organised religion. Of course one of the implications of the research we are looking at, referring to people in the privacy of their own homes and to a general belief in god, is that their belief is not necessarily the same as, and coterminous, with the interests of organised religious groups. The question I would value general guidance on is how far, in looking at the BBC, should we be thinking in your terms about its coverage of spiritual issues as opposed to its representation of the interests of the religious trade union and the churches who have got themselves organised, who want to have their organisation covered.

Dr Siddiqui: I do not represent any church and I would say that in fact, in some ways what we are arguing for is the opposite, that religious language is not something that lives and breaths and dies in textbooks: in our globalised age, religious language is something which travels and resonates thousands of miles in peoples' homes in seconds. So it is important that we talk about religious language and religion in ways that the whole world can actually identify with and not that religious programming should just be a reaction to global events. A lot of programming is really about reaction to global events, usually political events. In a way what that does not do is actually deal with those issues which are important to the ordinary believer, whether in the West or whether in the developing world (and let us bear in mind that the large majority of people in the developing world with which the West is so preoccupied now are believers of some religion). We talk in language and we make programmes which are really about the way people live and believe, not just about reaction to global political events. I would resist saying that this is really about a reflection of organised religion: it is really

about how religious language sits side by side, how religious programming sits side by side in contemporary civil debates on society right across the spectrum.

Q7 Lord Holme of Cheltenham: So you would be happy, for instance, I am not suggesting this seriously but to try to clarify the argument, if any obligations of the BBC were expressed in terms of spirituality rather than religion.

Dr Siddiqui: The BBC itself is very aware that a huge number of people, who express an interest in or belief in, or inclination towards religion, use the term spirituality. That does not exclude religion from that. What we are saying is that it is not that the two terms are antithetical: there is room for spirituality and debate on spirituality in religion, but also vice-versa.

Q8 Lord Maxton: I do not recognise, in the BBC in particular, your view that it represents a metropolitan liberal secular society. In fact religion is treated by the BBC with kid gloves. It is never criticised. You very rarely have a programme which puts an opposite point of view to a religious point of view. I accept it may produce programmes which are secular in the sense that they are not religious, but it does not ever, or rarely, criticise. May I come back to numbers, because they are important? What percentage of the population regularly attends church and define what you mean by regular? I do not mean going to the watch night service on Christmas Eve once a year as being regular attendance of the Church of England.

Bishop of Southwark: On your first point that religion is treated with kid gloves, that has not been my experience on very many news programmes where, for one reason or another, I have been asked to be interviewed on some aspect or other of the life of the church and have been treated in exactly the same way as anybody else.

Q9 Lord Maxton: The same as a politician?

Bishop of Southwark: Yes indeed; the professionals will probe and one would expect them to and they do. I hope I will have a bit of an opportunity to say that we are not a trade union for religious programming. What we are a trade union for, if we are a trade union, is for religion to be taken seriously right the way across the output of the BBC. I would argue that it is probably more significant that the hard news programmes, where there is a religious dimension to the news, as there often is, are treated with great seriousness. I think that is where sometimes the media can let themselves down, not deliberately, but because the depth of knowledge is not there to handle the story. We saw the thing yesterday, for example, over the postage stamp and the Post Office, where obviously the consultation was not wide enough or deep enough, not because anybody was being difficult or provocative, but it did not cross people's minds. That can be typical of what can happen in the hard news programmes. So I am concerned with religion as hard news. In terms of numbers, Joel I do not know whether you would like to pursue that.

Reverend Edwards: In terms of church attendances, it is probably somewhere around three and a half to four million who attend church regularly. This issue of hard numbers is an important one, so whether you are extrapolating from 70 per cent, 71 per cent in the official Government survey, which you could say is a nominal number, or the hard factual lower regular church attendance numbers, is important. If we are looking for numbers to legitimise importance, then politicians will have a very, very hard case to prove. What we have to demonstrate is that there is actually a residue of hunger for spirituality but sometimes religious groups in their formal structures may be good containers of and sometimes we are the best critics of ourselves for failing to represent, to reflect and to challenge the persisting and existing spirituality which is there. It is also very important that in the year 1999-2000, the BBC conducted what must have been its most exhaustive survey to date: the Soul of Britain. This showed a number of very important facts, for example, that young people under

forty thought their parents were not spiritual enough. One of the very important facts it showed up, which I was intrigued by, was that a very high percentage of people they surveyed, something like between 75 to 85 per cent – actually wanted to hear what the church had to say about critical issues such as global poverty, injustice, racism et cetera. There should not be a dualism or dichotomy between the numbers, there should be no tension between the spirituality and the role and responsibility, the challenge even, which organised religion has to respond to. The BBC must find itself in a place where it is actually dealing with those tensions and a former head of religion and ethics, Ernie Rae, once spoke about vague spirituality. I think religion has a responsibility to respond to that as well.

Dr Singh: I am concerned about the assumption that religion and spirituality are the same thing and that religion should be confined to the home. I am speaking from a Sikh perspective. In our view our different religions are guide books on our journey through life, telling us what we should do and what we should avoid in leading a responsible life. Now if all were peace and harmony in the world, perhaps we could argue that religion is not necessary, but we know that things are very much the contrary. These guide books have largely been discarded. I think they have a great perspective to offer on life, valuable guidance, and that this should be reflected throughout broadcasting.

Q10 Lord Peston: I am still trying to get your philosophy clarified because you referred to this bias towards the metropolitan, liberal, secular elite, which I must tell you I do not recognise at all. Now I am addressing Dr Ram-Prasad and Dr Siddiqui as they are both in religious departments; I do not know whether you call them religious studies departments. Would you apply the same theory to your universities? Would you say that really religion ought to permeate the teaching of all other subjects? You imply, for example, that the maths department is somehow metropolitan secular because religion does not enter into it, as far as I know, certainly not when I did maths. It just seems to me that your position is completely

illogical. Why should religion permeate everything in that sense? Maybe you would argue that religion ought to permeate all the other departments at your university.

Dr Ram-Prasad: I think it is a question of how exactly you permeate. The point is that there are indeed different manifestations of religion in different aspects of world experience and that is perfectly reflected in studies. We have religion in politics, religion in ecology, the management school takes us in to teach particular aspects, so if we were going to compare the departments at the university to, say, the stations and programmes on the BBC, well, yes actually, a lot of religion does pop up in different bits of the provision of the university. We also have students taking those different courses attending what is taught in our departments. So obviously physics might not have it, although in fact, I do have a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to look at physics and spiritual arguments of consciousness. Some departments might not have it however and some programmes might not have religion. There is a big difference between thinking that a very small range of provision exhausts what religion ought to be in the BBC's coverage and saying that everything ought to have religion.

Q11 Lord Peston: You say "everything"; you say "across the output". That is not a bit, that is the lot.

Bishop of Southwark: As I indicated a little earlier, I do not believe you can understand much of what is going on around the world in terms of hard news today without having some understanding of religion. When you try to understand, for example, what is going on in Iraq without some understanding of religion and some depth of understanding, one can make some grave errors. If it is the responsibility of the BBC, as it certainly is as a public service broadcaster, to try to report the news and explain the figures, I do not believe you can do that without a religious perspective.

Q12 Chairman: Do you think enough has been done on that?

Bishop of Southwark: No, I do not and I would not single out the BBC. I think the media in general have not put the resources into that aspect of human life and therefore we are inadequate in the way in which we do respond to the news and why we sometimes make grave errors. So I think there is that. The other aspect I think we were referring to is that the BBC also has a responsibility for entertaining and whether you are talking about soap operas or other programmes, they are reflecting life as it is, and in reflecting life as it is, we want to see religion taking its normal place.

Q13 Lord Peston: That is my question. You do see religion taking its normal place. But you say that you cannot see it there. How is it that I see it there throughout just as when I look at English literature I see religion throughout? Someone does not suddenly stand up to read you a John Milton poem and maybe tell you he is religious or anything like that. I cannot quite see, forgive the Americanism, what your beef is on this?

Dr Siddiqui: I think it is precisely because the BBC is so respected globally that I personally, and I am sure the Committee, feels that it is in a unique position and one of its aims is to be a forum for education globally. The bishop has mentioned Iraq: suddenly Iraq appeared on our screens and it was assumed that the whole population knew the difference between Sunni and Shia; yet nobody knew the difference, there should have been something that actually looked at the theological implications behind what was happening. Suddenly we are assuming that everybody in the media and everybody who is watching these programmes, even hard core news programmes, knows what the Shia coalition might look like and what their differences would be. All we are saying is that two areas are suddenly realising that there has been a huge missing link in the way they have taught things. You referred to the university departments and development is now saying that even after 50 years the reason IMF and the World Bank have not been able to erase the issue of poverty, is precisely because in those areas which are the most poverty stricken development is inextricably linked with issues of

spirituality and religion. In medical schools now medical ethics are all about how we reflect the ethics of a universal global population which has different issues and different viewpoints on some of the basic issues, some of the most essential issues that we are discussing now, such as abortion and stem cells. They are now including people. This is not so that people who have religion can go in and preach to them: this is so that people who are of a religious bias or have religious knowledge can actually reflect the wider issues around their central teaching.

Chairman: I am going to bring in the Bishop of Manchester, if I may. I know you have a more general point to raise, but you were going to talk about the news as well so this may be a suitable time to come in.

Q14 Bishop of Manchester: I am required though first of all to declare a stipendiary interest in religion. I need also to emphasise to the members of this Committee that I have taken no part in the written submission of evidence that we have had on this matter, nor, apart from courteously saying good morning to our visitors, have I engaged with this group on the matters before us. I need to say that. I want to shift the focus now to the BBC itself. We have been talking in helpful and general terms about religion and spirituality, but we are a Committee which is concerned with the BBC charter renewal and I should like to hear from all the members who are visiting us this morning their opinion about the kind of strategy that the BBC, from their perspective, ought to have on matters religious. By that I mean really two areas. The first is what traditionally might be termed religious broadcasting and we know that there is a department within the BBC, the religion and ethics department, which has particular responsibility for that. I should also like to hear you on a subject we have been touching on a little, to which the Chairman has just referred again now, which is religion in broadcasting and in what sense you feel that the BBC strategically needs to look at the way in which it provides informed opinion in the manner that you have been describing in terms of

news coverage. So there are two major areas there where I would be helped by your contributions.

Dr Singh: I think religion in broadcasting generally should look at the whole religious perspective for several reasons, one of which is the removal of ignorance about religion. If religion is important to so many people - we may not have agreed on the exact percentage, but it is, I am sure, conceded that it is extremely important to people - we need to know and understand just what those essential beliefs are, what is important and how those beliefs can contribute to society. I think the BBC can do a lot and should do a lot more in that direction. Due to the sort of social constraints of a largely secular society they are pushed into looking at religion from a perspective that often looks at the trivial rather than the essence of religious teachings. We can have a programme on Sikhs which will tell us how many chapattis are made in the Golden Temple, things like that, and nothing about the ethical teachings of religion. I think much more should be done that way, because in the end it is so easy in an atmosphere of ignorance for prejudices to arise. It is very important, especially in this day and age when people are travelling and mixing and previously distant neighbours are now next door to us, that we do understand what people are about and what motivates them, what is important to them.

Q15 Bishop of Manchester: If I were on the BBC, I might come back to you and say that we have a religion correspondent and when items come up on the news we refer to him. Without talking about personalities, are you saying that that provision which the BBC has at the moment is inadequate?

Dr Singh: Frankly the BBC's coverage of religious issues could certainly be improved.

Bishop of Southwark: Typically what will happen, going back to an earlier question in terms of us being probed on the news, is that one might go on the *Today* programme. They will be well briefed and probing questions will be asked. If that story begins to run and there are

follow-up questions, it will be a second team who will know very little about the subject at all and will even ask, and I have had this asked of me, “Bishop, what questions should I ask?”. That is no longer hard probing and it is because there is not the depth of knowledge. That is what I would recommend. We are not here to lobby, but I would recommend that in terms of its hard news coverage the BBC would be stronger if it had a greater depth of knowledge of matters of religion.

Q16 Chairman: Do either of you have any examples? We hear about the reservations. Are there any examples of where things have been done badly, particularly in explaining the different religions?

Dr Ram-Prasad: One example which comes to mind for me actually goes back to whether or not there is adequate coverage strategically, because it is so contingent on who happens to turn up, who is the person invited. An example which comes to my mind all the time is explaining the tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. It is repeatedly represented as a religious issue unless you have some old hand, a special report by Mark Tully or people who have lived there, who know the religious background and immediately know of course that the argument is not about religion because India has got as many Muslims as Pakistan and in fact there is a massive Muslim contingent in the Indian Army operating in Kashmir. So immediately the tendency to have kind of *West Wing* storyline which says this is about the religions clashing over nuclear Islamic bomb versus a Hindu bomb simply misrepresents what any professional would know about the field and most people in India and Pakistan would know. The lack of strategic thinking comes from thinking “Okay, we have somebody somewhere in Asia, let’s bung him in and ask him to give a report” rather than having somebody who would have the kind of training that you would expect over a longer period of time. It is entirely left to the brilliance of the individual person involved whether they know

that or not and that does not argue for strategy, although it does argue for individual acts of extremely good reportage.

Q17 Chairman: Can you give an example of where it has been done well? We are getting a lot of complaints where it has been done inadequately. Are there programmes or particular programmes where it has been done well, so we have some idea of what we are aiming at?

Bishop of Southwark: The coverage of the death of the Pope was done extremely well, where the BBC put resources into it, drew upon expertise and as the story developed the dying of the Pope and the death of the Pope and the handling of his funeral were excellent.

Dr Ram-Prasad: Some of the serious reports on the rise of the American right and the role of Christian conservative movement have been extremely well done once experts were brought to bear on it over the period of the first presidency of George W Bush.

Dr Singh: Some programmes about Sikhism have been done and been well done and that is going back to 1999, which was the 300th anniversary of Sikhs in their present form. They were excellently done, but against that, there is still general ignorance. We constantly hear again and again about the three monotheistic religions meaning Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Sikh scriptures begin with the words “There is but one God”. You cannot get more monotheistic than that. Someone talked about the BBC pussy-footing around religion, treating religion very sensitively. I should like to see it the other way around: more robust discussion about beliefs, about practices. It would be doing a service to religion, because so often out-dated and sometimes wrong social and cultural practices creep into religion. They need to be stripped away from religious practice so the ethical teachings can come to the fore.

Q18 Bishop of Manchester: May I come back over the other part of my question because you helpfully talked about the news side of it and those areas of broadcasting which do not specifically come under the heading of religious broadcasting in terms of their production.

Again, if I were here from the BBC, I would be asking what you guys want, because we have a religion and ethics department. What is your view about that?

Bishop of Southwark: I think they put out some excellent stuff. The problem is that I never quite know which comes from that department and which does not. For example, the series *The Monastery* was riveting, it had a high audience, competing with *Celebrity Island* on another channel and it was noticeable that week by week the numbers of viewers to *The Monastery* went up and the others went down. So there are some good programmes. I would want to question the BBC about where the programmes are actually placed on the schedule, on what channel and at what time of day. Again, I do not know where it came from but the programme on Jonathan Miller two days ago, *A Complete History of Unbelief*, was riveting; it was at peak time and one rarely has a religious programme of that intensity scheduled, probably on BBC2 but I am not sure, at peak time which meant people had a chance of seeing it. That is partly my complaint: not the quality of the programmes, but where they appear on the schedule.

Q19 Baroness Howe of Idlicote: Quite a lot of what I wanted to probe has already been discussed quite fully, but I was looking at a statement you make about religion having become a much more significant and potent force in world affairs and I do not think anybody would disagree with that comment. Equally, in this country the range of religions has multiplied, I would say even within the particular religions that there are different factions and so on. You equally say that the reasons for your concerns are good and bad. Given what you have been saying about the need to explain the different religions and their point of view et cetera, et cetera and not forgetting history, the crusades will give us one example, that religions have really been seen as a factor for conflict in the past, wrongly or rightly, clearly the importance of getting a right balance, reflecting what you all think is the best path and the best contribution of religion should play a fairly high part. Do you think currently the different

religions in this country are reflected in the right proportion? Is there a sufficient representation on CRAC of all the different religions really to see the advice you are giving is going right across the board?

Dr Siddiqui: May I start with the last comment about CRAC? CRAC has an anomalous role in some way because it is an official advisory committee to the BBC, but it is an unofficial advisory committee to Ofcom as well and it sits somewhere in between. One of the things we are trying to discuss with Ofcom and the BBC at the next meeting is the exact role of CRAC because it is an anomalous position. In terms of representation, I think that there is an adequate representation of the different faith communities. Perhaps once we know what our real role is, apart from just looking at programme recordings and commenting on them and talking generally about BBC religious output, then we might be able to discuss representation. However, in terms of the earlier question or the reflection you made about faith communities, maybe one area that the BBC should cover - in a way it has an obligation to educate the public - is not simply to educate on the history of different faiths, because that presumes that the different faiths are all monoliths and all Muslims and all Sikhs and all Hindus think alike, but actually to reflect the diversity within these faiths. A lot of the conflicts that we see are actually intra-faith diversities and not inter-faith. In some ways those people who write to the BBC - and I will give you an example of a recent *Panorama* programme which ended up being really a kind of rise and fall of the Muslim Council of Britain - and complain that the BBC has done a disservice to them ... In some ways the BBC has not because what they were reflecting were people who were in that organisation and out of that organisation, reflecting where the MCB stood in Britain today. Now that is a challenging programme because it is actually stepping out of strictly religious history or religious faith interpretation or faith reflection and looking seriously at an organisation which puts itself forward as a mouthpiece for Muslims in Britain. That is where the BBC is at its best in those programmes which are

slightly on the edge and are really aiming to reflect diversity and conflict of opinions within religions, because essentially what people who are of religious faith are talking about most of the time are the different diversities.

Dr Singh: The point about the differences within a religion is very important and some education on this is needed. However, the other point, the other extreme, is that we often look at different religions as though they are completely different. We do not look enough at the similarities - and this is something that the BBC can do - the huge area of overlap between our different religions. We should respect the differences, but there is a huge area of overlap and a little more focusing on that sometimes could be extremely helpful in making this a more cohesive society.

Reverend Edwards: In the aftermath of *Jerry Springer the Opera*, which we remember well, I had the opportunity of meeting with the Controller of BBC. One of the points we were seeking to make was that, the Christian community in particular, not exclusively but in particular, had some difficulties with it and made our strong objections. In the aftermath of that, we still found out that some opportunities were missed for a more massive educational task. In fairness to the BBC, when a number of us went to make a presentation to them before the broadcast, they undertook to follow up the transmission with some educational material which was done in part. I think the conversation we were having was not dissimilar to the one we want to have with you today. This is that faith does not come in a kind of confrontational, "Please let's grab more territory for faiths" argument. It really is an argument about the full quality of life and opportunities to enhance the professionalism of the BBC by ensuring that a kind of dualism by which religion is compartmentalised as a private sphere does not actually undercut professionalism within broadcasting and actually cheat the public. So one would hope that in representing religion, either in religious broadcasting or more widely in news items, we do not present the kind of dualism which marginalises faith.

But we recognise that everything, from the global impact of religion to its local and community impact, is highly transformational, with some magnificent stories as yet untold. The BBC should continue the good work it has begun and seeks to represent religion, our failures, our difficulties, our links with extreme behaviour as well as some of the more redemptive aspects of religion in the community. There is still a story waiting to be told and one of the arguments I would have with commissioners and producers is that very often, in the interest of sensationalisation, they are actually selling out to what is, in my experience, still a very pervasive anti-religious sentiment which actually works very vigorously in the editorial suites. If we could actually by-pass that, I think we would find that there is very good material around within the religious world to enhance broadcasting and make a positive contribution to communities. So it would be very interesting to see, for example, how the BBC positions itself as we approach the bi-centenary of abolitionism and what stories of faith will be told in the context of that important and still contemporary issue. I think the faiths would want to say: can we partner you and ensure that a good story is told professionally in a way which is educational?

Q20 Chairman: One has a certain amount of sympathy for reporters on the *Ten O'Clock News* who try, for example in Iraq, to set out the difference between Sunni and Shia. It is not a simple thing to do, is it, in the amount of time that you have?

Dr Siddiqui: But it should not be in the *Ten O'Clock News*. They are reacting to a global story which is fair enough, but then surely, within the two and a half years that have elapsed, the BBC has had plenty of time to have serious discussion, whether it is radio or television, on what exactly the conflicts are and the history and theology.

Bishop of Southwark: Why should one have more sympathy with that than, let us say, the complexity of the Tory succession. One expects the BBC to be thoroughly competent and professional and knowledgeable across a wide range of public life including, politics. I did

not respond to the numbers, but I would just like to say that more people worship in our churches in a month than are members of all the political parties put together. We do not then ask why the BBC is spending all this time on politics, but one thing we have learned in the last five years is that religion matters around the world and therefore we have all got to understand it better if we are going to understand our world.

Q21 Baroness Howe of Idlicote: You have made a very good case as far as I am concerned for being in on quite a number of levels, but equally, having said that, I do not quite see it, because the implication is that those with no religion, or with a different ethical approach to things, are catered for in the rest of the curriculum. I would have thought that their contribution to all the issues that we have been discussing is at least as important. Should they not be in there too, giving their ethical viewpoint or their humanist viewpoint and explaining their role?

Bishop of Southwark: There was the programme on Jonathan Miller. They are there and they are very often there in a big way and in a very imaginative way. I do not think they are being neglected, but that is my perspective.

Baroness Howe of Idlicote: They would seem to think they were.

Q22 Lord Maxton: Let me come back to *Thought for the Day* then and the BBC equivalent in Scotland, where in Scotland of course, far from it being 15 per cent who confess to having no religion, it is 28 per cent, which is double the number, for instance, of the Catholic population of Scotland. You never have a non-religious point view. If you had a prayer every day as *Thought for the Day* then I could just about understand it, but it is not: it is a religious person expressing their point of view. So why should it not be a non-religious person, not somebody who is a humanist necessarily, just a bus driver, a policeman, somebody who is not a member of a church at all expressing their view?

Bishop of Southwark: We are contributors because we are asked to contribute, but I can understand why the BBC take the line that they do, namely that this is an opportunity for a specifically religious voice which one is not hearing in the rest of the programme in the same kind of way. Equally I think I am right that there is within the *Today* programme quite a substantial time, far more than two minutes 40 seconds, for a personal perspective. Somebody, usually somebody certainly from a non-religious perspective, will give a substantial spot on whatever he or she wishes to do. It is not as though it is not there at all; it just finds a different place in the programme. But as I was saying, we are not the producers of the *Today* programme.

Q23 Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen: We have covered quite well the position of religion and current affairs. What about other areas of the BBC, for example, drama or music? How do you feel the BBC deals with this and if there are faults, what are they and how should they be rectified?

Dr Ram-Prasad: I think it is probably in those kinds of areas where coverage is the weakest, relative even to politics, because eventually they get the right people out for politics and they start writing and reporting well. We talked about this in the case of some of the soap operas, which of course are specialists on trivia and superficiality, so they cannot be faulted, particularly on religions. However, to the extent that they do tend to use stereotypes to represent a whole community in a kind of shorthand, the Christian, the mad fundamentalist, the Muslim who is going to go and kill people, the Hindu, the one who is in the arranged marriage and is going to beat his wife, which you recognise as soon as they pop up, that kind of thing has become such an easy form of cultural stereotyping that insufficiently hard questions are asked about how they could treat the hinterland of peoples' lives, which does include religion, more seriously. With music, I think that is probably an area where there is a real lack of recognition of the richness of the multi-ethnic traditions of Britain. They hardly

ever make it. If they do, it is usually on the presumption that Hindus and Sikhs are insomniacs, because the programmes are always at one o'clock in the morning, and if we are up, like we were last night for Diwali, we are not watching a programme are we? Those are possibly the areas where coverage would be weakest and my understanding of what is happening there is that it is partially to do not with an unreadiness on the part of BBC religion, but for it not to be given sufficient resources and clout to put out what it can across the programming.

Q24 Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen: You mentioned in particular the soaps, would you say where there is an illustration therefore of a religion that it is actually anti the religion rather than involving it?

Dr Singh: Dot Cotton in *EastEnders* is an example; they pull her out and make her quote endlessly exact quotations from the bible. To my mind it ridicules religion to some extent. It is useful if religion is brought into drama, to have something about its ethical teachings, what it has to offer on that particular issue, being discussed or talked about.

Dr Ram-Prasad: I would also say perhaps something slightly different: it is more than nuance I am asking for, because there could well be religious figures who are ridiculous figures, therefore they need to be there as part of the narrative. It is not actually an evaluation or a normative judgment on how it ought to be covered, it is just that these people's lives often do have a great many more dimensions. Any attempt to be dramatically real could include religious representation rather than think of it as something that is wheeled in stereotypically and then taken out again.

Q25 Lord King of Bridgwater: I just want to clear up on a point which came up earlier on the numbers game and the question of the strength and significance of religion in national life; I am talking particularly initially about the Church of England. You seem to focus on church

attendance, but there must be quite a constituency of people, the housebound for a start, who may get all their religion actually out of broadcasting and there may be another constituency of people who actually do not like church very much; they may still be quite deeply religious. Do you have any figures for that at all?

Bishop of Southwark: It is estimated that one in four adults in all faiths worship once a month in this country, so we are talking about a substantial minority of people who actively worship. In the Church of England we talk about 1.7 million a month, but that is not taking into account the day by day by day contact that the church has with drop-in clubs, with church schools and with all the raft of community life which exists. There are figures which we could submit to you from the dioceses of Chelmsford and Guildford who did a survey of the involvement of their church members in community service and they were talking about millions of people; the involvement of church people in the common life of the country, not just church people, we will be talking about people of all faiths. So there are some figures from particular places and certainly that is why, at the beginning, I did not really want to get bogged down in arguing certain numbers.

Q26 Lord King of Bridgwater: I am talking about the ones the priests and vicars know nothing about, the people who get all their religion out of broadcasting, never go to church and would mind very much ---.

Bishop of Southwark: Partly one touches that whenever the BBC tries to make any changes, let us say to the daily service or choral evensong, *Songs of Praise* and one suddenly discovers there is a dedicated listenership, number of viewers for whom that is a very important part of their lives. It is not something I personally know too much about, but it is certainly there.

Dr Ram-Prasad: We might not be able to have things to hand, but we could easily determine that, for example from the *Heaven and Earth* show, which comes on exactly at the time people would be in church. If we look at that audience size there, we are going to get a pretty

good indication of how many people are interested in this issue, but actually are not in church. Why? It is very likely because they cannot go, as I know anecdotally, but I think we might need to get at these figures indirectly rather than have them.

Bishop of Southwark: If I were a shop steward for the church, I would be asking them to close this down because it was stopping people coming to church.

Q27 Lord Holme of Cheltenham: In your evidence you say that you think the agreement which accompanies the charter should, amongst other things, ensure that religion is fairly reflected. That is a very difficult concept. Let us just suppose, for example, two successive weeks of *Panorama* and in week one we have a programme about the rapture in the United States where 33 per cent of Americans believe in the very near future that the world as we know it is coming to an end and the chosen are to go to sit at the right hand of god and the rest of us will burn in the flames. This is not an apocalyptic remote possibility: it is a proximate possibility, it is going to happen quite soon and this affects the policies of neo-conservatives in the administration who think “Why bother with the environment, because the world is going to come to end soon and the good people will be fine anyhow?”. That programme is the first week and the second week is a programme which shows the effects of fundamental Islam throughout the Middle East as a factor in conflict and tension. When you say “fairly”, what do you want at that point? Do you want to appear to say not all Muslims are like that, or do you want to appear to say you do not have to worry about a lot of nutters in the Mid-West, because that is not what the good old C of E believes? What do you mean by “fair”.

Dr Singh: It would be useful if there were some programme that pointed out that those fundamentalist beliefs in the United States are nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus Christ. They are just extreme beliefs.

Dr Siddiqui: I think it is extremely important to show those programmes, absolutely, and I would say it is the job of the BBC to educate and inform us that there are radical wings in

religions at the moment, that Islam is on the go on certain issues. It is entirely appropriate that the BBC should show programmes like that and if it chooses to show them in high profile programmes like *Panorama*, so be it and it is not misreporting anything. What we are trying to say by “fairly” is that that is not the nub and all and essence of a faith, that is one reflection of it. So the neo-conservative rise in America is a reflection of a particularly worrying trend for some people who are also Christians but who do not agree with that rise. Islamic radicalism is also a rising threat to Muslim communities themselves; it is a threat, but it should also show how Muslim communities themselves are worried about it. My comment really goes back to the initial points that religious programming in general should not just be a reaction to global events, it should also be showing that okay, there is this side of religion but there is also, not necessarily a more balanced side, but there is a different vision of that same faith that is practiced by people within that faith.

Q28 Lord Holme of Cheltenham: But you would not dissent from the fact that both of those programmes in themselves could be perfectly fair portrayals of religion?

Dr Siddiqui: Absolutely; yes.

Reverend Edwards: Indeed. About six or seven years ago, in fact when I was on CRAC, a very good friend of mine who worked in the BBC, Ewan Russell Jones who works for BBC Wales in the education department, did such a programme. I thought it was a very fair analysis on the whole issue of pre-millennialism, showing some of the “Jesus is coming soon and we are all going away to heaven” and the impact of that kind of religion. It was very well done, very astutely done, it spared no punches, and was very level-headed. So I think the BBC has a responsibility to show that kind of thing. Conversely, I hope we could also show that whilst that is the section of Christian eschatology with some downsides, there is also a very vibrant part of the Christian community which may believe the same things - I believe in the second coming of Christ - but equally this constituency is working very hard at community

cohesion and employs twice as many youth leaders as local government does and therefore is totally involved and absorbed in the life of its community now rather than waiting for the hereafter. This is religious broadcasting at its best, it moves beyond religion to community commentary and I think that is the strength of what the BBC is still able to do because it does it professionally and objectively.

Bishop of Southwark: May I just add another side to this “fairly” thing? I think what we are saying in our submission is that we do not want things just to be left to the good will of the director general who might come and control other channels. We feel that there should be a formal public service commitment which includes fair reflection of religion and other matters; we actually want that built in to a statement accompanying the charter. What is fair I would then be prepared to leave to Ofcom who at the moment judges, for example, whether religion has not been treated fairly within advertising. It is not a structural problem; we are building up in the nation an expertise which can actually judge whether something has been treated fairly in religious terms as much as in other terms. Ofcom is becoming an important vehicle for that.

Q29 Lord Holme of Cheltenham: Just one more supplementary, My Lord Chairman, and it is an important point. You would be happy with “fair” in the sense that in a defamation trial you can plead as defence “fair comment”; you would accept “fair” in that sense.

Bishop of Southwark: Yes. I would accept “fair” in the sense overall of an even-handed approach to this particular subject, this particular issue. I would be happy to leave it to a body like Ofcom to decide whether or not that has been handled fairly. They do it already when it comes to advertising.

Q30 Lord Holme of Cheltenham: Clearly it is a matter of the time period. You used the word “balance” which is not quite the same as “fair”, but it is an important point.

Reverend Edwards: Yes; that is what we are arguing for, for it actually to be in there in the statement accompanying the charter that we would expect religion to be treated fairly.

Q31 Chairman: Would you regard a programme like the rather good one on Radio Four early on Sunday morning as being an example of fair reporting of religion?

Bishop of Southwark: Except when it comes to reporting the Church of England.

Chairman: You sound like a politician.

Q32 Lord Kalms: One thing you cannot do in this type of subject is bring statistics into it. I quite agree. Although the Bishop of Southwark did bring it in when he referred in his report to those who go to church exceeding the membership of all political parties. I do not want to make an issue of this because you actually go on in the next paragraph as well, but does that not, in a sense, reflect the failure of religion and politics in our society to capture the higher ground? The purpose of this Committee, as My Lord Chairman said at the beginning, was to see the role of religion in the BBC and what seems to be clear from your evidence is that religion, as politics, does not actually capture the higher ground. The evidence you have given us this morning suggests, bearing in mind the possibility of any large bureaucracy to deal with the complexity of religion, bearing in mind that of the five groups today none of you is fundamentalist, that actually the BBC is doing quite a reasonable exercise in dealing with the almost innumerable alternatives in discussing religion.

Bishop of Southwark: If you are talking as a politician as well, I think you are being too hard on yourself. I think we put forward that figure in terms of church attendance and members of political parties not to score points one way or another, but to say that the membership of political parties is not necessarily a measure of the public interest in politics. It obviously is not, because the public have never been more interested in politics than they are today, otherwise the BBC and other channels would not have such a colossal output in terms of

politics. Equally, I think we are therefore saying one should not judge everything on the basis of how many people go to church or to the temple during the week; that is not necessarily a measure of the interest in religion or the importance of religion. I would also like to point out that although I do not know what the figures were yesterday, I imagine the viewing figures for the service in St Paul's were probably quite large. Again, that will have touched a nerve and a religious nerve in the life of the nation and that for me is as significant as how many show up in church or temple every week. That is really the point we are trying to make.

Q33 Lord Kalms: I am not completely convinced by it, but having made that point, our role is to look at the role of religion as created and permitted by the BBC and, listening to you very carefully, I would say on the whole they are doing a reasonably good job. Getting involved with theology is an impossible job, particularly in this country with multi-racism and all the various conflicts. Listening to you, I was just wondering how we would frame our report. I would suggest that the BBC, on the whole, is doing an exceptional job in dealing with the wide range of views today.

Bishop of Southwark: I think it is doing a good job. We want to support it, we want to do it better and I do not think I would accept that it is an impossible job, any more than it is impossible to reflect politics in this country. It is not impossible. It does take professionalism and it takes resources.

Dr Siddiqui: We are not asking here for the BBC to churn out banalities about religion, far from it. What we are really saying is that the BBC is in a privileged position to be more robust. I think that in our current climate, when we are talking so much about asylum and immigration and the changing face of Europe and Britain's role in Europe, we have to be really careful that different communities are coming in, different cultures, languages and religions. If we are talking about a cohesive society, we mean all the strands. What we are not asking for is religious programming to stand out starkly as a programme that only

religious people watch. It has to blend in with wider debates on all aspects of life, if we are going to produce not necessarily just more tolerant societies, but societies which are actually respectful of diversity and can actually have informed and adult conversations about what diversity brings, the challenges that diversity brings. Religion has a huge role in that.

Reverend Edwards: We would not see ourselves as adversaries of the BBC; in fact the BBC is serious in its 2002 strategy to respond to and drive the public appetite for programmes about religion. We are here to say “Well done”, where it is happening and here are some offers on the table as to how that might be enhanced. It is not just for the benefit of religion, if indeed religion and faith are very central to what it means to be a person and to be persons in community. We think that more could be done through stronger enhanced partnerships and that is basically the thrust of the arguments we have put forward.

Q34 Chairman: Does any other media organisation do it better in this country?

Dr Siddiqui: I do not think so.

Reverend Edwards: I do not think so; no. There are probably some examples of imaginative, slightly more on the edge approaches to it, but I think in terms of its professionalism and attempting fair play, the BBC is as good as it gets.

Bishop of Southwark: We have not mentioned, although you may have covered it elsewhere, that the raft of work the BBC does with local broadcasting is very important when it comes to religion. I used to be Bishop of Leicester and the Asian programmes in Leicester are very, very significant in terms of community cohesion. We have not touched upon that, but nevertheless that is there around the country and very significant and the BBC does it very well.

Q35 Lord Peston: I am still very puzzled by your position. When I watch the BBC it seems to be permeated with religion. You asked the question about music and drama. The BBC is

about to show the complete known works of Bach, the greatest, certainly within western civilisation, composer and the greater religious composer. Now I would argue, as someone who loves Bach, that his religion is irrelevant in one sense; I can listen to his music without having any of his beliefs. However, his religion was everything to him. My point is that I regard this notion that the BBC somehow is against religion as ridiculous and that goes also to the theatre and so on. The work of T S Elliot, one of our greatest poets and a considerable dramatist, appears all the time on the BBC. They always forget to point out what a vile anti-Semite he was but that is by the way. The fact is that this stuff appears all the time. You are obviously not listening to or seeing what some of the rest of us do and I am totally bewildered by this. I accept your point on expertise, but of course all of us who are experts view our subject with contempt when it comes up on the BBC. As an economist I am always asking why they do not have anybody on who knows what they are talking about. You are saying the same sort of thing, but we just have to recognise that that is the nature of the media, if you like: it is full of people trying to fluff their way through very difficult matters. I imagine that physicists must go mad over what they put over as science. I am just bewildered by what you see, but you obviously do see it. I am not denying you see what you are telling me, but I do not see where you are seeing it.

Dr Siddiqui: I am not necessarily saying that they put on people in religious broadcasting who do not know what they are talking about. It just seems that large chunks of programmes or a large number of programmes seem to be either about stereotypes or about the same discussions over and over again in different formats. Whenever we have a programme on British Islam, it will be about when the Muslims came and what they contributed and the chicken tikka masala and that is not what religion is about and that is not what resonates in the lives of a lot of people. It may resonate in the lives of some people, but I think people are hungry for real debate. People are hungry to know how that theology works in that person's

life. That does not mean they are interested in suddenly going out and reading the Koran or the bible or whatever; they just want to know. That religion or those sentiments make that person tick in a way that is extraordinary or ways of I would not dream of and I want to know and that kind of challenge needs more robust programming. That is all we are saying.

Dr Ram-Prasad: I am just slightly puzzled whether you were listening to what we have been saying. We just had people from here saying that in fact the BBC does an awfully good job a lot of time and the example of Bach would be precisely that kind of example. It is not that we are being antagonistic towards the BBC surely; we are trying to say we want to strengthen what they do well, so that they can do it better, rather than they are failing in that job.

Q36 Bishop of Manchester: One of the things that I do not think that we have gone into in any depth this morning in terms of religious broadcasting, or indeed religion in broadcasting, is that between radio and television. It would be helpful to tease this one out because in some of the evidence which has been produced, both within this Committee and also outside it, it is clear that people within the BBC feel that on the whole, they do a better job conveying religion through radio than they do through television. I think there are major technical issues involved in all that. Nevertheless, here is an opportunity to be able to comment from your perspective on where you feel that improvements might be made by the BBC in either or both those areas of radio and television.

Bishop of Southwark: Certainly you have the numbers, if you do not, we can supply them: BBC TV has 113 hours a year of religious broadcasting, network BBC radio 1,186. It is a fact that it is over ten times as much and there will be good reasons for that; it is more expensive producing television programmes. Also, frankly it is easier to handle music and perhaps worship on the radio than it is on television. One has to be very skilled to capture the sense of awe and mystery and wonder and uplift of worship on a television screen; it is easier to find it on the radio. Also, the BBC has had long experience of putting resources into

religious broadcasting on radio and they have some extremely skilled people. So there are very good reasons, but I also think, as I said earlier, that I would prefer to see, not necessarily more religious programmes on television, but scheduled at a better time and perhaps putting in more resources so that they are of better quality; those two things. There is no point arguing for more religious broadcasting if it is not of the right quality or it is at a time when nobody can see it, at two o'clock in the morning.

Q37 Bishop of Manchester: One of the things that we have learned on this Committee is that over the next few years scheduling as an issue will become less important because people will be able to download at a time or day of their choice. May I go back to a point you made just a moment ago about the difficulties, for example, over worship on television? Do I take it that all of you would be in agreement with the BBC's current policy of actually reducing the amount of worship that it does on television and not least on the basis of the argument that I have heard them put forward that, as you have said, worship comes across better on radio. I am asking that because I am thinking also of the people we mentioned earlier who may be housebound and do rely on this sort of thing.

Bishop of Southwark: And let us not forget the set piece: yesterday the service at St Paul's and the handling of the death of the Pope. There will be those kinds of services for which there is no substitute, the radio does not carry it in the same kind of way, but that might not be every Sunday, Sunday by Sunday, twice on Sunday. You are asking the wrong person, I am in church on Sunday.

Q38 Lord Maxton: Why should churches, particularly the Christian churches, have the right to acts of worship on television? Political parties do not have the right to half-hour or hour-long programmes to put across their point of view without contradiction. The Humanist Society does not get an hour every so often to put across its point of view without

contradiction, so why on earth should the Christian churches, not any other church hardly, have these acts of worship on radio and television every week? I cannot turn on the radio on a Sunday morning and find a programme I want to listen to.

Bishop of Southwark: I am not sure that we do have the right. I imagine it is because out there are people housebound, driving and the rest of it for whom this is very significant and they make their voices heard and the BBC over the years has responded to that voice. I do not think the church is saying “We must have this”; on the contrary, it is taking away customers from my cathedral.

Q39 Lord Maxton: So if the BBC were to say “We do not believe it is in the interests of broadcasting generally to have acts of worship on television or radio”, would you have no objection to that?

Bishop of Southwark: I would ask whether in terms of the public service nature of the BBC there is a significant group of people for whom this is very important and therefore, I think I probably would have an argument, but that is not to say that the argument would be based on the right of the church to have acts of worship.

Lord Maxton: But with modern technology there is no reason why the churches themselves, using the modern technologies of DVDs, of videos and so on, cannot provide their believers with that material without the rest of us having to lose maybe other programmes we would want to watch as a result.

Q40 Lord King of Bridgwater: Lord Maxton is a technological wizard and if there is one man who knows how to download programmes of all the scheduling, he is the one who can do it, whereas a lot of the elderly people who might want religious broadcasting are the least able to use DVDs and other things. So it seems a very sensible arrangement that those who are not able to do that should have their programmes.

Bishop of Southwark: I imagine the same argument goes across the menu. In a sense the BBC put out a balanced menu that they think is going to be of interest to the general public. Not all of it will be of interest to every person but that does not mean to say you say that bit can be supplied in a different way.

Dr Siddiqui: I just want to tie up a couple of things you said earlier about *Thought for the Day*. I have to say this because earlier this year there was an attempted move by BBC Scotland to shift *Thought for the Day* from 7.27 BBC Scotland, to ten to seven and there was a huge outcry and they had to move it back to 7.27.

Q41 Lord King of Bridgwater: What were the figures?

Dr Siddiqui: There was enough of an outcry for the people in charge at the BBC to stop that move. The reason was that between quarter past seven and eight o'clock is officially the peak listening time for people who listen to the radio and they wanted to make sure that the privileged position, and I accept it is a very privileged position, of both *Thoughts for the Day*, Radio Four and BBC Scotland, were within that peak time. This is going to be something that will be an ongoing debate. Just going back to the *Thought for the Day* slot, the Bishop has said we are not the producers, but even when I have personally said to the producers that I do not want to put god in my thought today, I just want to leave it as a thought, they have always insisted that there be theological reflection because that is the premise for *Thought for the Day*: if you do not have a theological reflection, it will no longer be *Thought for the Day*.

Q42 Chairman: Let me ask this question, because we have been skirting around it. You say that you are not producers of the *Today* programme which we obviously accept. We have actually also talked about *Thought for the Day*. If the producers of the *Today* programme were, for example, to make slots on *Thought for the Day* regularly available, for example, to the humanists, would you support that or would you think that was a retrograde step?

Dr Siddiqui: The producers themselves always argue that it would not be *Thought for the Day*. That is the premise, that is the function of *Thought for the Day*, that it is two and a half minutes of theological reflection which is topical, which is short, which is current.

Bishop of Southwark: It would have a different nature. We all must have the same experience, because you relate to your producer the night before and agree on a theme and try to spot what is going to be the major news item. You try to have a theological or spiritual view on that. If you were not going to try to do a theological or spiritual view on it, all of us might come up with something different, but it would be a different slot. At the moment it is the fact that it is a religious or a spiritual view which gives it its identity.

Q43 Chairman: It is a religious and spiritual spot, as you put it and therefore it would exclude the humanists.

Bishop of Southwark: It would be something else. Twenty-five past seven is always the sports programme and it is like asking why it is always about sports. Why can they not have somebody on there who is going to be talking about some other hobby such as bird watching? They could, but it would no longer be the sporting slot.

Q44 Lord Maxton: So it is *Religious Thought for the Day*, not *Thought for the Day*.

Reverend Edwards: That is a very important underlying question because at the heart of this challenge - should secular humanists be a part of *Thought for the Day* or not? - is a very important debate about assumptions, about what religion is and therefore what are sacred spaces and how you differentiate between *Thought for the Day* as a kind of neutral zone for erudite ideas about current affairs, as opposed to what is a zone for theological reflections and there may be a deeper debate here which is beyond our particular remit. On the earlier questions about the space for religious broadcasting based again on numbers, it is important that 70 per cent of the population at some conscious level says they would even vaguely

officially describe themselves in this way. We cannot just bypass the fact that the BBC's own research suggests that a very high percentage of people out there actually want to hear some kind of reflection from Christian faith, religion. I go back to the Annan report, which I was vaguely familiar with when I was on CRAC. Some time ago, I think it was 1977, he suggested that while the churches may be weak, concern about religion is strong and that we do not belong to a country where all the springs of religious life have dried up. He suggested that a large public still speculates about myths, ritual, death and the meaning of life, holiness and evil and broadcasting has responded to these changes. I think that is still current. I think that if the death of a pope can displace the marriage of a prince, then we ought not to marginalise religious broadcasting too swiftly.

Q45 Chairman: That sounded to me like a very, very good concluding part. I am going to bring this to an end otherwise I am going to be accused, as they are going to accuse *Thought for the Day*, of excluding the humanists who are on next.

Bishop of Southwark: Before you do, you probably have access to this but if you do not, we are very happy for you to have it. Ofcom did a survey in May this year of public attitudes to religious programmes. That is certainly in the public domain

Chairman: That would be very interesting, thank you very much indeed. Thank you all very much; you have given your evidence excellently and succinctly and we are very grateful. Perhaps if we have any other questions, we could come back to you. Thank you very much for coming today.

Memorandum submitted by British Humanist Association

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Ms Hanne Stinson**, Executive Director and **Mr David Pollock**, former Chairman, British Humanist Association, examined.

Q46 Chairman: Thank you very much for coming and welcome. This is really the second part of our inquiry. We reported yesterday on the first part. We are now looking at a number of areas, which we were not able to go into in sufficient depth during the first part and one of these is religious broadcasting. As you have seen, we have just been talking to a multi-faith group before you. We certainly have your written evidence, for which many thanks and we know who both of you are. May I start the questioning with two general points? You say that there is the clearest evidence that only a minority of the population holds any genuine religious beliefs, while the number explicitly denying religious belief is rapidly growing. That certainly was not the flavour of the evidence we were getting in the first session. Discuss.

Ms Stinson: Part of this comes down to how you actually define what religious beliefs are and the extent to which somebody has to be religious in order to be classed as belonging to a religion or being religious or having some sort of religious or spiritual feeling. There is an increasing number of surveys which show rapidly growing numbers of non-religious people. Most face-to-face surveys show at least 30 per cent of adults, going up to 40 or 50 per cent and, with young people, going even higher, up to a DfES survey which shows 65 per cent of young people not having religious beliefs. I find it quite interesting that the census can bring up a figure of 70-plus per cent religious when other surveys will show, for example, that 40 per cent of the population cannot actually name any of the four gospels.

Q47 Chairman: Your appendix shows these surveys.

Ms Stinson: Yes, we show a number of surveys in the appendix.

Q48 Chairman: What about humanism itself. Is there any evidence that is becoming ever more popular? How do you measure it?

Ms Stinson: We do not have any figures for the number of humanists in the UK.

Q49 Chairman: Is that a wise precaution? Why not?

Ms Stinson: No, it is actually that awareness of humanism is very, very low and one might suggest that the BBC is partly to blame for that. We find that a very large number of non-religious people, when they come across humanism or when they come across the British Humanist Association, actually say they have been a humanist all my life, or for the last 20 years, and they never knew that was what it was called. They are very often very relieved to have found a group of people who actually share their beliefs. We would estimate that a significant proportion of the non-religious people within the UK are broadly humanist in their outlook, but we cannot put a figure on it, because people do not use the word.

Q50 Chairman: One point which struck me, reading your evidence, was that you said basically there are two major institutional examples of access being granted to religion, the education system and the BBC. Then you went on to say that between them they cause immense damage to society. Why do you think that?

Ms Stinson: I genuinely believe that it does. There are assumptions in very many circles, including the media and the BBC, that we still have a religious society. We have people who grow up being taught that the only source of morality is religion. I have been told very many times that I may be a humanist and I might claim that my morality does not come from religion, but of course it does because I grew up in a Christian society. I would very strongly

challenge that: I do not think my morals do come from religion, I think they come from my common humanity. When you have a very large number of people who do not have religious beliefs, including of course a large number of people who have been brought up in a religion, but have lost their religious beliefs, who have been taught that morality is based on religion, you have a large number of people who then flounder while they try to work out where their morality actually comes from. The religions are very, very good at claiming that society is sliding into some sort of immoral or amoral situation and blaming it on the reduction in religious belief, when in fact it should be blamed on the fact that those people who do not have religious beliefs maybe have not been helped to formulate what their beliefs actually are. Having said that, I do not actually think that the non-religious are less moral than the religious anyway. If there is a problem, it is that people have not actually had support to formulate what their beliefs actually are.

Q51 Chairman: “Immense damage” is a fairly strong criticism.

Ms Stinson: I do think it does immense damage. It causes immense damage to society, because people are maybe floundering as to what the firm basis of their morality is and it causes immense damage to individuals who are forever being put down. This particularly goes for young people who are being told they cannot be moral because they do not have religious beliefs.

Q52 Lord Holme of Cheltenham: I should like to explore why as non-religious, alternative, humanistic value people you feel you are hard done by in BBC coverage. It seems to me that there is an assumed value system in the BBC which quite often irritates its critics, which is, if not humanist, essentially humanistic. There seems to be a belief in enlightenment and the perfectibility of society; there seems to be a belief in rationality, there seems to be a belief in tolerance and diversity, there seems to be a belief in respecting the

planet. If you were to do a value analysis of the implicit values of the BBC, I am unclear that they would not at least substantially overlap with a humanistic – I shall not say humanist – view of the world. Certainly, rather than speculating what the value system of the BBC is, if you look at their output, whether it is in terms of news and current affairs or in terms of drama or in terms of soap operas, I would find it extremely difficult to look at it and say that those programmes did not by and large, over time, mostly have a moral and humanistic underpinning. Forgetting the fact that you do not like the religious people and you think they are getting too much, what is it you object to in the run-of-the-mill coverage of the BBC of whatever genre it is?

Ms Stinson: We heard this morning people claiming that most of the output of the BBC was secular and this is something we are told very, very often. When it comes to the values which come across in the BBC, I would say that those values are actually generally the values which are shared between the religious and the non-religious because most values are actually shared between both groups of people. The BBC regularly claims that there is this little bit of religion and all the rest of broadcasting is secular, hence that ought to be enough for us. We would say that a small percentage is religious and all the rest is general and is for everybody, and that the BBC is actually making the wrong comparison when they link that small percentage of religious against the rest as secular. What they should be doing is actually comparing the small percentage of religious broadcasting against the non-existent percentage of broadcasting about specifically humanistic, positive, non-religious beliefs. I do not mean atheism; I mean positive non-religious beliefs, because that is where the gap is.

Mr Pollock: Clearly the BBC's output is such as you describe it: it is largely based on values which could be described as humanistic. What we object to is neither that, nor the existence of religious broadcasting which obviously provides a valuable service for a minority audience, but one which values it considerably. What we are objecting to is that the BBC is

quite deliberately ignoring the requirements which are placed on it by the Human Rights Act as a public authority and by the Communications Act in section 264 to treat equally religions and beliefs across the spectrum. The European Convention on Human Rights says that there should be no discrimination on grounds of religion or belief. Case law has established that humanism counts as a belief. The Government in its general policymaking accepts that humanism is a belief. The Government in their own amendment to the Communications Bill, when it was going through your House, said that the requirement to provide programmes about religion needed to be extended to cover religion and other beliefs. They mentioned humanism in that context in the House. The BBC has ignored all of that. Our freedom of information inquiry at the beginning of this year showed that they had not generated a single piece of paper relative to that quite significant change in their obligations. Nevertheless, without having considered what the law required, they tell us constantly that they are confident that their output meets the requirements. What is lacking is anything which is parallel to that part of religious broadcasting which is unmediated, Christians talking Christianity to Christians, which amounts on Radio Four to over three hours per week. There is obviously similar programming elsewhere, but that is a key element of it. There is nothing ever like that of humanists talking humanism to humanists. The result is, to get back to My Lord Chairman's first question, that the very large majority of the non-religious population, itself at least a large minority of the total population, is unable to articulate with any confidence their own life stance. They live implicitly humanist lives. The essentials of humanism are a naturalistic world view, a rejection of dogma and a morality based on consequences, mainly for people and the planet. That describes the basic outlook of the great majority of non-religious people in the country. Those are the essentials of humanism. They do not know that it is humanism, and they are not able to articulate it. When it comes to trying to teach their children morality, they do not have the confidence to do it. Very many

non-religious people still send their children to religious schools because they think that might give them a grounding in morality. The linking of religion and morality, which has no logic whatsoever, is constantly found.

Q53 Lord Holme of Cheltenham: Forgive me, but this is a little bit like the trade union point I was making to the religious representatives: in terms of industrial demands you want comparability and you want a slice of the pie and so on.

Mr Pollock: Yes, we do, so long as there is religious broadcasting, unmediated, direct from religious leaders to their followers, we do not see why we should be discriminated against.

Q54 Lord Peston: I suppose I ought to declare an interest as an atheist, which is much more extreme than you. I am still a bit lost. Dr Singh, in his evidence earlier, made a point which we did not follow up enough, which was that he wanted us to distinguish between religion, by which I think he meant organised religion, and spirituality. Would you accept that distinction as well?

Ms Stinson: Spirituality is a very, very difficult word.

Q55 Lord Peston: Let me then say, for example, that I would have regarded both David Hume and Bertrand Russell as deeply spiritual people; indeed both have written very clearly about yearning for something more but unfortunately there is nothing, that sort of thing. So the distinction, at least in my mind, is very important and I wonder whether that is your view.

Ms Stinson: It depends on how you use the word. Very often it is used as though it is part of religion, with the implication that you cannot be spiritual if you are not religious. In the sense in which you have just used it, I think humanists can be just as spiritual as any religious person; there is the same sense of awe and wonder when they hear music or see a wonderful

view, all those sorts of things, or how nature actually works, and in that sense just as spiritual; and that too is the important element of broadcasting.

Q56 Lord Peston: Therefore going back to My Lord Chairman's opening question to you about your view on the damage religion does, you are arguing really that it is organised religion which is doing the damage.

Ms Stinson: I was not actually talking about the damage religion does.

Q57 Lord Peston: I am sorry; you were saying the BBC does the damage. You are quite right.

Ms Stinson: It is the lack of broadcasting about non-religious positive beliefs which I think is damaging. Religion can be damaging in some circumstances, but basically we are not anti-religious and we are not anti-religious broadcasting.

Q58 Lord Peston: When Lord Holme of Cheltenham asked you about wanting a fair share, you made the point that religion – it seems to me and I agree with you – is of its essence dogmatic. I do not see how it can be other than dogmatic and be a religion. I can then understand programmes which put forward a dogma. What I have difficulty understanding and therefore I am less exercised than you are, is how you could have a programme which was non-dogmatic. In other words, if I were asked to comment in two minutes on *Thought for the Day*, and I take your point that you ought to have some ability to do that, my problem would be that I would meander on for two minutes explaining what the problem was. I would never get around even to doing what they do, which is in the end lay down some piece of dogma. I do not know why you want to get into that game at all.

Ms Stinson: We certainly do not want to lay down dogma. There is a very clear place for exploring issues from a humanist perspective and if you did have humanist *Thoughts for the*

Day they would be much more questioning and exploratory and trying to pull out the underlying issues, very often the moral issues, than the average *Thought for the Day* is.

Mr Pollock: May I give an example perhaps? Quite recently, on the morning that Lord Joffe's Bill was going through the House, Jonathan Sachs was on *Thought for the Day* giving a strongly anti-euthanasia, anti-assisted dying thought from a religious perspective. It would be perfectly possible to do a humanist *Thought for the Day* which talked about the value of life, wherein lies the value of life, why a residual life of pain and no prospects for improvement might seem to a person to lack value, and that there should be a permissive attitude towards euthanasia. That would be helpful to a lot of people in the population who are otherwise left only with a religious morality being voiced on the air.

Q59 Lord Peston: I was about to raise the subject of Lord Joffe's Bill myself. Surely Lord Joffe's Bill and his case for it got an extremely good airing on the BBC from very effective people? I agree that they did not get that little slot that Jonathan Sachs got, but no-one could argue surely that the case, exactly as you have just put it forward yourself now, was not aired very fully on the BBC.

Ms Stinson: What happened that morning on *Today* is that we had an excellent item on the Bill: we had Lord Joffe, we had the Bishop, it was very, very even-handed, it was balanced and both points of view, the religious point of view and Lord Joffe's point of view were given a very, very good airing. I was listening to that and I thought that it was a good balanced piece of reporting. Immediately after that, or a couple of minutes after that, we had a three-minute polemic on one side, which was totally unmediated, which I felt therefore totally unbalanced that whole item.

Q60 Lord Peston: So it does bring us back to the view of Lord Holme of Cheltenham that what you want is another three-minute polemic.

Ms Stinson: No; no.

Chairman: I think there is a question of balance there. It might be useful if we took that specific example with the BBC when they come.

Q61 Baroness Howe of Idlicote: I should like to start way back. When you were making your introductory statement it occurred to me first of all that the percentage of humanists was quite small. The second point is: what about your own lobbying for your organisation. Surely more could go on that and would get it a higher profile. For example, do you start earlier, in schools? Are you trying to get this thought about in schools? If what you are saying is that the whole approach of morality and ethical approach is really being ignored to the detriment of how people develop, then this is a very good point to start. Having said all that, it is not exactly the BBC, but it is what we are talking about today. I should have thought you clearly made a good case for why you should be included, why a non-religious religion should be included in something like CRAC. What particular role do you think they should be playing? Should they be there to see that the situation you describe actually does not happen or was better balanced?

Ms Stinson: May I start by responding on the issue of schools and starting early? For many, many years the British Humanist Association has been working together with religious groups in order to improve religious education, and it has been one of our major pieces of work for the last 40 years, if not longer. Our aim there has always been not to get religious education out of schools, but to make it better quality and ensure that it covers and teaches a really good understanding of the different religious beliefs and of non-religious beliefs. In fact I think some very important progress was made quite recently with the introduction of the national framework for religious education which does now include non-religious beliefs and specifically humanism. It is not compulsory of course, so we do not know to what extent schools will actually pick that up, though there is quite a lot of evidence that they are. We do

see that as extremely important and if all children do learn about other religions, preferably with and from children with other beliefs, which is why we are also opposed to separate education in faith schools, which is a big issue which we obviously cannot go into, we think that is actually extremely important. The other thing which is extremely important is that the children who have non-religious views, who express those in schools, have those views respected and they are very often not. We get an awful lot of complaints from parents who say “My little Johnny came home and do you know what the teacher said to him?” and it was absolutely outrageous. We hear it and it is absolutely outrageous. The teacher will say they do not respect the child’s views because they are wrong. That is the sort of thing teachers sometimes say in schools. That undermines children. I have forgotten the second part of your question.

Q62 Baroness Howe of Idlicote: It was really about the role of CRAC.

Ms Stinson: If the BBC were to take on board that they have this responsibility to produce programming on religious and on non-religious beliefs such as humanism, then I think there would be a very, very obvious role for humanist representatives on the CRAC; I see no question of it. The reason why we would want it now is because, while a lot of religious programming is perfectly acceptable and we have no problem with it, we would want to feel that there is actually a mediating body which says “If you’re doing that, shouldn’t you be doing this”.

Q63 Baroness Howe of Idlicote: If the percentage of those who are humanists, or those with non-religious beliefs, is quite small, what sort of proportion would you be looking for?

Ms Stinson: I do not think I said that the percentage of humanists is small. If the percentage of non-religious is 30, 40 maybe 50 per cent and we are saying that most of those people, from the evidence we have, lead a broadly humanist life, even if they cannot articulate it as

humanism and even if they do not call it humanism, then that is actually quite a large percentage. I do not want to come here and say we should have so many hours on Radio Four and so many hours on this or the other. It is, however, important that there should be a regular slot which actually expounds humanist views on particular topics; it would not be dogma, it would be exploring issues. And there should also be some programmes which actually explore it in more depth.

Q64 Lord Maxton: Like Lord Peston I should declare an interest too. I am a member of the all-party humanist group and I would go even further than Lord Peston in declaring that I am an atheist, but I am also an anti-clerical atheist in that I do not believe that religion is beneficial to our society. If we look around the world at the present time, religion is at the source of many – not all but many – of the conflicts we see, even within our own country: in Northern Ireland or where I come from in the west of Scotland. It may be mainly in terms of football, but that is still there and sectarianism is rife. That is why I believe that the BBC is damaging our society, not quite in the same way as you do, but because it is my view that it helps to sustain something which is dying and gives it life support and it would be better for the western secular liberal democratic world if it did die. Would you like to comment?

Ms Stinson: I have some sympathy with that view. I do believe that the BBC is artificially sustaining something which is declining. Where I think I would take a slightly different line is that I recognise that within our society religion is very important to a percentage of the population. I would not want to be so extreme as to say that those people should not have an opportunity to hear that sort of view on the BBC. I should like to see more of the sort of challenging programme that the group which was here earlier was talking about, where there is really in-depth analysis of some of the issues around religion. I think that would be beneficial and I would support them totally on that. I do see a place for religious

broadcasting, obviously particularly for those who are housebound, and until the churches improve their distribution of material then that is good.

Q65 Lord Maxton: At the end of the day, as in education, it is the job of the religious organisations to provide the education. As I said to someone earlier, a person who is housebound has often been a member of a church. Surely they would much prefer to have a DVD or a video of the church service taking place in that church on that Sunday, provided by the church and often perhaps delivered by their own minister or whoever might be in charge of that church. Is that not a much better way of doing it than having this broad sweep of religion on television?

Mr Pollock: If the BBC proposed abolishing all religious broadcasting of the type I was mentioning earlier, religious people talking religion directly to a religious audience, we would not object. If it is going to continue, we should like to have our share of it. It might be valuable just to go back to your original question to illustrate the double stance of humanists. As humanists individually, obviously we disagree with religious views of the world and we think they are mistaken. We sometimes think that they do harm. If religion disappeared gradually from the world, we would think on balance that it would probably be a better place. Our other stance is our stance towards living in the community, in a society together with people who disagree with us. There we support the sort of open democratic society which respects rights, supports non-discrimination and so on. Hanne is very busy at the moment on the steering group of the Government's planned Commission for Equality and Human Rights. We put a lot of our work into promoting the idea of non-discrimination, of proper rights for all groups and respect between them. When it comes to that, there is a need for broadcasting to reflect the state of the world.

Q66 Lord Maxton: I do not disagree with that. I believe entirely in the right of anybody to believe in any religion but it seems to me that the BBC and education do what in the Labour Party we used to call positive discrimination. In other words, it actually positively expounds that point of view rather than allowing the organisations themselves to do the education.

Mr Pollock: That is the whole tenor of our evidence to you. They are perhaps blind to what they are doing, but that is exactly what they are doing.

Q67 Bishop of Manchester: You might welcome a decline in religion, but the truth of the matter is that on a world scale religion is growing numerically and in influence. That is the situation we are in at the moment and there is plenty of statistical backing to show that point. I would accept some of what Lord Maxton says in terms of religion being at the root of quite a lot of the problems; by no means all and he did not say “all” either. It is quite clearly. When that is the case, it is often because the violence, the conflicts have been fed by ignorance and prejudice, which therefore to my mind – and I should be interested in your comments on this – suggests that, far from putting religion into a ghetto slot on some separate channel for those who want to watch it, it is actually increasingly important to have well-informed and carefully put together programmes, which enable people to be less ignorant and less prejudiced on these things. I suspect that we would agree on that. Where I am trying to tease out your position in all this, and you have said a lot with which I agree, is that I am not quite sure on what base you are building your particular viewpoints. One moment you talk about non-religious beliefs and then we suddenly switch over and you are talking about humanists. When Lord Peston says he has non-religious beliefs, he comes to it from an atheistic viewpoint and therefore would not feel presumably properly represented by you. Here you are and it is very good to be able to engage in this conversation, but what really is your, for want of a better expression, power base? Can you legitimately claim to be speaking for that quite wide range of people with non-religious beliefs? In fact, if I may, I hope not

unfairly, press the point, understandably you said you would not be able to give a percentage of people in the country who had humanist beliefs, either by recognising themselves or not. Are you able actually to say what the membership of the British Humanist Association is?

Ms Stinson: I am very happy to do that. At the moment the membership of the British Humanist Association is just over 5,000 individual members. There are also 50-something affiliated groups around the country who are separate, so the membership is not counted in that. That is a very small membership. If I also tell you, that until I became the Executive Director of the British Humanist Association I was not a member, even though I have been a humanist all my life, that says something about why people actually join an organisation.

Q68 Bishop of Manchester: Yes, I could use that argument about the Christian church.

Ms Stinson: There is no pressure at all on humanists, no expectation that they will join anything. People join the British Humanist Association because they support our work. Whether it is our educational work, whether it is our ceremonies or whether it is our lobbying and campaigning, they do it specifically for that purpose, not just in order to express their humanism. I was interested in what you said about the decline of religion in this country compared with the growth elsewhere, because I think that is no doubt true.

Q69 Bishop of Manchester: I do not think I expressed it quite like that.

Ms Stinson: When you said that, what instantly came into my mind was that the number of religious people in this country is declining. The influence of religion in this country is growing and there is no doubt about that. The extent to which the religions are consulted by the Government and by local authorities and so on is growing. Their influence via the BBC is growing. It is far more common now for the BBC to call in a religious person in order to give a moral view, which is something of an issue for us anyway, on a particular issue, whether it is stem cell research or abortion or anything like that. The influence is growing enormously

and that is actually why, suddenly, although our membership is still very small, it started growing because non-religious people, who for a long time had not thought about religion very much, leading their lives by broad and humanist principles and not worrying about religion, are suddenly saying that they are being influenced now by religion in a way they do not want to be. They can see religion is influencing all sorts of things in a way they do not want, such as Lord Joffe's Bill, where 82 per cent of the population is actually in favour of legislation but the religions are against it. They are asking why religion now has all this influence, and that is a very large difference in British society.

Bishop of Manchester: On a point of accuracy there, not all those opposed to Lord Joffe's Bill are opposing it from a religious viewpoint.

Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen: And not all those in support of it are not religious.

Ms Stinson: I accept that

Q70 Lord Kalms: Would it be right to assume that you are a proselyte organisation?

Ms Stinson: No.

Q71 Lord Kalms: You are not proactive in trying to encourage people to join your organisation.

Ms Stinson: We should like people to join our organisation, but we are not interested in converting religious people to humanism. Where we are interested is in supporting non-religious people, who have broadly humanist views, to articulate those and understand those more clearly. I do not think that is proselytising.

Q72 Baroness Howe of Idlicote: On a point of clarification, may I ask whether you can be an atheist and be a humanist.

Ms Stinson: Oh, yes.

Mr Pollock: Yes.

Q73 Baroness Howe of Idlicote: You can. So as a hater of one religion or all religions you can still be a humanist.

Mr Pollock: For humanists and for man in his natural state almost, religion is an irrelevance. We do not define ourselves by reference to religion. We define ourselves as the people we are with the views we have. When it turns to defining our answers to what are generally called ultimate questions, ours are humanist answers. We share a lot with religious people because they, like us, take these ultimate questions seriously. What is the meaning of life? What does death mean? What should our purpose be? What is the root of our morality and so on? Religion does not obsess me. I do not define myself by my lack of religion.

Ms Stinson: I would say that both atheism and agnosticism are negative responses to religion in the sense that they are saying “I do not believe that”. Either I definitely believe that is not true or I do not believe it but I cannot actually prove that it is not, and those are two different positions. Somebody who leads their life by humanist principles has in a sense a negative starting point; saying what I am not. Whenever I say what I am, I say I am a humanist because I try to lead an ethical life on the basis of humanist morality.

Q74 Lord Kalms: May I come back to your submission? You make some very strong points about a space in which to represent your views; I am not arguing against that. In paragraph 32 you say very specifically “We want the BBC to cease discriminating against non-religious beliefs by recognising that they are part of the same spectrum as religion and should be treated on equal terms”. That is not actually a very strong argument; in fact it is the weakest argument in your whole paper. I do not quite see how you can say that non-religious beliefs are in the same spectrum as religious beliefs and you are asking now for equal time. It is a little bit like saying that there is a pet lover programme on the BBC and they should give

equal time to those who dislike pets. The two sides have nothing to do with each other: religious beliefs are a powerful force in our society and non-religious beliefs may well also be, if you argue with your 5,000 members, a powerful force, but to equate the two is not a serious issue, they are two separate, complete arguments.

Ms Stinson: No, they are not. I would say my non-religious belief, my humanism, is as powerful a force for me as a religious person's religious beliefs are. What we are talking about is the way I view the world, or a religious person views the world. It is a life stance, it is a basic philosophy, it is the way we understand the world. Some people have a religious way of understanding the world and some people have a non-religious way of understanding the world, and on that basis it is a spectrum. It is also recognised in the Human Rights Act that equates those beliefs, whether they are religious beliefs or non-religious beliefs, because it is the way we answer ultimate questions. That is the distinction, that is the range, the spectrum of beliefs, which is about the position you take on yourself as a person, on the world, your world view, your life stance, your beliefs.

Q75 Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen: You say that the BBC should cease discriminating against you. Are you actually therefore saying that the BBC is deliberately discriminating?

Ms Stinson: I think we have to assume that it is deliberate because for the last 40 years we have been asking them not to discriminate. The sort of answer we get back is the sort of answer I alluded to earlier, that 90-odd per cent of the output is secular. They have not taken on board the argument I made just now, which is that there is this spectrum of views, of world views, of life stances, on which they should not discriminate. Yes, we do feel discriminated against.

Q76 Chairman: Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen makes a very important point. You say that the BBC is discriminating against you. What would it take to persuade you that they were not discriminating against you? What is it really? As this is a Committee about the BBC, what is it you really want from the BBC?

Mr Pollock: That they should obey the law in the Human Rights Act which tells them as a public authority not to discriminate on grounds of religion or belief. The Communications Act does something very similar. They persistently refuse to answer our very strong case that they are in fact so discriminating. The case is almost open and shut and if they provide three and a half hours on Radio Four every week for religious people to talk to religious people and never a minute for humanists to talk about humanism to humanist people, then whatever the numbers are, that is discrimination.

Q77 Chairman: So you want not necessarily equality, but some kind of balance.

Mr Pollock: Yes; we would agree with Alan Bookbinder, the head of religion and ethics, when he said that all the licence payers are entitled to see their belief reflected back to them.

Q78 Bishop of Manchester: If I may say so, if you are quoting him, he also went on to say the 30 per cent who do not believe in god and lead effectively humanist lives have acres of TV and radio time devoted to secular concerns.

Mr Pollock: To game shows, to makeovers, to sport. Where? Where else?

Q79 Lord Peston: Is one of the problems not that the religious side has an internal pressure group in the BBC working away to fill up slots and the non-religious side does not have the equivalent in terms of internal pressure?

Ms Stinson: And is not represented.

Lord Peston: I have always felt that one of the real problems for the BBC is that if it wants to have this internal religious department, then it really ought to have some balance from others saying they want a programme, say, on the great philosopher Spinoza who became non-religious as a result of being excommunicated, but whose views clearly came in a sense from the same set of problems as those who excommunicated him.

Q80 Bishop of Manchester: I suspect that Alan Bookbinder, were he to be here, would be able to show that there have been occasional programmes of that kind. The issue which seems to be being presented to us at the moment is not so much whether or not that kind of programme has or has not been put on: it is whether or not the British Humanist Association specifically has contributed to such programmes. Is that right?

Mr Pollock: No.

Ms Stinson: No, it is a different question. You asked earlier for whom we speak. I would say quite specifically that we are not looking for a British Humanist Association slot on the BBC; that is not what we are looking for. If the BBC were suddenly to say they would like some humanist features on *Thought for the Day* we would come up with a pretty impressive list of people they might want to choose. It would not include me; it would not include the BHA. It would include humanists who I would feel could express a view on topical issues. What we are looking for is not that our view is represented. What we are actually looking for is a service to non-religious people. In fact the people who need that service most are not the people who currently join the British Humanist Association, they are not the people who call themselves humanists, they are the average person with non-religious beliefs who are struggling to find a foundation for their morality, if they think about it at all and many people do think about it. We are looking for a service to that group of people. We are not looking for the BHA to be represented on the BBC.

Q81 Chairman: To the extent that it is said to you that there are lots of other programmes on television and radio, that rather misses the point of what you are trying to achieve.

Ms Stinson: Absolutely; it totally misses the point.

Q82 Lord Maxton: I should have thought, for instance, if there were a news item – almost the case you were making about Lord Joffe’s Bill – on genetic science in some form or other, it would be totally wrong, though it often happens that you get the discussion and then you get the religious point of view basically saying they are opposed to it.

Ms Stinson: Absolutely.

Q83 Lord Maxton: Surely at that point we could have ---

Ms Stinson: A humanist view.

Q84 Lord Maxton: --- a humanist, or even better a genetic scientist, who probably does not believe in god, putting his point of view, exactly why he thinks this is right.

Ms Stinson: Yes.

Q85 Bishop of Manchester: Or a separate religious viewpoint saying they are in support of something. I should not like you to get away with saying it is always negative.

Mr Pollock: The situation which Lord Maxton mentions is typical. When something in the genetic field, or whatever it might be, comes up, the BBC looks to a clergyman, a bishop, some religious commentator to provide the moral view on it. They never look to a humanist moral philosopher to do that. So you get the impression that you have a politician or scientist who is taking a thoroughly pragmatic view of a matter and then the morality comes in when religion comes in. It gives a very false impression.

Chairman: Thank you very much indeed. I am afraid we have rather gone over our time, but thank you very, very much indeed. It was very interesting and I think you put your case

very clearly indeed. If we have any other points, perhaps we can come back to you. Thank you so much.