

TUESDAY 8 NOVEMBER 2005

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Present

Armstrong of Ilminster, L.  
Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury, B.  
Fowler, L. (Chairman)  
Gibson of Market Rasen, B.  
Holme of Cheltenham, L.  
Howe of Idlicote, B.  
Kalms, L.  
King of Bridgwater, L.  
Manchester, Bp.  
Maxton, L.  
O'Neill of Bengarve, B.  
Peston, L.

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**Memorandum submitted by ITV**

**Examination of Witnesses**

Witnesses: **Mr Dominic Crossley-Holland**, Controller of Current Affairs, Arts and Religion, ITV, and **Mr Aaqil Ahmed**, Commissioning Editor for religion, Channel 4, examined.

**Q86 Chairman:** Good afternoon. As you know, we have done one part of our review of the BBC Charter process and we have reported on that. We are now looking at a number of other subjects which we did not have time to cover and one of those is religious broadcasting which we are looking at in some depth. We have the papers that you sent. As far as ITV is concerned, I was very interested in the paper that you sent. Basically, you are saying that the BBC will be the leading broadcaster of religious and faith based programming. It is fairly unusual for ITV to say that someone else should take the lead. Is this because traditional religious broadcasting and advertising simply do not go together?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** Firstly, thank you very much for inviting us today. Our view is that the BBC is Britain's leading public service broadcaster and we believe that, because of its

unique position and public subsidy, it should therefore take a leading role in the provision of religious and faith based broadcasting in this country. You are right of course to allude to our competitive spirit at ITV. Of course I want to see the BBC provide religious and faith based programming. I do not necessarily think that ITV should take second place. ITV's programming should have high impact and be successful but I believe the BBC should take a leading role in a number of defined ways because of its unique position and the funding it gets. I am not sure that it is doing so at the moment.

**Q87 Chairman:** What gets in the way of your religious broadcasting? Is it the fact that advertisers are not interested?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** For us commercially, we are in a different environment from the BBC, which is not commercial and does not have shareholders, and we are in a different environment from Aaquil and Channel 4 which has a different public status. ITV has shareholders and is dependent upon advertising revenue wholly for the provision of its programming. We come from a completely different standpoint. We have to operate in a far stricter, far more competitive commercial environment where we have to make the schedule over the day balance out. For example, there is quite rightly a debate about where programmes go in the schedule. Our successful programmes in peak -- for example, *Coronation Street* or *The X Factor* -- pay for other programmes which are less commercially viable in other parts of the schedule and there is no shame in that.

**Q88 Chairman:** You cross-subsidise?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** Yes.

**Q89 Chairman:** Do you have a budget for religious broadcasting?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** We have. I should declare that I am new. I have been at ITV six months. Prior to that I was at ITN and ITV News for 16 or 17 years so I have spent my whole career in public service broadcasting. Over the last six months, prior to my arrival, we had reduced our programming agreement with Ofcom to 52 hours but the budgets had not been reduced. The overall spending is less but we are spending more on individual programmes. I am trying to make programmes with more impact. Going back to one of your original observations, I want to see our programming absolutely as competitive as the BBC's, making a high impact. I see perhaps a slight reduction in the number of hours but a raising of the quality of our programming. The sort of programming like *Tsunami Journey*, for example, I think is really cutting through and making a real difference. In some cases that is quite commercially viable, although we make no secret that it is a very tough environment and it is getting tougher as we approach analogue switch-off.

**Q90 Chairman:** Do you get any advertising on religious programmes?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** Yes. If you look at the demographics of audiences for religious programming, it is getting tougher. I have alluded to analogue switch-off. As we approach it, we are having a tougher and tougher time making those programmes earn their keep. Religious programmes in the last few years have dropped roughly, on ITV 1, to a 20 per cent share. Other genres have fared as badly as well, given the increasing erosion of audiences for channels 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. You can sell these programmes but they do not attract the sort of demographics that advertisers most favour, which are younger and upmarket. They tend to attract older, more downmarket audiences. The onus is upon me to make programmes which reverse that trend. I passionately believe we can do that. We have begun to do that in the last six months. I think we could have done better in the past, quite frankly, in some areas. We are beginning to do better but it is tough.

**Q91 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury:** Is it not the case that you are putting much less money into making religious programmes? The hours may be roughly the same but they are less expensive programmes. What is the effect of this?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** No, it is not. Overall, we have reduced the hours but the programmes we are making have a higher quality and are creating more of an impact. It is a balancing act. I am not pretending we get it right on every single programme. If you look at programmes like the interview with Rowan Williams, I am very proud of that. That was put on in the spring at Sunday lunch time. I was very proud to have done Ragih Omaar's *Tsunami Journey* which I had to pull because it was scheduled on 7/7. It was transmitted a couple of weeks later, at 11 o'clock on a weekday. Those are more expensive programmes. They set out the stall for the sort of programming I want to see on ITV, which is ecumenical, relevant, contemporary, accessible, high quality and well funded.

**Q92 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury:** How do you approach hours versus money and time slot? That is very relevant, is it not, to the viewer?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** Are you talking about the fact that different slots have different budgets?

**Q93 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury:** No. It should not just be a matter of "We make a certain number of hours of religious programming and that satisfies a quota". Money should be spent and these programmes should be broadcast at times when people are watching.

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** When I came into the job, I felt that to some extent there had been a notion, not just at ITV but across the broadcast spectrum, that somehow we had to produce this type of programme; it was being done under forbearance and therefore it could not rate. It was a vicious circle. I am determined to try and bust that. I do not accept that we are just

box ticking. I passionately believe that we can make programmes that will have higher budgets, that will be high quality and make a difference to people's lives. It will not be all of them and, to be realistic in the commercial environment we operate in, it is a question of balance between producing some of those programmes and others. Of course I would like to see more programmes in peak. We come from a very different commercial environment than Channel 4. What would be successful on Channel 4 with a million or two million viewers would not do for ITV. It would be a huge commercial drain for us. My job creatively -- I am a programme maker -- is to make programmes that will cut through and demand slots in the schedule and I intend to do so.

**Q94 Lord Peston:** Mr Ahmed, you are very different from Mr Crossley-Holland because he has this extraordinary, ragbag title, if I may say so. I do not know who dreamed up the combination of current affairs, arts and religion. It sounds to me a bit like a meal that no one could digest. However you are just religion. Looking at the Communications Act 2003, which I think you are supposed to operate according to, it refers not to just religion. It keeps referring to religions and other beliefs. I am not very clear what your strategy is. How do you make sure that you deal with the other beliefs, or is there someone else at Channel 4 corresponding to the three tasks of Mr Crossley-Holland who deals with other beliefs?

**Mr Ahmed:** I may only have the title of commissioning editor for religion but I do get to do more than just religion. I commission Dispatches, documentaries, current affairs and multicultural programming across the board. We do a vast range of programmes. We have programmes coming out about atheism, which is not organised religion. They either come out of my area or other people can commission them as well. It could be history, science or general documentaries. In terms of strategy, I believe the strategy Dominic would like is what we have. Our programmes are in peak for a very good reason, not just for the sake of it, but because they work. When I came to work for Channel 4, religious programmes were

being broadcast at 5 or 6pm on a Saturday and we had 26 new hours, of which 10 would be broadcast at midnight and 16 at 5 or 6pm on a Saturday, which was not the kind of job I really wanted. I am very proud to say that now we have over 50 hours of programming of which only 4.4 hours are not broadcast at 7, 8 or 9pm during the week or on a Saturday. These are prime time programmes and we have done that by doing the kind of film making and story telling which puts religion at the core of each subject and tells you about the world we want to live in. Whether that is about other faiths or religions.

**Q95 Lord Peston:** It is not, is it? It is not remotely about other faiths. It is not about other beliefs. Faiths and beliefs are different things. I do not have any faiths at all. I have very different beliefs. In the Channel 4 review and in your programme policy statements you have lots of really good stuff on religion. I am not denigrating what you do there but who is the strategist who says, “Why are we not showing other programmes on other beliefs”? There is a programme for Manchester’s orthodox Jewish community, a very good idea. Who says, “Why do we not do a programme on families that do not have religious beliefs”? Who is the strategist who would bring that into play?

**Mr Ahmed:** All broadcasters have a wide range of commissioning editors. In terms of our upcoming programmes about atheism, they are coming out of the history department simply because they had the idea. When we did *Spirituality Shopper*, there were various people on that programme who were talking about things they liked talking about, about their beliefs. That came from me. What we do not have is an individual who says, “It is my job to look at things which are not about religion.” In the modern broadcasting world it would be a non-job. It would be three or four hours a year. All commissioning editors will look at the ways of reflecting society as a whole. I would suggest that I would be more likely to commission those types of programmes but it does not stop anybody else from doing it as well.

**Q96 Baroness Howe of Idlicote:** What constitutes in your mind religious broadcasting? You say the history department have done something. Is that clocked up against the number of hours of religious broadcasting that Ofcom are assessing, for example?

**Q97 Mr Ahmed:** It can come from anywhere. It depends on whether or not the programmes fulfil the requirements Ofcom set in terms of what constitutes a religious programme. We exceed the hours that we are asked to do. They do not always come from my department. They can come from anywhere: current affairs, for instance, or history. Over the last week we have had a series of programmes about the culture of Islam. There were two programmes which came from the arts department, one on Tsuki music and one on art of Islam. One came from the history department on the issue of Moorish Islamic fervour in Spain. I provided a film about the history of Islam in Britain. All those programmes will effectively be given a religious tick by Ofcom but they can come from any Commissioning Department.

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** If I may pick up on Lord Peston's kind remark about my ragbag title, it is not a hindrance. It is a real asset because it enables me to put matters of faith and religion in other types of programming. I am, for example, the commissioner of *Tonight with Trevor McDonald*, which is 91 episodes of current affairs in peak, which is a huge commitment, three times greater than anything on BBC 1 in terms of current affairs in peak. We did a programme recently on the new proposed law on religious incitement. It gives you an idea that there is that cross-fertilisation, which I think is very important.

**Q98 Lord Peston:** Is there a strategist? Do I understand that you think the concept of a strategist is incompatible with the modern approach to broadcasting? Is that true of ITV as well? Who sits there taking an overall view saying, "Is the output as a whole the output we like to produce?" You seem to be saying no one does.

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** We do absolutely take an overview of what we should be doing.

**Q99 Lord Peston:** It is you?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** It is me. I look at the balance of our output. I have bosses; I am not suggesting I do this in isolation. I work with other departments within ITV. We have a very big research department, ratings departments, strategy departments, home affairs departments and we all look at the shape of programming. We also look at what the competition are doing. I think it is very important that our programming is complementary to what other programme makers are doing. I think it would be a poor world indeed if ITV were just a pale imitation of what the BBC were doing. If we talk a little more about what the BBC should be doing, I shall explain why ITV are doing what we are doing.

**Q100 Baroness Howe of Idlicote:** Looking at the Ofcom definition, it deals with programmes where matters of religion is a central subject or a significant part. Is that the right approach? Should it be amended in any way? Thinking about the debates on beliefs as opposed to religions aspect, would, say, a humanist programme fit into that category, taking an ethical view on certain issues? Would that count in your religious broadcasting?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** Absolutely. We take the view that religion should and does cover a broad base. It should reflect people's faith and those of no faith and our viewers' lives. Our religious output should go from traditional acts of worship like the celebration of the Muslim Festival of Eid that we have on Sunday nights on ITV through to the Anglican acts of worship we will have this year for Norwich Cathedral. It should also encompass matters of faith, spirit, moral and ethical dilemmas that touch people's daily lives. I think there is a danger that, in some cases, we have preserved religious broadcasting in aspic. Unless we move on and make it relevant and contemporary, there will be a problem.

**Q101 Baroness Howe of Idlicote:** Would you add to the Ofcom definition in any way?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** The Ofcom definition is a perfectly sensible, basic definition. Happily and rightly Ofcom in practice take a broad view of the way we apply that definition. As we said in our statement of policy, ITV are wholly behind that. We are trying to be very ecumenical and wide ranging in our approach. I think that is the only way we can get vibrant religious programming that connects with our viewers.

**Mr Ahmed:** We do cover all of these things. The big problem at Channel 4 is we are a publisher. We commission programmes. We would do a humanist programme if it was an excellent idea that would fit at eight o'clock in the schedule. If we want our programmes to be ghettoised at 11pm, 12.30pm or 10am on a Sunday morning, we will readily put programmes out that nobody will watch. We want our programmes to go out at 8pm and 9pm during the week. To do that, we have to make programmes which a significant proportion of people want to watch, write about and get excited about. That is the big question, whether it is about humanists, Muslims, Hindus or anybody. Is the idea a good one?

**Q102 Chairman:** It sounds from what you are saying -- correct me if I am wrong -- that you wait for companies to put ideas to you. I suppose in a strategic sense you might be commissioning the ideas and saying, "These are the areas we want to cover." Do you do it that way round?

**Mr Ahmed:** In the two and a half years I have been at Channel 4, half of the ideas I have commissioned have come from me. The biggest problem I have is I spend most of my time saying to various different publishing companies, "Please find me an idea for eight o'clock" and it has not happened. I have huge problems trying to find non-Abrahamic faith ideas which will work in prime time. We have some interesting projects in terms of atheism which will work at 8 or 9pm. I could fill my whole 50 or 60 hours a year with programmes about Christianity, Judaism, Islam and the Middle East.

**Q103 Lord Maxton:** Surely you could do something on George Bernard Shaw, a well known playwright? Do it as a double thing. A major part of it is his non-belief in God. Bertrand Russell is another. These are people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who were leading figures in their own right but also were non-believers. Therefore, as often as not, when we do get anything about people like that broadcasters tend to ignore completely that very important element of their lives and just deal with other aspects of their lives rather than the important bit, which is the religious bit.

**Mr Ahmed:** We have to look at what the Channel 4 audience expects and it would be a hard sell, I would imagine, to do a programme on George Bernard Shaw on Channel 4. It does not mean that other broadcasters could not find a place for it in their schedules.

**Q104 Bishop of Manchester:** We all recognise that broadcasting religion on television is not an easy thing to do, particularly in relation to worship, which is something that you said in your written submission from ITV. It would be helpful if we routed some of the comments that have been made in absolute figures of viewing. I know, for example, that ITV has somebody who does this. I am sure Channel 4 does as well. Could you give us an idea of the viewing figures that you have for religious programming on ITV and Channel 4?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** In preparation for this, I asked our ratings department to give me an update and I was asked by the clerk to have a look at how religious programmes compared to other programmes of different genres in the same slot. Broadly, the picture is not that encouraging at the moment, I am sad to report that to you. Generally, religious programmes do not perform to the slot average. They tend to perform below it. Another genre in the same slot would get a better rating. *My Favourite Hymns* that we were running up until Easter was averaging around 400,000 viewers and a five per cent share, which is three or four share points below the slot average.

**Q105 Chairman:** In terms of audience, that would be what?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** 400,000 viewers.

**Q106 Chairman:** The average would have been?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** A few hundred thousand more, up to a million. The Ragih Omaar programme which I am very proud of was the critical pick in *The Sun* which is rare for an ITV religious programme at about midweek. It had a tough slot because it was up against *Question Time* on Thursday. That did about 10 or 11 per cent and around 1.1 million, which was just below the slot average by a few hundred thousand. That shows that we can work harder and look at how we cross-fertilise between genres. Overall, the picture is not an optimistic one. I would also like to note that shares in multichannel homes, which are increasingly important, are further depressed and falling faster than terrestrial homes. There are some rare success stories. We produced a programme on *The Da Vinci Code* as Channel 4 have done and that did well. It got a 20 per cent share and a 16 per cent share in multichannel homes. That was almost up to the slot average.

**Q107 Chairman:** You would define that as religious broadcasting, would you?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** I thought it held a theological thread rather more strongly than the book it covered.

**Q108 Chairman:** What about Channel 4?

**Mr Ahmed:** In terms of 8pm on a Monday, the programmes tend to be averaging about 800,000 to 900,000 viewers which is the equivalent of what *Despatches* gets in the same slot. It is more than arts programming gets. The only programme in that slot on a Monday at 8pm which beats it is when *Starkey* is wheeled out and when *Time Team* is wheeled out. They get 1.4/1.5 million. We are quite proud of the fact that we can get 800,000 to 900,000 viewers in

that slot. When we put a film out at 9pm, it is not because we are expecting to get five or six million viewers like *Grand Designs* or *Jamie Oliver*. We are doing it because we are very proud of this programme. It is in our premium slot and we have pulled in audiences of about 1.5 million which is no embarrassment. The Saturday two hour slots that we have are regularly pulling in audiences of 1.4/1.5 million which is on equal weighting with history and the arts. We are not doing too badly. The viewing figures are not bad. Obviously, we do not necessarily base everything on viewing figures alone. It is also about impact. Does it get written about? Do people know that programme exists? We have a few more programmes coming out which we believe may do something. Religious programming has now become a success. On Christmas Day last year we had a two hour programme called *Who Wrote the Bible?* which had an audience of 900,000 viewers. For Channel 4, Christmas Day is a white flag day. People are generally watching BBC and ITV. 900,000 viewers for *Who Wrote the Bible?* was a run away success. 400,000 or 500,000 viewers is what we would normally get. The result of that is this year we have a two hour programme on Christmas Day called *Tsunami: Where Was God?* about the whole concept about what happens when something like the tsunami happens. What does it say about your faith in God? Already it has been decided that next Christmas we will have a two hour special on Christmas Day. With the success of religious programming on Christmas Day, Channel 4 has decided that we will give that day back to religion for once.

**Q109 Bishop of Manchester:** Also, there is a story teller's children's cartoon programme on the early Christian communities in Rome which got 49 per cent of children's viewing on a Saturday morning, which was nearly 40 per cent higher than the subsequent Disney cartoon. That shows that maybe a better picture of Rome was being presented than the BBC manages. In the light of those very helpful comments on statistics, there does seem to be a huge gap between what Channel 4 and the BBC do in terms of religious broadcasting and what ITV

seems to be managing. You have said, Dominic, that you want to have better quality and more impact. Is not the ITV situation almost beyond rescuing in terms of religious broadcasting? Why are you so far behind Channel 4 and the BBC?

*Mr Crossley-Holland:* In what way?

**Q110 Bishop of Manchester:** In terms of low viewing figures.

*Mr Crossley-Holland:* Our cumulative viewing figures would clearly be far higher than Channel 4's but it is very difficult for us to put them in the same slot. I reject that we are so far behind. We produce now the same number of hours as Channel 4 and Channel 5, which is 52 hours of religious broadcasting a year.

**Q111 Bishop of Manchester:** What I am trying to draw out of you is the creative ideas that you may have. You talk in very general terms about the intention and one applauds that but what are you actually hoping to come forward with from ITV which complements what the BBC and Channel 4 are doing?

*Mr Crossley-Holland:* We set out our stall quite clearly in our statement and review. We want to make more contemporary, relevant, accessible religious programmes. We want to make films. Aaqil talked about the tsunami. We made that programme a few months ago and I am very proud of it. We are doing a follow up looking at the London bombings, the effects and challenges they will have on people's faiths and those of no faith. There is a direct example of my pedigree from news and current affairs. I want to look at contemporary events and how they affect and influence people's faith and explore some contemporary events through people's faith, because I think that helps connect with the audience. I would also like to try and open up areas that have not been done. I want to do some high profile interviews, again to be more contemporary. We did that with Rowan Williams and we are planning more interviews with Melvyn Bragg. We are planning on starting a project with the Vatican. I

want to see more ecumenical, more relevant, more accessible religion. I think some of it has tended to be slightly fuddy-duddy and we are to blame for that.

**Q112 Bishop of Manchester:** ITV has provided sufficient money for you to do these things?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** Yes.

**Q113 Lord Peston:** You were talking about the numbers in the hundreds of thousands.

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** Sometimes a million or two.

**Q114 Lord Peston:** Which is probably more than the historical Jesus ever spoke to in the whole of his life but in terms of a big programme like *Jericho* last night or Linda la Plante, there you are measuring it in five millions or ten millions?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** *Trial and Retribution* or *Coronation Street* might be doing nine or ten million. For example, the *Tonight with Trevor McDonald* we did on the new proposed law on religious incitement got 3.5 to 4 million. That partly is by dint of us putting it out at peak. I would not say that was about religion; I would say that was current affairs. I think it is important to note that.

**Q115 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury:** We have been talking about Christianity and atheism. We are in a multicultural world. What about other religions? Do you think there is a proper balance? How do you decide what is a religion? For instance, we read a lot about Kaballah. How do you come to conclusions about what should be covered and what should not?

**Mr Ahmed:** If enough people think it is a religion it is probably good enough for me. I am not going to start making decisions on what constitutes a religion. If the idea is very good, we will do it. A programme about what the world needs is more atheism and less religion is a

good idea. In terms of the balance of different religions, I would suggest that without Channel 4's output we would be in a very difficult position because the BBC in particular have just given up in terms of programmes which reach out to people of different religions.

**Q116 Chairman:** What do you mean when you say "given up"? You actually mean that, do you?

**Mr Ahmed:** That is my belief. On a personal level, I think it is an absolute outrage that the Muslim community, whether it is two, three or four million, are licence fee payers; yet they do not have a programme of their own.

**Q117 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury:** Are you talking about all BBC?

**Mr Ahmed:** Across the BBC and particularly in television. Channel 4, a commercially funded broadcaster, finds it within its budget to give the Muslim community their own programme with *Sharia TV*. We will continue to do that. We are committed to a fourth series next year.

**Q118 Lord Maxton:** There was great play made by those of the religious faiths who were before us last week about the census numbers on religion, mainly on the question of 70 per cent. The Muslim population is two per cent. The Sikh population is less than one per cent. Those who profess to have no religion at all are 23 per cent. In Scotland it happens to be 28 per cent. Where is the balance? You have shown many more programmes about Islam and when I suggest you might do a programme on non-believers you dismiss it. You say you do not want to do it.

**Mr Ahmed:** We are. We have in production two projects about atheism. One of them looks at the fact that religion is the root of all evil.

**Chairman:** I think he was dismissing your idea, not the concept.

**Q119 Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen:** This draws me back to part of the ITV response to the inquiry and it jumped out at me. It is 4.3, a very bland statement. “The BBC has not put enough focus on religious programming ...”. Could you expand on that?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** I take my colleague, Aaqil Ahmed’s, view here. I started this session by talking about the BBC’s unique position. The BBC is given almost £3 billion-worth of licence fee. I think the BBC should be the leading PSB and fulfilling its mandate on religion. The BBC governors’ own report in January this year, looking back at what it was trying to do which was to put more landmark programmes on and more programmes in peak, found it had not done so in either case. For a purely commercial broadcaster like ITV, if you see us out here, Channel 4 in the middle and the BBC on the far side, to be doing more than the BBC last year when we had 102 hours -- I think BBC 1 had 87 hours -- seems to be rather the wrong way round. I would like to see the BBC put more programme in peak. I would like to see them doing more traditional acts of worship which are at the more commercially difficult end of the spectrum for us. I would like to see them taking more risks. I would like to see them making more landmark programmes. That is their duty and responsibility and they are not fulfilling that at the moment. Along with that, I think they could be and should be producing a more ecumenical range of programming.

**Q120 Chairman:** What do you think, Mr Ahmed?

**Mr Ahmed:** The BBC’s Christian worship output is excellent. We have to respect that. It is something that we do not get into. The real question is what kind of hours that have some kind of impact, what kind of programmes, do the BBC do for other faiths? That is the real problem. All these programmes we have just done on Islam on Channel 4 were not done for any particular reason. The last time the BBC did anything anywhere near that was when I was the executive producer at the BBC. That was a series on Islam and that was four years ago.

**Q121 Chairman:** They have not repeated that?

**Mr Ahmed:** Not that kind of impact or full coverage. Since then Channel 4 has done two seasons on Islam. There has been the odd, individual programme on the BBC 4 or BBC 2. Not many people know it even existed. Other faiths have a real issue with the programming that they are getting. Sometimes you have to look at what you are doing yourself. I am fully aware that for the last couple of years we have struggled to make programmes about non-Abrahamic faiths and people with no faith. We are trying to resolve that. Towards the end of this year and from next year onwards, we have programmes in the pipeline which will resolve those issues. I think the BBC are not doing that. For whatever reason, they have decided not to bother thinking about what other faiths need. I am sure there are arguments which will be wheeled out to say that they do, but the programmes do not illustrate that at all.

**Q122 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** You have both had very distinguished careers in news and current affairs with senior jobs. I am asking a question to try and judge the significance assigned within your respective cultures to religion. When you were given the jobs you each have respectively now, was that an exciting challenge in promotion or is it the equivalent of managing a power station in Siberia? How do you feel about it?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** I have a thrilling job. I regard it as one of the best jobs in British broadcasting. For me, jokes aside about its rather lengthy title, it is a wonderful mix. I think the mix is having the ability to cross-fertilise between genres which puts me in a very helpful position that has huge responsibility, so no, absolutely not. It is a broad remit, everything from *Tonight with Trevor McDonald* which is 92 episodes of current affairs in peak through to, if you look at the nearest competitor, *Real Story* on BBC 1, that is 30 episodes, to give you an idea of the scale; through to all our religious broadcasting, through to *The South Bank Show*, through to news specials. I commissioned the funeral coverage on ITV 1 which was scheduled through. I am very proud of that remit and absolutely it is an honour to do the job.

**Q123 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** Mr Ahmed, how do you feel about it in terms of a valued job within Channel 4?

**Mr Ahmed:** If you look at the annual report that came out last year, the front cover was from a religious programme, *Kabul, the City of Martyrs*. We were the only people in the whole world to make a documentary about the Shiia Festival, the first one to be held in Iraq post-Saddam. That is the respect that the job can be given within the channel. On a personal level when I was offered the job in the BBC to work in religion, to look at doing programming the Islam season, that was a dream job for me. From 11 September onwards, my background and Dominic's background in current affairs and news have been made even more relevant. To fully understand the world we live in you have to really understand the world of current affairs. For me, this has been a dream job. It is not going to be the job I will be in for the rest of my life but for the particular phase of the last four or five years it is the genre that I would do anything to stay in for the time being. It is a great area to be in.

**Q124 Chairman:** Do you find that your two employers also regard it in the same enthusiastic way that you do or do you think religion is a rather Cinderella department for you both?

**Mr Ahmed:** No. Speaking for Channel 4, I am very fortunate. When I first joined Mark Thomson and Tim Garden were my two bosses. They were replaced by Kevin Lygo. Initially, you think: oh, God, what is Kevin going to be like? Kevin is very knowledgeable about religion and spent many years as a trader in Islamic fine arts. I have been very fortunate to have a boss in the channel who understands the subject.

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** I would say the same but it is also a very tough, commercial environment and I need to fight my corner as every commissioner does in a commercial network.

**Q125 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** Let me ask you both about religion on the news because the religious faith groups who came and represented their wishes to us recently were very keen that religion was not just put in a separate compartment but that it ran through all programming and news and current affairs came up quite a lot. It seems to me, given that both of you have a news background, there are certain problems there because you have at least two requirements laid on you. One is the editorial one and news values, what is news, what represents the news that should be covered, what are the news values of what is passing across the news editor's desk. Then there are the public broadcaster requirements of balance, impartiality and fairness. Given that a lot of news is bad, how do you see any role for religion on the news over and above those two sets of requirements?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** It is always difficult because news values are such an amorphous thing to pin down. As you know, I spent the last 16 years in news and a while ago I used to edit *News at Ten* when it was at ten o'clock. You are right: it must be balanced; it must show due impartiality and in order to get a story on it needs to pass the news value test in the sense that during the day one whittles down a group of stories to a running order and getting the right light and shade, determining what stories get in is very difficult. One story that may make it on one day may not make it on another, depending upon the volume of news, quite frankly. I believe without exception on ITV, Channel 4 and the BBC our news services are amazingly sensitive to the context of these stories. I am sure we do not get it right all the time. I can put my hand up to many a mistake I have made but we are aware of the issues, sensitivities and problems. As we have become a more secular society and as there are fewer religious specialisms in broadcasters, one complaint that I hear regularly is that there are different repositories of religious knowledge, depending on where you go. That is a problem we need to be aware of and make sure we continually review. We need to make sure that we recruit, that our diversity policy reflect the society we report on. We need to make sure that

we continue to plug the gap on that lack of knowledge because it is a concern. There is no easy answer to this but I do not take a gloomy view. I think our news services do a rather good job.

**Q126 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** Do you think the editor of ITN or *Channel 4 News* ought to be thinking: it is time we had a religious item on the news? When these representatives come to us and say that there should be more religion on the news ----?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** It would be dangerous if we got into an area where we set quotas for what would make our news. One has to leave it up to these very seasoned professionals with huge amounts of experience. If you look at the team producing *Channel 4 News* or ITV News, they have covered conflicts in Northern Ireland, Chechnya, Palestine, the wider Middle East, Iraq, with underlying religious conflicts there for many a year and they have a huge amount of experience. They need of course to be made aware of religious stories. We need to make sure that the specialism is there, that stories that are getting onto the news diaries are making it onto those diaries and that communications happen between churches and news organisations. It would set a very dangerous precedent if one were to say that one must now go to a religious story. I think religious stories should go on merit.

**Q127 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** My ear twitched a little when you drew a distinction between programmes for which you would tick particular boxes and programmes you would want to make. I think it would help us to have a little reflection on how widely you can tick the boxes against the quota and what is left?

**Mr Ahmed:** We do not tick boxes for the sake of it.

**Q128 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** I am sure you do not but all the same are those criteria in the Ofcom definition? I suppose the sort of question that is still mysterious to me is are certain travelogues also religious programmes?

*Mr Ahmed:* Anything which looks at acts of worship or explores world faiths -- I am looking at the Ofcom definition -- religious history, personal belief systems etc. ----

**Q129 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** That is why I am asking you.

*Mr Ahmed:* There is a very wide brief but in terms of what I believe my output on Channel 4 is about we would not commission that programme in the first place. Our programming is very current and is obsessed with telling stories that I think matter. A few years ago the programmes that were going out at five or six o'clock on a Saturday afternoon were obsessed with people making journeys around the world. Although that would constitute a religious programme in terms of what Ofcom set out, it is not something that we would do because it would not get the slot or the impact that we require.

**Q130 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** Is Mr Portillo going to Compostela and ruminating on the way a religious programme?

*Mr Ahmed:* Yes.

**Q131 Bishop of Manchester:** Is it fair to see a distinction between religious broadcasting and religion in broadcasting? Some of the things that Lady O'Neill was talking about might come into the latter category. Taking that back to Lord Holme's point about the news, are you both satisfied that in your respective organisations, when complicated issues are reported on the news that involve religion, there is a sufficiently informed person available to be able to educate or aid those who are watching and listening to understand the complex background? Would such a person be within your departments or would they have some

links to those people if they were somewhere else? I am trying to work out where the joined up thinking is on this very wide religious matter within the whole field of your two broadcasting companies.

**Mr Ahmed:** In any subject, whether it be religion, crime, housing or whatever, you have to have knowledge about the subject. If you do not have that knowledge, then you seek it. As somebody who is a practising Muslim who has been to Mecca etc., I still have Islamic experts who give me information when we do *Sharia TV* or any kind of programme on Islam because I do not know that much. I was a crime producer for many years and I had to get that information from somewhere.

**Q132 Bishop of Manchester:** I am not asking that.

**Mr Ahmed:** I do not think you need to have people these people sitting in an office waiting to be wheeled out ---

**Q133 Bishop of Manchester:** It is not your programmes I am asking about; it is news coverage.

**Mr Ahmed:** On the news programmes you do not have to have somebody sitting in a newsroom who suddenly becomes a religious expert that you wheel out. When you need that information you find that information. I would say that in every newsroom around the country these people are experienced journalists who would know where to get that information from.

**Q134 Bishop of Manchester:** Is the same true in ITV?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** Yes, although I would add a couple of riders to that. One is that we employ independent companies and parts of ITV like Granada to make programmes and quite often, as you say, a non-specifically religious programme will contain religious content like

perhaps two examples, the now famous Hindu wedding in *Coronation Street* last year or the, I thought, very moving documentary we had on ITV a couple of weeks ago about the man with a seven-second memory. It was part of our *Real Life* series and his wife talked about her faith and how that helped carry her through an awfully difficult time. The companies involved in making those programmes would have taken specialist advice. The second rider, if I may, is that I am painfully aware of my shortcomings and what I have done is take advice and set up a little ecumenical panel of my own in ITV, with five different representatives to help me, give me advice and give me the odd boot actually and say “Do better” because it is impossible to be a repository of all that information and, as Aaqil said, to have people sitting around who are available for that, the economics just do not stack up.

**Chairman:** We are coming almost to the end. Lord Maxton and then Baroness Gibson.

**Q135 Lord Maxton:** Does that advice include a member of the Humanist Association?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** Not specifically but it would if it needed to. It does include somebody who is a non-believer, if you like.

**Q136 Lord Maxton:** Can I suggest to you in your news coverage, coming back to the points that have been made, that the religious differences that lie at the root of so many of the problems around the world are not in fact properly covered. Let me give you one example and that is Darfur. It is never seen as a religious divide but at the root of the famine taking place among those people in Darfur lie ethnic and religious division between peoples. It is very interesting to note - and I am sorry to have to say this - that when news coverage is done it always refers to those who are the attackers as “Arabs”, it never refers to them as “Muslims”, yet that is the divide as much as the ethnic one. Surely, that is the sort of coverage we ought to be getting - a much more deep-rooted look at exactly what causes some of the problems around the world?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** I am happy to pick that up if you like. I have to say that I am very proud of our news coverage. I think broadly it gets it right. I would also say - and it is stating the obvious - that in a 15 or 20-minute bulletin it is very difficult always to get all the context one wishes to get in; apologies where we do not. I think broadly we are getting it right. I accept sometimes some more religious context would be helpful, as it would on other subjects, but I do not think I accept that we are getting it wrong and getting the terminology wrong. We are very, very sensitive to it, we agonise over it, we take advice over it and broadly (with exceptions) I think we get it right.

**Q137 Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen:** Turning to digital switchover, do you think the provision of specifically religious programmes will be commercially viable after the switchover?

**Mr Ahmed:** If we are really honest with you, it is not commercially viable at the moment.

**Q138 Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen:** You indicated that earlier.

**Mr Ahmed:** It is not commercially viable now. Without any kind of provision or any kind of mechanism which will make it affordable for the channel to do this at a time when we know all the clichés about how hard it is going to be to get advertising in the post-switchover world, I think it is going to be very hard for Channel Four to continue with religious broadcasting with the current financial mechanism it has in place at the moment.

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** I think it is a tough one. It is clearly difficult to be a soothsayer but, as Ofcom have already recognised, public service broadcasting and religion are getting more difficult. Clearly it is a fast-moving commercial environment but it does seem pretty difficult now. I do not take quite such a pessimistic view. I think some religious programming will be viable. I think it will be a mixture between dedicated programming, I suspect, and religion in other genres, but very important too. I think actually there may be some audience demand

for it but how you define it I do not know. I detect a slight growth in the desire for explanation and for spirituality and faith, but how you define that in religious broadcasting is a separate question.

**Q139 Chairman:** We are next going to see the BBC and both of you have been quite critical of the BBC. Just give us the essence of your criticism?

**Mr Crossley-Holland:** I should just reiterate that I am a great admirer of a lot of what the BBC do. They are a tremendous programme provider on television and on radio and I would not want anything I say to get in the way of that statement, just to put that to one side. Having said that, I think the BBC Governors' own report at the beginning of the year did point up some omissions, if you like. I think the BBC should be producing more religious programming and faith-based programming in peak. It really does not produce any or a very negligible amount of programming on BBC One in peak. You should be able, if you like, to stumble across it and get it on BBC One in peak. I think it should be producing the acts of worship and continue to do so. I agree with Aaqil that it should also be being a little more ecumenical in its approach. I think it should be more transparent. As a licence payer rather than as a competitive controller I would like to know what the BBC are doing. I do not think it is really enough to know that they commit to 112 hours across BBC One and BBC Two. I would like to know what does that comprise. I think perhaps there is a case, as we say in our submission, for some sort of bill of services or charter of services or licence agreement where you could know what you are getting and hold them to account. Having said that, I think they produce some excellent programming that should, rightly, be praised.

**Mr Ahmed:** I said it before and I will repeat it again, the BBC's output in terms of Christian worship broadcasting is excellent. I spent two very happy years at the BBC Religious Department and the people who work there are very dedicated professionals who know their subject matter inside out. The problem is that obviously they know their subject matter being

Christian worship and Christian programming inside out. What I would like to see the BBC do is fully understand the diversity of faith, of communities, of beliefs and of ethnicity in this country and that reflected not just in their programming but possibly the big connection to that being reflected in their staffing as well. One of the reasons why the BBC possibly struggles with its multi-cultural religious output is because of the make-up of its workforce in terms of the Muslim community or the Sikh community and people of other faiths. I think that is going to be a huge issue for them from now on. Religious Christian output is fantastic but their other output really needs to be worked hard on. If it does not we are looking at a situation now where --- this Ramadan for instance in my household and every single Muslim household that I know they were watching the Islam Channel. When al-Jazeera in English language launches it is the end. There is a really serious question here. If you have got millions of Muslims who have decided that the BBC does nothing for them why should they pay the licence fee? It is a very serious question. You have the Asian community watching Asian channels, you have the Muslim community watching Muslim channels. What is the point of the licence fee? I am speaking as somebody who wants the licence fee to continue. For the licence fee to continue, this is just one example of how the BBC needs to get its act together to realise that turning its back on these communities for whatever commercial decision they have decided to do is actually suicide for the future.

**Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed. We are very grateful. It has been a very fascinating session and I am grateful for the time that you have spent and the care that you have taken in preparing your evidence. Thank you very much.

Witnesses: **Mr Alan Bookbinder**, Head of Religion and Ethics, and **Mr John Willis**, Director of Factual and Learning, BBC, examined.

**Q140 Chairman:** Welcome and thank you very much. You know the background, we have produced our first report and we are now looking, again against a bit of time pressure, at a number of areas which we really did not have time to go into in any depth and which we felt deserved looking at rather more closely, and religious broadcasting is obviously one of those. I think we are clear in the sense of what you put to us. We have read that and we know that so perhaps we could go straight into questions. Mr Bookbinder, I notice that when you joined the Religious Broadcasting Department it was promptly renamed the Religion and Ethics Department; discuss or perhaps explain!

**Mr Bookbinder:** Partly that was to recognise what was already happening, it had happened that the department was producing not only a substantial amount of programmes that were recognisably religious but a good number of programmes that were about ethics beyond the purely religious sphere. *The Moral Maze* was one of our programmes, for instance, and *Heart of the Matter* was one of our programmes. *Heaven and Earth*, our Sunday morning show, part of its regular output is an ethical debate. It was really recognising what was already there. It did not denote a new shift in policy.

**Q141 Chairman:** Does that mean that, in fact, your area of responsibility and interest would cover other non-religious bodies as well? Would you have a responsibility there, humanist for example?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Yes it would. Of course much of our programming is outside what I am responsible for. It deals with ethical issues. Most of the documentaries and most of the drama and most of the arts programme are looking at broader questions of meaning and purpose. Indeed, much of the great swathes of our science and history and arts programmes

start with a secular, humanist point of view in the sense of a non-divine point of view. On the specifics of representation of atheists and humanists, I am responsible for that within my ambit. So, for instance, the series on air at the moment, Jonathan Miller's *Short History of Disbelief*, which is running in peak time on BBC Two (which originated on BBC Four but is now on BBC Two) was made by an independent company but came through my department. The big debate we did three weeks ago with A C Grayling, a well-known atheist/humanist, was within *Heaven and Earth* and that was my responsibility. The atheist section on the BBC religious website, which has equal weight with all the other major religions, is my responsibility, too.

**Q142 Chairman:** I think we might come back to that point in a moment but you also have a responsibility for the diversity of faiths as well. We were just hearing evidence before you came that one or two of the people giving evidence were less than impressed with the way that you did that and though you were very strong as far as Christian broadcasting was concerned - in fact excellent – but you were not very good on other religions.

**Mr Bookbinder:** In fact, I was at the back and I must say ---

**Q143 Chairman:** --- Then you are in a good position to answer.

**Mr Bookbinder:** --- I was listening with mounting incredulity at the account of what we do. Certainly the bulk of our programming is centred on the Christian experience and I make no apology for that given the breakdown of the population and the traditions of this country but, goodness me, to say that we ignore other faiths seems to me just extraordinary. As Dominic and Aaqil were speaking I was just looking down the last few months of our output. We had *The Battle for Islam*, nine o'clock, BBC Two, 90 minutes, *The Islamic History of Europe*, a three-part series, Holocaust Memorial Day, 12 hours on television altogether, *Karma Lives*, last week's programme to mark Diwali, Jewish New Year, a special programme this year for

Vaisakhi, the Sikh festival, *The Story of God* is on, a new *Landmark* series on BBC One starting next month, three parts, peak time, not just looking at Christianity but Christianity as one small part of that and looking at the whole of mankind's encounter with the divine, *What the World Thinks of God*, a major BBC Two special that drew on different religions. That is before you look at our radio output or our on-line output. Again, I do not want to go through a great list because I think I have submitted some lists for you, but a glance at that will show you just how much we are catering for other religions.

**Q144 Chairman:** So you would obviously reject that criticism. Do you also reject the criticism that your programmes are not in peak times and that there is something rather lacking in the staffing balance, which was a point which was made?

**Mr Bookbinder:** On a lack of peak time programmes, to be frank with you, this comes a little bit rich from ITV who have just reduced their commitment from 104 hours to 52 hours none of which is in peak time, not a single minute. The programme which Dominic was very proud of *The Tsunami*, went out at 11 pm. However, let me concentrate on the BBC. As I said, a great list of programmes going out between seven pm and ten pm. *The Story of God* on BBC One, *Himalaya* on BBC One, *The Battle for Britain's Soul* on BBC Two, the *Monastery* series at nine pm, *Seaside Parish* at eight pm, the drama *Mr Harvey Lights a Candle* at ten pm. I do not want to go on and on but this list does go on and on.

**Q145 Chairman:** And staffing, you heard that point?

**Mr Bookbinder:** It is true that our representation in the department could be better. We have two or three Muslims, we have two people of Jewish background, we have one person of Hindu background. We have otherwise predominantly either Christian or no declared religion.

**Q146 Chairman:** How big is the department?

*Mr Bookbinder:* The department is about 100 people so I grant there is more that we can do there.

*Mr Willis:* Can I just add obviously sitting outside Alan's department there are other areas and in terms of reflecting diversity of ethnicity and faith, we have got a whole radio network. We have the Asian Network based in Leicester and in Birmingham, which obviously is a specialist narrowcaster, and in Birmingham within the broadband which I represent we have the Asian Programme Unit, which employs young Asian staff to make a whole range of programmes many of which have a faith dimension to them. We do not count them as religious, that is just the programmes made by that specialist department, but I would not want you to think that the only programmes we made which touched upon matters of faith came from Alan's department. We employ lots of people across a range of different genres and particularly, as I say, we have the Asian Network.

**Q147 Chairman:** Perhaps just before I ask Lord King, you would explain, you are the head of the department which incorporates religion and ethics.

*Mr Willis:* Yes I am called the Director of Factual and Learning programmes, which means I look after religious programmes but also science, history, gardening, great national events, documentaries, so it is a very broad range of programmes but religion is a very critical part of it.

**Q148 Lord King of Bridgwater:** You talked about the programmes you broadcast, interesting ones about religion, but you do not broadcast religious services for the Muslim community, do you? I do not see how you can but I see that you broadcast a number of Christian services. Is there any way in which you could actually do anything or is this bound to be left to separate radio channels perhaps or television?

**Mr Bookbinder:** You are right, we do broadcast a substantial number of Christian services around the calendar and around national events. The truth is that services in other religions are not really a spectacular event in the same way as Christian services are. There is no particular call. The Hindus are not saying to us, “Please film in our temples.” They are not saying, “Please film our worship,” nor is the Muslim community. What they are saying is, “Take us seriously and pay us more attention,” which from the programmes I have quoted I think we do. However, to transmit directly worship is not really something that is on anyone’s agenda.

**Q149 Lord King of Bridgwater:** You are talking just about television, what about radio?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Radio, equally, there is a great desire to understand what the worship means and what the significance of it is, and this we try to do in different ways, but the direct live transmission of it as it happens is not something that there is any really great call for.

**Q150 Lord King of Bridgwater:** It just seems to me that the point that was made that Muslims do not feel any great affinity with the BBC in that respect would be right. You cannot offer that to the house-bound Muslims who might get some form of direct (and I do not know what form it takes) worship from their own particular channel; is that right?

**Mr Bookbinder:** I am not aware of any live worship. Of course, there are programmes of discussion and debate that are specifically aimed at them, but then so there are on BBC radio and television. It is just the specifics.

**Q151 Lord King of Bridgwater:** Religious services for people of a particular faith, can they get that and on what channel do they get it? I am asking out of total ignorance.

**Mr Bookbinder:** They certainly do not get it on the BBC or any of the main broadcasters. I am not aware of any specialist services. You are talking about prayers from the Mosque transmitted directly into their homes?

**Q152 Lord King of Bridgwater:** Absolutely.

**Mr Bookbinder:** There may be some radio transmission and I can check back on that.

**Lord King of Bridgwater:** It is a very difficult thing to do. It would be wrong to say we do not provide any service for them because it seems to me that it is very difficult for you to do that.

**Q153 Bishop of Manchester:** As you said earlier yourself, the Ofcom allowance for ITV religious broadcasting to drop its hours has let them off the hook in one sense. The overall hours broadcast by the Religion and Ethics Department in the BBC, although it has gone up and down a bit, overall it has dropped since 2000. To what extent do you feel you are trying to hold on to something within the BBC? You said in the submission that religious broadcasting was a “litmus test” of how serious public service broadcasting is taken within the BBC. Is there a sense in which not you obviously but people within the BBC rather feel that religion and ethics is a bit of a Cinderella to be taken reasonably seriously but future opportunities for a great surge forward are pretty unlikely?

**Mr Bookbinder:** I do occasionally encounter a secular, metropolitan attitude that is rather resistant to religious programmes but that is really only very occasionally. Much more often, particularly as religion has marched up the political agenda in the last few years, there is much greater interest. Indeed, it is one of the paradoxes of my job that as religion has become more important it is more difficult for me to get programme commissions because there are so many other genres - notably current affairs, history and art - that have suddenly taken a greater interest in the subject and are putting in very compelling ideas, and bringing off very

nice programmes. Equally, the independent sector is now much more competitive in the area of religion. Religion actually matters to more producers because they can see opportunities, and so although in some areas our hours have declined very slightly that is more than compensated for by other areas. The numbers I think you are referring to refer to the output of the department, whereas there are many other departments who have their own accounting systems who are contributing religious programmes. So I would say the ground is now more fertile than it was, with the occasional exception.

**Q154 Chairman:** Mr Willis, would you agree with that? You have got an overall responsibility here. Is religion going up in the scale or going down?

*Mr Willis:* I think Alan's description was absolutely right. There is some resistance in some cases but since 9/11, frankly, this is very high up the agenda in all the BBC departments that I am responsible for including religion and ethics. I think there is an intense debate and discussion within the BBC about how to tell these stories as well as possible across different genres and I think we are knocking on a door that is much more open than it was before.

**Q155 Bishop of Manchester:** If I could just ask one more question. The door then being open, are you able to take the opportunities that that provides? One of the difficulties that has been put to us during the evidence is that audiences tend to drop for the many religious programmes. Presumably, therefore, if you can get people who are very creative and who can produce good programmes the viewing figures hopefully go in a different direction. Are you confident that there are out there the creative programme makers who are waiting to be commissioned to do the kind of programmes that you were talking about?

*Mr Willis:* Just taking a broader view, and Alan can talk a little bit about the individual audience figures. I think it is really important that the programmes are made not just by the Religion and Ethics Department but by the best writers, producers, documentary makers, who

inside the BBC and outside the BBC engage with this subject. Because it has become so relevant to the lives of everyone who travels on the Tube, for example, that is exactly what is happening. I think it is engaging some of the best people in British television. I think in Manchester, as Aaqil said, we have got a real world-class centre (Alan will blush) of knowledge, skill and experience in this area. When the Pope died, the coverage by the BBC in Manchester where there were outside broadcasts, obituaries and thoughtful radio pieces was absolutely immaculate and I was really pleased that we had a dedicated department, but you do not want to confine this subject matter to that. In terms of audiences, Alan will tell you that programmes like *Songs of Praise* do really, really well in their time slot, as does *Heaven and Earth*, so the audience is there.

**Mr Bookbinder:** I must say I did not share the pessimism of ITV and Channel Four about audiences for religion. The series *Monastery*, which went out earlier this year in a peak slot on BBC Two, had two and a half million viewers. That seems to me pretty good. It was a wonderful documentary series about the collision of the sacred and the secular and what happens when they meet. I was looking through some audience figures, having been asked by the Clerk to do so, and *Songs of Praise* over the last three weeks has had over three million viewers, way above the equivalent programmes on other channels. *Heaven and Earth* on a Sunday morning is averaging a million compared to half a million or so that the other channels are getting. These are not massive figures but in quite unattractive slots like ten o'clock Sunday morning, it shows there is an appetite there. What our programming is about is to try and pick that up and to some extent drive that.

**Q156 Lord King of Bridgwater:** What was *Songs of Praise* five years ago?

**Mr Bookbinder:** *Songs of Praise* five years ago would have averaged a little more than it does at the moment. I do not have the exact figures. It was slightly up but the overall trend is slightly down. I could get those figures for you if that would be helpful.

**Q157 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** I am sure you have had a chance to read the Ofcom religious programmes qualitative research study. I thought the findings, although it is only qualitative research and therefore perhaps not so statistically valid, were exceptionally interesting in that they reflect the tension in what people want in religious broadcasting. Clearly people want something different from what the religious faith groups want. The religious faith groups, understandably, want acts of worship and their religion accurately portrayed in action, but clearly the general public are hankering for words like contemplation, meditation, reflection, how an individual's faith affects their lives and culture, understanding religion in a larger geo-political context, in other words a whole set of questions which are not necessarily the issues which come top of the list with the individual faith groups who want a voice and hearing for their faiths. I am wondering how you try and balance that factor and what is clearly a wider appetite than simply portraying faiths at worship?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Certainly it is a difficult balance to get and we are striving to do both really. In terms of the provision for active believers I think there is no question that there is a great deal out there and at a time in the schedule when people are prepared to listen and to watch. For the broader community, I think you are right that this sense of spiritual searching or questing for meaning by people who maybe have lost their faith or whose faith has lapsed or who have never encountered faith before but still feel some kind of gap in their lives, that is certainly a very important area for the audience. To an extent *Heaven and Earth* on Sunday morning does this. It has a very broad brief to explore questions of meaning and purpose and to do it in an accessible way. Quite a lot of our observational documentaries in this area while they may feature religious figures --- and I mentioned *Monastery* but that featured a group of entirely secular people encountering the monks at Worth Abbey, and that, too, prompted a huge amount of precisely that kind of reflection and meditation that you are talking about. There are other examples. If you think of our long-running Sunday series *Something*

*Understood* its brief is precisely to do this, to prompt reflection through words and music, very often nothing to do with traditional religions but trying to bring people towards what they might see as deeper realities.

**Q158 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** There are only two programmes of your output which I have personally experienced, *Heaven and Earth* which, as someone who is condemned with a biological clock to wake up early on a Sunday morning, I must say I enjoy very much, and *Songs of Praise* I find an indispensable accompaniment to reading the newspaper. Here are two programmes that I personally have experienced. I think you were saying that *Heaven and Earth* for its slot early on a Sunday morning does well. I am afraid I did not catch the number.

**Mr Willis:** The average is around million.

**Mr Bookbinder:** It beats the opposition. It is the most successful programme across terrestrial television and satellite television at that time.

**Q159 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** What about *Songs of Praise*, what are the audiences for that and how does that compare with what is running on the opposition at that time on a Sunday evening?

**Mr Bookbinder:** I have those figures to hand. If I pluck one out of the air but it is fairly typical, last Sunday *Songs of Praise* had 3.1 million; ITV, 2.2; BBC Two, 1.5; Channel Four, 1.6; Channel Five, 1.5, so considerably ahead. As I look back, and I will not quote all the figures, over several weeks that is an average pattern.

**Q160 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** That gives you about a 30 per cent audience share.

**Mr Bookbinder:** It is in the 20s somewhere.

**Chairman:** We might look at these figures in some detail if we could have them. Lord King made that point.

**Q161 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury:** Returning to the Ofcom paper, there is also a suggestion in there that people want religious belief to be incorporated in general television a bit more rather than specific religious programmes. I wonder to what degree your department can effect that. Also, which is in a way related, you have been saying you are getting good figures despite the time slots, as I understood you. Do you press for specifically religious programmes to be put in more peak time?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Certainly we do and there is a lot of robust debate within the organisation about that. Scheduling, as I am sure you will understand, is highly competitive, and occasionally there are disappointments. Occasionally I feel that the schedulers find it all too easy to put us on late at night; it is like falling off an epilogue. However, a lot of the time, as I was saying before, we are in pretty good slots. I am very pleased to see *The Story of God* turn up at seven o'clock on BBC One. I have quoted a number of other really quite promising times. In that sense, given that there is always an essential tension and there is always tremendous competition, I think we do fairly well. As a head of department I would always want more programmes nearer peak, of course I would. There has been a debate about *Songs of Praise* which a year ago was beginning to wander around the schedules and be rather too regularly switched to BBC Two when there was a big sporting event or a live programme. That has changed now and *Songs of Praise* is regularly in a slot between five to six where, as I have been explaining, it gets a really quite substantial audience. It could be that if *Songs of Praise* were on later in the evening against tougher competition from drama and soaps et cetera, that it would do less well. In that case, finding a spot just off peak but very close to peak seems to work.

**Q162 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury:** Are you talking about religion in other types of programmes or what?

**Mr Bookbinder:** To an extent, in that quite frequently the department is asked for advice from current affairs or drama or history. We have some involvement in encouraging that but really the interest from other genres happens pretty much spontaneously. People - producers, directors, writers - have looked at the world as their material and they have decided that there are interesting stories to tell about religion. It was very interesting because the drama that went out at Easter *Mr Harvey Lights a Candle*, about the redemptive power of Christian faith, ten o'clock on BBC One by a Christian writer, is something that I think even two or three years ago would have been quite unlikely to happen. There it was again at the heart of the BBC.

**Q163 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury:** Is somebody keeping an eye on the balance? That again is the Christian faith, and in *Eastenders* we have Dot who is very Christian. Is there someone keeping an eye on it?

**Mr Bookbinder:** I have to report every six months not just on what my own department does but on the whole of the BBC's offerings on religion and as a six-monthly interval that is a quite a good corrective where it is needed because it means we can track just what we are doing about different religions. I have to say it is very rare that I look at that and I say, "Oh dear, we have not covered Islam this six months", or, "What on earth have we done around the Jewish community?" It tends to be that there is a pretty fair range there already. Occasionally there was a time I think a year ago when we realised that for one reason or another we had not marked Diwali for some years on television (although it is on radio and local television) and we put that right this year, so there is that kind of ability to correct.

**Mr Willis:** If I might just add, I think that Alan and his team is a sort of unpaid consultant for the whole BBC so it is a resource for everyone to use. We do actively try to encourage other

genres. Just a few weeks ago the Governors of the BBC organised a half-day seminar in which we talked about the role of religion in comedy, religion in drama and religion in documentaries and we hardly talked about what is being made in Alan's department. I think everyone is very attentive to the subject.

**Q164 Lord King of Bridgwater:** Does that six-monthly report go to the Governors.

**Mr Bookbinder:** It goes to the Governors' nominated accountability body the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC).

**Q165 Lord King of Bridgwater:** That does not include any Governors?

**Mr Bookbinder:** No but the Chairman of CRAC reports directly to the Governors.

**Q166 Lord Maxton:** It seems to me that you are desperately defending the position of the BBC in putting out its religious broadcasts. Some of us think that you do far too much and that you are very uncritical of the religious broadcasting you do. If we look at this great three-part programme *The Story of God*, of course the straight implication for someone like me is that you believe there is one. Some of us do not, so that is a starting point. You are also uncritical. Let me take the great example you gave of how wonderfully the BBC covered the death of the Pope. It was very uncritical. It never really did any analysis of the social conservatism and the impact of that on the African population and the AIDS epidemic sweeping through that continent, did it?

**Mr Bookbinder:** In the days after he died no, but look at the *Panorama* on the Vatican's policies on contraception in the third world. That was not soft on religion. Look at the recent *Panorama* on the Muslim Council. The Muslim Council did not find that soft. Look at over a long period ---

**Q167 Chairman:** ---The Vatican and contraception, that is the *Panorama* you are thinking of?

**Mr Bookbinder:** In fact there were two.

**Q168 Chairman:** Certainly I saw one and it was very good but just tell me this HIV/AIDS which Lord Maxton has just raised, millions of people have died, millions of people are going to die, and the Roman Catholic view on the use of condoms is regarded by many people as being an obstacle to progress. Would you consider it as part of the remit of your department to campaign for a change of policy in this area?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Not to campaign actively but certainly to scrutinise what is happening. A lot of what we do is affirming and celebrating religion but a significant portion is scrutinising and holding religion up to the light and examining the harm done in the name of religion. There is a significant amount of what we do that does that. Although we would not get behind a political campaign, we would very much want to shed light on what was happening there and leave the audience to come to their own conclusions.

**Q169 Lord Maxton:** Do you consider *Panorama* as a peak time programme? It used to be. It used to be a nine o'clock, one-hour programme, one evening a week; now it is half past ten, half an hour on a Sunday.

**Mr Bookbinder:** I would call it edge of peak at quarter past ten on a Sunday but it is getting substantial audiences there.

**Q170 Lord Maxton:** As big as *Songs of Praise*?

**Mr Willis:** Bigger than *Songs of Praise* and certainly --

**Mr Bookbinder:** But you know investigations of child sex abuse in the Catholic Church were absolutely in peak time and were carried in the main news and have featured regularly on the

*Today* programme. There has been a very steady flow of programmes about that, some from the department, some more broadly.

**Q171 Chairman:** Do you initiate those or are you reporting others who have brought the subject up?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Take our Radio Four Sunday morning programme called *Sunday*, which is a religious current affairs programme if you like, we have a team of journalists who originate their own stories and do their own reporting on that. We work occasionally with the *Today* programme as well if they are looking at the same thing, so absolutely. If you look at our features on our web site on these subjects they have been pretty hard-hitting. Although there is a great deal in our programming that is affirming religion, there is a very significant stream that is asking difficult questions.

**Q172 Lord Maxton:** Very significant? Give me the percentage of “significant” out of your total religious output which is critical?

**Mr Bookbinder:** It is hard for me to put a figure on it but it is pretty regular and indeed often we are criticised for misrepresenting religion.

**Mr Willis:** At the same time as that series is on starting in a couple of weeks is Jonathan Miller’s three-part series on atheism on BBC Two, more or less at the same time or the same part of the schedule.

**Q173 Lord Maxton:** Viewing figures for Jonathan Miller?

**Mr Willis:** That is its second transmission, it had already been on BBC Four, and on BBC Two it is getting 1.2 million, which is pretty respectable.

**Mr Bookbinder:** It is the same slot, it follows immediately, three weeks prior to that, *The Battle for Britain’s Soul*, a religious slot which was getting about the same figures.

**Q174 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** Could I ask you to turn to radio for a moment. I want to ask the question that of course everybody who wakes up with Radio Four wishes to ask, and it is not a question about *Prayer for the Day*, which frankly I do not always wake in time for, but *Thought for the Day*. You must have some formula that allocates *Thought for the Day* between different faiths and no faith. How does that work?

**Mr Bookbinder:** It is not an exact mathematical formula. In essence, we are trying to make sure that the six main world faiths have some representation on the programme. There is a predominance of Christian speakers from different denominations and then there is a smaller number of representatives from Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Judaism, so there is a spread. In fact, if you looked at the arithmetic there is an over-representation of the other faiths simply because if you did it by numbers the other faiths, frankly, would hardly ever get on.

**Q175 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** And we all enjoy Rabbi Blue so much!

**Mr Bookbinder:** So not an exact formula but an attempt to be broadly representative.

**Q176 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** Do you have a different sort of strategy or view of how religious broadcasting on radio works and whom it is for than you do of religious broadcasting on television?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Only insofar as the different radio networks speak to a slightly different audience. Most of our religious programming is on Radio Two or Radio Four and there is a little on Radio Three. We know quite a bit about the demographic profiles of those audiences. We know in quite a sophisticated way what groups of people are watching at what times of the day.

**Q177 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** And listening.

**Mr Bookbinder:** And listening, so it works very well to have Sunday on as early as seven am and *Sunday Worship* following it after the news soon after eight o'clock because we know the audience that enjoys those programmes, which tends to be over 50 ---

**Chairman:** Perhaps it might be an idea to adjourn for five minutes and we will vote and come back.

*The Committee suspended from 5.18 pm to 5.27 pm for a division in the House.*

**Chairman:** I am reluctant to start before we have the Bishop of Manchester with us but nevertheless I will! Baroness O'Neill?

**Q178 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** I thought, but may be it is just the opacity of some of the speakers, that you also have secular speakers on *Thought for the Day* from time to time, or am I wrong in that?

**Mr Bookbinder:** No, we do not, it is very much a slot reserved for the religious and spiritual and not secular.

**Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** It is multi-faith but not secular?

**Q179 Lord Maxton:** Why not?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Because the slot is designed precisely to be a moment for religious and spiritual reflection in the middle of an entirely secular programme. It is meant to contrast with the adversarial hurly-burly of the programme and to prompt reflection from that perspective.

**Q180 Lord Maxton:** Let me give you an example of taking it out of the hurly-burly. On the day on which the Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill was debated in the Lords there was a balanced debate on the *Today* programme balanced between Lord Joffe and a Bishop

but then *Thought for the Day* was a Chief Rabbi attacking the bill for three minutes without any contentious point being put to him that he might be wrong. Can that be correct?

**Mr Bookbinder:** I do remember the morning you are talking about and admittedly it was a close call and one that was quite a fine judgment. In the end our feeling was that on an issue like, that the religious voice had something to say, that this was not just, as it were, a regular public policy issue, this went to deep morality and to a deep sense of meaning and purpose which is what religion is about. So to prevent the Chief Rabbi speaking from a religious perspective on that would not have seemed the right thing to do. Remember the *Today* audience is very sophisticated, this is not *Newsround*, this is a very intelligent audience capable of making a judgment about where a speaker is coming from.

**Q181 Chairman:** Who makes the decision? Is it in the context of the programme itself. This discussion was obviously coming up. Who then made the decision that the Chief Rabbi should actually come in on this particular issue?

**Mr Bookbinder:** The way that *Thought for the Day* works is that the speakers are rota-ed some way ahead of time and the day before their spot comes up they have a discussion with the producer about what they might talk about. Usually they make their own choice with some guidance. They then write a script in conjunction with the producer and that is subject to our normal editorial guidelines. That then goes out live and uninterrupted - uninterrupted but not unmediated - in the programme, and in this case the producer who was on duty that day would have agreed with the Chief Rabbi that this was an issue that would benefit from some broader spiritual light being shed on it.

**Q182 Lord Maxton:** If you had a debate on some piece of scientific news, would it not benefit the country if you had a scientist giving three minutes' explanation of what that scientific point of view was?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Yes but that kind of thing goes on in the programme already.

**Q183 Lord Maxton:** No it does not.

**Mr Bookbinder:** It may not be a scientist speaking in an uninterrupted way ---

**Q184 Lord Maxton:** Why not?

**Mr Bookbinder:** --- but it is certainly a reporter interviewing a scientist. The *Today* programme ---

**Lord Maxton:** It is not the same thing at all.

**Q185 Lord Peston:** It is not the same thing. Sorry, if I could just come in on that. Many of us have thought a lot about Lord Joffe's Bill. If I had done three minutes on *Thought for the Day* (and I will tell you I am not a candidate at all) the main point I would have tried to get over is that this is a very deep moral or ethical issue and the thing that the listener most needs to understand is the depth of the problem and how reasonable people can differ on it. Even although I favour Lord Joffe's Bill, I am very worried at the same time. In other words, I am slightly on the margin. I think there is a broader question but this is the example we have got. If you are putting out vast amounts of dogmatic, religious stuff what you do not get is people putting out - and I think you ought to because that is your title - you ought to be having people saying these are difficult ethical issues. The one approach that is wrong is the dogmatic approach. That is why I think this particular programme was particularly inappropriate because it is not a dogmatic issue. I am sorry to press you on that, but since you are now in charge of ethics I would like to know what you do which gets over ethics as a regular thing rather than keep telling me about Jonathan Miller. The point about Jonathan Miller is that it is rare. That is the whole point about it. If it were on all the time you would be telling us about Jonathan Miller. You are telling me that because you do not do that most of the time.

**Mr Willis:** No, but I think ethics is part of the texture of a large number of documentaries and dramas. Lots of them have ethical or moral dilemmas that sit beneath them. I can think of a whole range of programmes.

**Q186 Lord Maxton:** It is always the religious people you go for to provide the ethics.

**Mr Willis:** It is not always the religious people we go to.

**Q187 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** They do not.

**Mr Bookbinder:** Very briefly, if I think of some of the key voices on the atheist/humanist side and how often they appear on programmes like *Heaven and Earth* - Richard Dawkins, Philip Pullman, Polly Toynbee - these are serious voices that take into account the depth of the dilemma of moral issues and they are in our output.

**Q188 Chairman:** We started all this on *Thought for the Day* and I am still a little unclear. I think I am clear now on the policy but I suppose the straight question is why cannot non-religious commentators contribute to *Thought for the Day*?

**Mr Bookbinder:** As I say, because the slot is designed to do something that humanists or atheists could not do which is to provide a spiritual perspective. That is what it is there for.

**Q189 Chairman:** I must say as a general listener that is not always my overwhelming response to *Thought for the Day*. It is a perfectly nice spot but it is a fairly general spot. I do not feel it is unbelievably spiritual in its nature.

**Mr Bookbinder:** But you will always find a scripture or theological reference in there ---

**Q190 Lord Maxton:** Somewhere

**Mr Bookbinder:** Somewhere.

**Lord Maxton:** It is difficult to find sometimes.

**Q191 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** I would have thought that a fair number of “thoughts for the day” - and I rather like it - have not come from adherents of any of the six faiths you named.

**Mr Bookbinder:** They are not of course all clerics; there are many lay people among them.

**Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** Not merely that.

**Chairman:** Baroness O'Neill is making the point that she did not think that that was the policy. In other words, if you listen as a general listener you are not entirely clear that this is such a spiritual spot as you actually seem to suggest.

**Q192 Lord Maxton:** Why do you not change the name to *Religious Spot for the Day* or *God Spot*?

**Mr Willis:** The audience have been listening to this spot for a very long time and it is a highly intelligent audience. They know what the perspective is and they know that it is a little pause for thought. I do not think it needs to be relabelled otherwise we would be calling *Horizon Scientific Horizon of the Week*.

**Chairman:** You do not need to rename *Horizon*. Can I bring in Lord Holmes.

**Q193 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** I do not think we quite got the mathematical formula between the six great religions, but in the part of it that is Christian is there a mathematical formula for the various subdivisions of Christianity, Catholics, Church of England, the Methodists and so on?

**Mr Bookbinder:** No, not a precise one. We aim to have roughly equal numbers of Anglicans and Catholics and then a smattering of others.

**Q194 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** Catholics versus non-Catholics?

**Mr Bookbinder:** No, Catholics and Anglicans roughly the same and then in addition to that a range of people Methodists, Baptists, whatever. Part of our criteria is the fluency and, frankly, the performance of speakers. We do not want to get locked into a formula where we have to have, for instance, a Baptist this week but we have not found someone who is ---

**Q195 Lord Holme of Cheltenham:** You report every six months. Over what period do you balance the ticket for *Thought for the Day*? You were telling us that you report on religious coverage every six months.

**Mr Bookbinder:** It is a fairly continuous process in that we have a rota of people and some of them are rested for periods or they are unavailable for periods, but it is between 30 and 35 people at any time. As someone steps down we would broadly be looking to replace like-for-like. We try to get a reasonable gender balance as well. It is quite a complicated picture and that is why I say there is no exact mathematical formula for any of these things.

**Chairman:** Before we move on has anyone else any questions on *Thought for the Day*?

**Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen:** I want to make a comment, Chairman, because I think what is coming over so far is that we are all totally opposed to *Thought for the Day*. I would like to say how much I enjoy it and please do not alter the format.

**Q196 Chairman:** I think we might move on.

**Mr Willis:** A free BBC pen is on its way to you!

**Q197 Lord Maxton:** I do not listen to it except of course when I am down here. I listen to *Good Morning Scotland* for my sins, whatever they might be. But there of course there was a move to take the religious spot, still called *Thought for the Day* I think, and put it in an earlier slot, and there was an outcry. Are you in charge of that at all?

**Mr Bookbinder:** BBC Scotland is not part of my remit. I am aware a little bit of what you are talking about.

**Lord Maxton:** If it is not, it does not matter.

**Chairman:** Let us move on. Baroness Howe?

**Q198 Baroness Howe of Idlicote:** Yes, I am another one who enjoys *Thought for the Day*. Having said that, maybe there is cause to look at something parallel for the other religions. For the moment there are other aspects that I would like very much to ask you about. My actual question about how you give proper balance to the different faiths has been more or less answered by you but I still want to ask a bit of a question around that because it seems to me from what you were saying that more and more programmes are featuring religion in one way or another and, as you say, it has come up the agenda of priority, and that is hardly surprising given the state of the world and the constant conflict and whether it is race or whether it is, in fact, religion what do we all need to understand more in this. So if you have got that situation, what I cannot quite appreciate from what you have said is why do you not count the areas in general information or whatever the programme is, history et cetera, is, which features a religious slot? Why do you not count that towards the religious total, as indeed quite clearly ITV are doing? That is one question. The second question is what I think has been shown very clearly is a need for more education. The point was made earlier on about spirituality and people needing to understand the lives around them through their feelings of belief or non-belief or their ethical or spiritual approach. Where do you fit in children in all this because nobody has even mentioned this subject? Are you preparing programmes for children at school because they are now coming into a world where they are seeing all this on television and being really very concerned about meaning and understanding. I am beginning to have some of my grandchildren of all different ages making comments, so what is your role there?

**Mr Bookbinder:** First on why we do not count programmes in other genres, this is simply because the way that the Governors regulate the different genres is that they require in our statement of programming promises, and it is annual thing, of certain numbers of hours from different genres, and if a programme is made by current affairs it can only be counted once. It is not allowed to be counted as a current affairs programme and a religious programme, and similarly in art. So I would love to be able to count this because it would save me having to explain this rather complicated system and also it would save some misunderstanding.

**Q199 Baroness Howe of Idlicote:** So what you are saying is there might be a case for this and maybe the Governors should look at it?

**Mr Bookbinder:** It is really a matter for the Governors but that is why it happens the way it does. On education, well, yes, there are a couple of things I can tell you about. The religious programmes that we make for schools are made by our department for the National Curriculum and those programmes now go directly to the schools for them to show (although they can be downloaded during the night). On children's programmes, well, there is a certain amount there. If your grandchildren are regular viewers of *Blue Peter*, for instance, they would find Blue Peter does quite regularly mark the festivals and go a little bit behind scenes of different religions. Recently even *The Tweenies* have been doing Easter and Passover, in their idiom obviously. There is a range there. *Grange Hill*, the children's drama, is well-known for some of its religious stories. I do not know if you remember the story of the Jewish boy coming up to his bar mitzvah. There is a threading of religion into these programmes.

**Q200 Baroness Howe of Idlicote:** Is it specific religion as opposed to the understanding of and respect for, using that word which is very much in vogue at the moment, other religions?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Insofar as *Blue Peter* is asking its audience to consider what is important about the Diwali celebrations last week, then I hope it is encouraging respect and tolerance and some sense of broader understanding. It chimes well with religion in the National Curriculum which certainly, compared to my day, is very rich and well thought through.

**Q201 Lord Peston:** I was going to ask about non-religious views and that was more or less the end of what we were discussing. Did I understand you to say that you had 100 people working for you?

**Mr Bookbinder:** Yes.

**Q202 Lord Peston:** It was almost *sotto voce* but I think you said you had about 100 people. I assume that would include people of all the main religions. Is that a criterion that you use?

**Mr Bookbinder:** As I was explaining before, I think there is definitely more work we can do in this because we only have a smattering of people from non-Christian religions. We have a large number of people who, frankly, I would not know what their faith was because we do not ask them specifically. We want to know that they take religion seriously and think it is interesting and are prepared to bring their creative skills to it, but we do not monitor specifically.

**Q203 Lord Peston:** I understand that and I think it would even be illegal in terms of employment law, but that is by the way. I must admit, and you can tell from the way I have approached this, that I am fairly critical of your department. I see what you do as pushing religion essentially. Apart from anything else, you have got to get slots for your output and it is a religious output. I am not clear given that your title is also Ethical who you have there, or several people perhaps, who is pushing non or anti-religion? Are there people who sit there

saying that really we have to get over much more a secular view of life, or does that happen elsewhere in the BBC?

**Mr Bookbinder:** You have to make a distinction between different parts of the output. If someone is working on *Sunday Worship* on Radio Four, for instance, yes, of course they are doing this from a Christian standpoint, and whereas I would not quite agree with pushing religion, certainly they are interested in communicating a kind of positive and affirming view of religion. Equally, if I think of my team on *Sunday* which goes out before *Sunday Worship* these are journalists, these are not Christian journalists or Muslim journalists; they are people who find in the world of religion interesting and challenging stories and, like most journalists, they are there to ask quite difficult questions. Whereas they are not pushing the anti-religious view, they are doing what all good journalists do, and that is they are looking for stories that shed light, that are new, that will be of interest to the public. I would say that if you are the producer of *The Moral Maze* then you are not a bit interested in religion. That is not your brief. You are interested in bringing stories of morality and public policy and exploring them from an ethical standpoint and doing it in an entertaining way. I do not accept your dichotomy between those who are pushing religion and those who are anti it. I think it is a slightly different way of looking at it.

**Q204 Lord Peston:** Yes but I do not know whether you saw the transcript of the evidence we got last week of the religious people we had here, but part of their evidence was that they wanted all BBC programmes to be permeated with a religious dimension. They were quite clear, that is what they wanted, and so on. What struck me is who in the BBC is going to say “No, that is the last thing we want”? In other words, viewed from the outside they seemed to think that the BBC and our society was overwhelmingly secular; I from the outside see it totally differently.

**Mr Willis:** It is called balance.

**Q205 Lord Peston:** I do not think there is one. The point I am trying to put to you is I cannot see the balance. I can see the religious pressure groups internally and externally but I do not see the secular.

**Mr Willis:** I do not think there is a religious pressure group internally. There are people of faith who work on certain programmes and, as Alan said, there are also people of scepticism and people of journalistic experience and background who ask questions.

**Chairman:** A last question from the Bishop of Manchester who has not had much of a run so far.

**Q206 Bishop of Manchester:** John Willis said earlier that it was a world-class department, I think that is how he described it, and certainly I know most of the people in the team there and they are an excellent group of people and, if I may say so, I know how much they appreciate your own thoughtful leadership of that team. However, do you feel, first of all, that if you are a world-class department that you are getting the kind of support and practical help, not least in terms of funding from the BBC, and, secondly, do you feel it has been a good or a bad thing to be separated from if you like the centre of power in London to have been in Manchester for these last few years?

**Mr Bookbinder:** I would say, just to take your second point first, that on balance moving a department from London to Manchester in isolation without moving also a good deal of the commissioning, scheduling and budgeting power has been something of a disadvantage. I note that in the much bigger moves that are mooted to Manchester it is not going to happen that way. The departments that are going to move are going to move with the key levers of power. They are going to be commissioning departments, they are going to be scheduling children's programmes, sport, new media, they are going to have a lot more control over their own destiny. Our story was a mixed one but I think what is to come will be a much more positive one. On the funding, again, rather like the scheduling, funding is terrifically

competitive. We have to punch our weight alongside all the other departments that are baying for more money. If you look at the figures comparatively I think we do not do too badly.

**Q207 Chairman:** How much is your funding?

*Mr Bookbinder:* The department has a budget of around £16 million a year in total but that covers radio and on-line and television as well. We also, especially for our BBC One Landmark, tend to win co-production money from outside bodies and to some extent from the United States. That helps us a fair bit. Would I like more money? Of course I would. Everything I have talked about really has been about balance and I think we have just about enough. We would always like more but I do not feel that we are a poor relation compared to other genres.

**Q208 Chairman:** £16 out of £3 billion does not sound that fantastic.

*Mr Bookbinder:* No, but you are talking about again, with respect, a relatively small number of hours compared to the whole and we are 100 people out of 24,000 or whatever. It is about congruent, if you like.

**Q209 Lord King of Bridgwater:** In co-production with the United States there are plenty of people from the religious field in the United States who would love to give you lots of money to make religious programmes. Do you reject a number of approaches that you get?

*Mr Bookbinder:* We tend to work with other broadcasters. We have a long-standing arrangement with the Discovery Channel and we do a lot of work together with them, also with the Public Broadcasting Channels. We do not tend to work with the more evangelical US organisations because we feel that that brings unwanted baggage with it. We need to maintain impartiality and this balance between celebration and scepticism.

**Q210 Chairman:** You have been very patient and it has been a bit disjointed, I am afraid, in the last part because of the division and everything, but thank you very much indeed for coming. We have enjoyed your evidence. Perhaps if we have got any other questions for either of you we could write to you?

*Mr Willis:* Please do.

**Chairman:** In the meantime, thank you very much indeed.