

## Religious Broadcasting in 'Post-Secular' Europe

We are living in interesting times. Times which show a huge upturn in religious prominence which is at odds with the perception that secularism is in charge of society. I want to examine the way this dissonance is affecting the place and understanding of religious broadcasting and how we, as religious broadcasters, should respond to it.

For so long we have been living under the spreading tide of secularism. In the years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, Europe was dominated by secularist ideas which predicted the inevitable withering away of religion under pressure from the enlightened forces of progress, education and scientific rationality. Many things have happened in recent decades to undermine these assumptions, not least the collapse of communism, the rise of Islam as a global force, the rapid growth of Christianity in the two-thirds world, and the tenacious persistence of the Christian church in Western society.

So despite the fact it was predicted that religion would disappear from public life, we are seeing a dramatic reappearance of religion taking place. The tide is turning. Some academics are now talking about how Religion has a renewed public profile in the world today. Assumptions about the privatisation of religion associated with western modernity are being revised. The rumour that God is dead has been somewhat exaggerated! A number of social scientists and cultural theorists have been employing terms like 're-enchantment', 're-sacralisation' some are even going as far as to use the phrase 'post secularism' to describe western culture since the mid 1990s.

"This phenomenon of the new visibility of religion in civil society represents one of the most significant social and intellectual paradigm shifts of our day." So say the academics at Manchester University. And it's clear then that the old secularist approach is driven by ideological assumptions which are not shared by the great mass of the British people at least.

Such a secular approach it seems has been prevalent in the media profession, especially television. A YouGov poll in 2005 showed that asked the question "Would you consider yourself to be religious?" 71% of general public said yes but only 21% of TV industry said yes.

The soil in which we have grown up as broadcasters has been watered by secularism which has of course had an impact on how religion has been perceived generally and religious broadcasting in particular. But in our brave new world of reawakened religiosity, post secular society if you like, we must be careful how we proceed.

As we embrace this positive future we need to be quite clear about what religious broadcasting is and what it isn't

I don't know how it is for you but 'Religion' is not a cool word in our country. It tends to summon up memories of dull sermons and dusty liturgies. It consistently comes last in all the lists of subjects in which people are supposed to be interested. So naturally we want to broaden the definition so that we are more appealing to the masses and less threatening with ugly religious dogma and cheesy enthusiasm.

Broadening its definition away from organised, traditional forms of religious practice is also tempting – but we should be wary about watering down our subject matter as mixing up the ideas behind the great faiths with the world of individual spiritualities is risky.

You can water something down until it stops tasting of anything, you can dilute a subject to the point where it loses its focus and its purpose and you can make it out that anything from skateboarding to hang-gliding is the same as religiousness but that road ends in potential confusion and blandness.

It's true that there are a large number of beliefs and spiritualities out there in the culture that do not come within the orbit of organised religion, and these certainly need to be explored and reflected in our

output. But, precisely because they are amorphous, private and highly individualistic, they do not join large numbers of people in common ritual, belief and practice. In this sense they are not public realities. They do not have the weight and social significance of organised religion.

To pretend that they do – and to accord them equal or even superior status and attention – does a grave disservice to the great world faiths that have stood the test of time and unite millions if not billions of people and exercise a profound role in shaping the lives of large sections of the public.

In terms of British society we are now clearly talking about a number of world religions which play a significant public role, and this has to be properly reflected in our output. But it must be acknowledged that the overwhelming religious tradition in the UK, with an unrivalled place in the daily life of the nation, continues to be Christianity, and the media has a special duty to recognise that fact.

We must also protect the subject of religion as a specialism. Religion is a specialist subject, covering all faiths as well as agnosticism and atheism, its every bit as academic as science and history and arts except that the risks are potentially higher.

The issues are too important, the stakeholders are too vocal, the feelings too sensitive, the passions too high and the consequences of error too great. Sure-footed editorial judgement is essential, and knowing who to ask, how to ask and what to ask, is indispensable.

Objective coverage of religious issues does not come from a secular mindset, nor does it come from a religious mindset it comes from informed individuals who know what they are talking about. So, supported by the new emergence of religion, at the heart of religious broadcasting there has to be a solid body of content and expertise that deals with the main religious traditions, celebrating them, exploring them, interrogating them, reflecting them – that is our foundation. And the beauty of the word “religion” is that it is big

enough to then cover all the individualistic beliefs, superstitions and vague spiritual longings that are undoubtedly out there.

So with our roots firmly embedded it is safe to broaden our definition of Religion somewhat.

**Religion is the very substance of life – why are we here at all? what is life for? Religion is about forgiveness, meaning, enduring the unendurable, starting again, its visceral, passionate and dangerous, its celebration, its stories of transformation, its violent and ....it's why the world's the way it is, it's the ground of our being and our ultimate concern.**

Are you interested in all that? – of course you are.

And in that broader definition rooted in the great faiths it transforms from being a duty broadcast to a consumer need, from a public service box ticking exercise to an audience grabbing proposition.

So in summary I believe we are in an exciting, new environment, arguably post secular, with the opportunity to capitalise on the new emergence of religion in the public sphere but as we proceed we need to be careful to hang on to the core definition of what religion is really about and absorb the new individualistic spiritual experience but not be too swayed by it..

I would now like to be specific to our current situation for a few minutes. Firstly the BBC takes its Religious Broadcasting very seriously and devotes a lot of time, money and attention to it. And I am proud to head up the in house team that are the preferred suppliers of religious content across all platforms. We have a department or studio as they like to call them these days of 130 ish people making some 430 hours of radio and at the moment 120 hours of TV. The TV hours will be reduced in the autumn when a new religious strand begins on BBC One, which is being made by two independent companies but we have lots of exciting multi-platform projects coming up and some major commissions.

Our radio story is one of unbridled success. Religious broadcasting in all its varieties works well on radio, we are not there making up the numbers. Our shows go out in prime slots and do fabulously well for their respective networks. Our Sunday morning show on Radio Two, the popular light entertainment station, attracts the third highest share on the network, some 3 million listeners. Over on the more serious Radio Four our topical Sunday magazine show is highly respected and the worship service that follows pulls in a million listeners. We do documentaries, cut and thrust debate, exploratory conversation, short-form talks in primetime secular shows – radio loves us.

TV loves us too but not quite in the same way. We have one of the longest running TV strands in the now 46 year old Songs of Praise which still pulls in between 2 and four million viewers. We mark all the big religious festivals through the year with special programming on BBC 1 And we have had some great successes with our documentary output recently and in particular we hit the mark with our history and immersive or more experiential programming. These are commissioned from us and Indies by the commissioner for religion music and arts. He has a small slate compared to other subject matter but commissions imaginatively. He secures prime-time slots for religious programmes of a creative kind and I admire him for that But we are always pressing for more and we are starting to pitch to new commissioners wanting to expand the range and style of our output.

People have a hunger to know more about religion. It is the key to understanding most areas of conflict and is becoming ever more important. The stories litter the newspapers But religion is also the key to understanding our history, culture and arts. The University of Leeds English department recently asked the Theology department to prepare a prima paper for its English undergraduates because they couldn't understand Shakespeare or Milton.

Obviously it's not just about understanding the past it is essential for dealing the world today – ignorance of religious nuance and religious history can be highly dangerous. Well, for example, if you don't

understand religious sensibilities you may end up with a world leader who foolishly describes his military campaign as a crusade – and think how daft that would be?

And the young want to know more too – A Level exam results in the UK in 2004 and again in 2005 showed secondary school pupils are abandoning sciences, modern languages and computing in favour of among other things – religious studies which showed the biggest increase of any subject up 13.8 percent in 2004 a trend that has continued and also has gone on since the turn of the millennium.

My challenge to all of us here is: There has never been a more important time for the media across Europe to enhance its religious and ethical output – we must not fail to respond.