



# Learning to Listen

Inquiry into Religious Literacy  
in Print and Broadcast Media



**A** ALL  
**P** PARTY  
**P** PARLIAMENTARY  
**G** GROUP

**Religion in the Media**

# ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON RELIGION IN THE MEDIA

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Learning to Listen: Final report of the APPG  
on Religion in the Media's Inquiry into Religious Literacy  
in Print and Broadcast Media

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# FOREWORD

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**Yasmin Qureshi MP, Chair**  
**Baroness Butler-Sloss, Co-Chair**

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We believe that religious literacy is essential for anyone who seeks to understand society today. A public conversation which treats religion as outdated and irrelevant to today's world will leave a growing number of our fellow citizens increasingly isolated and marginalised. In holding this Inquiry, we set out to explore how to encourage a media environment which is conducive to a rounded, informed public understanding of religion and the role religious literacy can play in achieving this end.

We would like to thank everyone who took part at each stage of the Inquiry process – in particular, all those individuals and organisations who provided thoughtful, nuanced and insightful written submissions and every panellist who gave up their time to join us and let us learn from their expertise. We hope that they feel the report accurately describes their views and that the recommendations we put forward are useful. We also thank every member of the APPG who joined the oral evidence sessions for their support and guidance.

The publication of this report has, unfortunately, been delayed due to Covid-19. The sharp rise in the number of coronavirus cases and the subsequent third national lockdown were unforeseen at the time we were concluding our deliberations late last year.

This document is primarily about, and is aimed primarily at, the media and the institutions which support it. We are lucky in this country to have a free media. However, that does not make it above reproach, nor does it make improvement impossible. It is worrying that we heard from many people – faith groups, academics and journalists – who believe that misrepresentation of religious people and beliefs has become widespread across our media. In this report, we have tried not to criticise individuals or even organisations. Instead, we have worked to understand the institutional factors which determine the shape and character of our media and to explore what tools – whether they be educational, legislative or regulatory – could help to foster a public debate about religion which is more informed and empathetic, rigorous and respectful.

To be clear, journalists must be able to question freely and criticise religious beliefs – such criticism may well be merited. Highlighting shortcomings and exposing hypocrisy is a vital feature of public interest journalism. When harm is justified by or linked to religious beliefs, it is essential that journalists are able to investigate and publicise malpractice. This should be welcomed unequivocally. However, it is our belief that this is done best from a position of knowledge and with a desire to understand alongside a willingness to condemn where necessary, rather than through gratuitous efforts to 'exceptionalise' faith groups.

Our title, 'Learning to Listen', is not just directed at the media. Faith groups have a responsibility to work to understand how best to tell their story and to hear and respond to the constraints faced by journalists and the demands of modern-day journalism. Every member of our society will benefit from listening more and better to their fellow citizens. There is a tendency in the media, raised at various points in our evidence sessions, to depict faith groups as either internally divided or as a source of conflict more widely. By their very nature, different religions and belief systems often make mutually exclusive, contrasting claims and statements – whether that is a claim to a given truth or advocacy for a desired moral code, there are clear areas where we might expect disagreement. Yet in the process of this Inquiry, we have seen the reality of religious organisations working together towards shared ends – indeed, the Officers of the group are an example of precisely that.

Today, the UK is characterised by an incredible variety of beliefs, histories and perspectives. Complete agreement and uniformity is neither possible nor desirable. To live together well, it is beholden upon all of us to learn to listen to our fellow citizens and to do so with respect and curiosity before we move to judgement. Learning not just what people think, but why they think it, is essential in bridging gaps and crossing social and cultural divides. This is the broadest suggestion we would like to make – that our society can be richer, more harmonious and more confident in itself if we all learn to listen and empathise with that which we do not believe or support. A media that is diverse, curious and sensitive to the enormous variety of beliefs in the UK today can play a key role in fostering that society and we hope that our recommendations are useful tools to achieve that end.



## METHODOLOGY

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Alongside desk-research, this Inquiry has involved three principal sources of evidence.

We have taken written submissions (hereafter, 'submissions') provided in response to a public call for written evidence advertised on our website and on our social media pages. The call for written evidence asked nine questions and can be found in Appendix 1. We received fifty-five written submissions.

The submissions came from a wide variety of respondents from academia (14 individuals alongside five collective submissions by academic groups), journalism (seven full-time practising journalists, three journalists who are also part-time academics), think tanks and faith groups. The breadth of knowledge and the diversity of perspectives among people and organisations who care deeply about the subject of our Inquiry was evident.

Many submissions came from individuals and organisations which defy singular categorisation; some of the most nuanced responses came from academics who also work as journalists. A variety of faith groups have recognised the vital importance of faith organisations engaging proactively with the media. Several excellent, detailed submissions came from specialist public affairs or communications departments created by faith organisations.

While the vast majority of submissions engaged directly with the questions set out in our call for written evidence, six respondents provided answers which engaged with the broad terms of the Inquiry rather than with the explicit questions asked. Of those responses which engaged directly with the written questions, 78% answered five or more. 18 submissions answered all nine of the questions in the call for written evidence. Four panellists from our oral evidence sessions also provided further evidence in written form to supplement or clarify their oral evidence.

We have also received written responses (hereafter, 'responses') from several organisations to whom we sent bespoke questions due to their significant roles in the media industry. Those organisations include broadcasters (C4, ITV, BBC and Sky), regulators (IPSO provided a full response, Ofcom a private note) and educators.

Finally, we held seven oral evidence sessions. These took place over Zoom through May and June. Although rearrangements due to the impact of Covid-19 disrupted the intended order, the sessions were broadly thematic, engaging with: academics; faith groups; specialists in knowledge dissemination and knowledge transfer (educators, regulators, think tanks); print media; and broadcast media. In total we heard from fifty-eight panellists, thirty of whom also provided a personal submission or represented a group who had provided a submission or response. All full list of panellists can be found in Appendix 2.



Oral Evidence Session attended by Anwar Akhtar, Director of Samosa Media, Anjum Peerbacos and Heena Khaled, Advancing Voices of Women Against Islamophobia (AVOW) and Jasveer Singh, Sikh Press Association. APPG members present: Bishop Nick Baines, Baroness Butler-Sloss, Yasmin Qureshi MP and Lisa Cameron. 14 May 2020



Oral evidence session attended by Rev'd Canon James Walters, Director, LSE Faith Centre, Elizabeth Oldfield, Director, Theos, Nick Spencer, Senior Fellow, Theos and Rt Rev'd Dr Helen-Ann Hartley, Bishop of Ripon, Chair, Sandford St Martin Trust. APPG members present: Bishop Nick Baines, Yasmin Qureshi MP and Lisa Cameron MP. 18 May 2020.



Oral evidence session attended by Lord Faulks, Chairman, IPSO, Ian Murray, Executive Director, Society of Editors and Imam Qari Asim, Deputy Chair, Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group. APPG members present: Yasmin Qureshi MP, Baroness Hussein-Ece, Lisa Cameron MP, Baroness Uddin, Baroness Butler-Sloss, Bishop Nick Baines. 18 May 2020



Oral evidence session attended by Fatima Salaria, Head of Specialist Factual, C4, Saba Zaman, Radio Producer, CTVC, Rosie Dawson, William Temple Foundation, APPG members present: Baroness Butler-Sloss, Lisa Cameron MP, Tan Dhesi MP, Yasmin Qureshi MP and Baroness Uddin. 26 June 2020





Oral evidence session attended by Professor Tony McEnery, Distinguished Professor of English Language and Linguistics, Lancaster University, Professor Elizabeth Poole, Professor of Media and Communications, Keele University, Dr Keith Kahn-Harris, Senior Lecturer at Leo Baeck College, Fellow of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research. APPG members present: Bishop Nick Baines, Yasmin Qureshi MP, Alex Sobel MP, Baroness Butler-Sloss, Baroness Uddin. 11 May 2020.



Oral evidence session attended by Will Gore, Head of partnerships, NCTJ, Professor Martin Conboy, Emeritus Professor of Journalism History, Sheffield University and Dr Paul Lashmar, Head of Department of Journalism, City University. APPG members present: Yasmin Qureshi MP, Lord Parekh, Baroness Butler-Sloss and Baroness Uddin. 21 May 2020.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Although the APPG's officers hold different political and religious views, we are united in believing that it is essential that the media provides a balanced portrayal of faith groups and an accurate reflection of the diversity of religious belief and practice in the UK. Currently, too many people feel that our print and broadcast media fail on both fronts. We wanted to understand why this is and held this Inquiry with a view to developing recommendations which could improve trust in the media and help foster a more religiously literate media environment.

We put out a public call for written evidence and held seven oral evidence sessions. At each stage, we sought to engage with a wide variety of perspectives to develop a full and rounded picture of the difficulties faced by journalists and media organisations as well as the perceived impact of religious illiteracy and misrepresentation on faith groups.

A central theme running through this report is the basic and fundamental conviction that journalists and programme-makers should aim to explore the "lived experience" of religion as well as its doctrinal, ritual and ceremonial elements. This view was supported across the full body of our submissions and by panellists from a variety of different faiths. Too often, religion and belief are reduced to a series of rules to be learnt and practices understood; it was instructive that the majority of responses from media organisations understood religious literacy only as a matter of acquiring knowledge. For the vast majority of people of faith, this is only one part of their religious lives. Focusing on practices and rituals fundamentally misses the lived experience of faith as something which informs every part of public and private life and acts as a source of motivation, strength and guidance to the majority of the world's inhabitants. Until this simple truth is understood, the media will continue to misrepresent and misunderstand religion.

## Findings

The precise meaning of religious literacy is contentious. We use the varied and extensive definitions provided in written submissions to highlight the different interpretations of this term and then explain our own, with particular reference to what being religiously literate means in terms of the media. It incorporates knowledge, competency in engaging with religious ideas and people and the respect which derives from viewing religion to be a valid source of beliefs and values.

In the panel sessions and written evidence which explored what effect religious illiteracy has on the media, several themes emerged. Alongside the consistent criticism of the frequency with which religion is reduced to its visual or liturgical facets, panellists highlighted sensationalisation, stereotyping, basic errors, a failure to represent diversity and the misleading use of representatives. Simply by understanding and avoiding these trends, journalists and media organisations would do a great deal to alleviate the charge of religious illiteracy which is often levelled against them. In doing so, they can significantly increase public understanding of religion and, in the case of public service broadcasters, more fully realise their ability to inform while they entertain.

Doing this is of real importance because, as we explore in Chapter 3, religious illiteracy in the media has a clear, negative effect on the wider public. It fosters ignorance, thereby reducing the quality of public debate, contributes to discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, and, just as importantly, reduces the public's trust in the media. This is deeply worrying because we believe that a free and diverse media is an essential part of any mature, healthy democracy.

## General steps

It is clear that there needs to be a formalised, coordinated approach to the education of journalists. Currently, it is perfectly possible for journalists to be fully qualified and professionally successful without ever engaging with religious literacy in a sustained or coordinated way. There is good work already being done by several organisations which can be built on. Religious literacy education could become a standardised part of ethics modules already run in journalism courses and then incorporated into professional qualifications. Once journalists are qualified, we recommend that religious literacy training should be formalised as a key part of a journalists' continuing professional development.

There are some wider, more general steps that can and should be taken. Where possible, journalists should aim to develop rounded, balanced depictions of religion and belief which avoid stereotyping and generalisation. A great deal can be achieved simply by building sufficient knowledge to avoid basic factual mistakes and misleading terminology. At the same time, we were repeatedly told of issues caused by a failure to recognise the many traditions within religions and we call on journalists to understand and explore the diversity of religious belief and practice. One key step would be for journalists and programme-makers to recognise that few speakers can "represent a faith" and work to find the best representative rather than the easiest or most controversial.

We are also clear that this is a two-way street and that faith groups have a key role to play in fostering religious literacy in the media. Stronger relationships and greater mutual understanding between religious groups and journalists can work to reduce animosity more widely; we were therefore encouraged to hear of new initiatives being developed to bridge gaps between faith organisations and media groups. Journalists should take advantage of the training opportunities and resources that religious organisations are making available at the same time as building and valuing internal specialisation. Faith groups must recognise that the difficulties faced by journalists are genuine and work to understand what makes a good story if they want their voices to be heard.

## Press

In both print and broadcast media, it was clear that many of the issues raised related to the rapidly changing media landscape. The growth of social media has fundamentally altered how people receive news and entertainment and this has, in turn, impacted the way that religion is represented and discussed.

Many local outlets have closed due to a loss of advertising revenue and the movement of their audience to online platforms. This loss of local, public interest reporting is deeply worrying. Not only does local journalism play an important social and democratic role, there is also evidence to suggest that it often represents religion and belief in a more nuanced, rounded way than the national press. On that basis, we support the findings of the Cairncross Review and urge the government to fully comply with its recommendations to support public-interest journalism.

The national press has also faced deep challenges caused by a steep decline in advertising revenue. This has led to a loss of specialised knowledge from many newsrooms. Because of this, there is a clear need for newspapers to develop networks of expertise and focused training to recover from that loss of in-house religious knowledge and specialism. More broadly, editors now have a new responsibility when all that many people see of whole stories is decontextualized headlines and pictures on social media. With this in mind, we call on newspapers to take greater care with the pictures and headlines they choose.

Alongside changes in output, evidence provided to us strongly argued for a coordinated effort to change the makeup of newsrooms. We heard powerful evidence that media organisations should ensure that diversity and inclusion strategies include a focus on the underrepresentation of people of faith. One useful step would be for newspapers to audit and publish their religion and belief workforce statistics to provide a better sense of who is working in the industry so that disparities can be addressed.

We also heard compelling evidence to suggest that, despite some positive changes made in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry, real and abiding issues with our regulatory system persist and prevent access to regulatory redress. We recommend that this is looked at again by the government, with a view to providing greater public confidence that the press is meaningfully, independently regulated. One specific comment worth making is that, in practice, the current regulatory model does little to prevent discrimination. It is up to the government and civil society more widely to decide whether they view this to be a problem; we think that it is, and feel that groups should be able to make complaints of discrimination to a press regulator.

## Broadcasting

The UK's broadcasting sector also faces significant challenges. Much like the press, reduced budgets and a change in focus has seen many broadcasters lose specialised religious journalists. This means that there is a clear need for broadcasters to engage with faith groups and specialist production companies to ensure that they have access to the specialist knowledge that has been lost with religious correspondents.

Broadcasters have developed significantly more robust, detailed data on diversity than the press. However, we believe that further steps should be taken by the government and broadcasters to provide more extensive information on diversity breakdowns in the industry. The government should consider providing Ofcom with more powers to collect information on diversity characteristics including religion and belief. In the meantime, broadcasters should work towards higher response rates so that a more accurate picture of broadcasting diversity can be developed. The Diamond system used to attain and compare data should also be amended urgently to include religion and belief.

It is clear that the vast majority of mainstream religious programming is now done by the BBC. Exactly how greater public understanding of religion can be achieved is clearly a source of debate; the evidence that we received suggested that there is an area of tension between increasing the quantity of religious programming and improving the wider normalisation of religion and belief across all programming. We think that nuanced and diverse religious broadcasting should be expected of all public service broadcasters and that both specific religious programming slots and the wider normalisation of faith have a key role to play.

The current religious programming hours required of the BBC should be protected in future reviews and all public service broadcasters should explore how they can use the full width of their output to increase religious literacy. A rapidly changing broadcasting environment means that serious questions have to be asked of policymakers as well as broadcasters about accurate representations of faith communities in specialist and general programming. Public service broadcasters play a central, vital role in representing faith. As they come under new budgetary and competitive pressures, it is important that they are protected and supported. One simple means of doing this would be for Parliament to pass legislation to expand the prominence regime so that PSB (Public Service Broadcast) content is prominently displayed whatever method viewers use to access content. We also heard compelling evidence that the remit of public service broadcasters should be redrafted to include the purpose of promoting religious literacy.

In this report, we explore, assess and advocate for a series of what we term 'proposed actions'. These actions are based on proposals made in both written and oral evidence; each, we believe, would significantly improve the public debate around religion by fostering a more religiously literate media. We have also extracted seven, central recommendations which we feel are particularly crucial if a more religiously literate media environment is to be fostered.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## GENERAL

Journalists and programme-makers should aim to explore the 'lived experience' of religion as well as its doctrinal, ritual and ceremonial elements.

Newspapers and broadcasters should audit and publish full accounts of their religion and belief workforce statistics to provide a better sense of who is working in the industry so that disparities can be addressed.

## EDUCATION

Religious literacy training should be formally incorporated into professional media qualifications and journalists' continuing professional development.

## PRESS

Newspapers should take greater care with the pictures and headlines they choose, recognising that this is all the majority of viewers will see.

Independent regulation should be looked at again by policymakers because there remain significant issues around access to regulatory redress. In particular, groups should be able to make complaints on the grounds of discrimination.

## BROADCASTING

The current religious programming hours required of the BBC should be protected in future reviews.

The remit of public service broadcasters should be redrafted to include the purpose of promoting religious literacy and all public service broadcasters should explore how they can use the full width of their output to increase religious literacy.

## INTRODUCTION

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Religion continues to play a central role in the lives of millions of people in the UK and the lives of billions across the world. Despite this, public discourse is characterised by 'a lamentable quality of conversation about religion just as we need it most'.<sup>1</sup> This report sets out to improve the quality of that conversation by focusing on one hugely significant part of the public sphere - the media.

Between 2013 and 2015, our co-chair, Baroness Butler-Sloss, sat as Chair of the Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life. The Commission's report, entitled 'Living with Difference: community, diversity and the common good' (hereafter, the CORAB report) sought to explore the place and role of religion and belief in the UK across a variety of thematic areas including 'education', 'media', 'dialogue', 'action' and 'law'. It then made practical recommendations in each area. This Inquiry does not seek to depart from the intent or focus of that piece of work. Instead, it starts from an awareness that, while the CORAB report led to changes in a number of other sectors, the media environment remains broadly the same.

Five years on from that report, too many people continue to view the media as indifferent towards religion and belief at best and actively biased against people of faith at worst. As detailed in this report, there is evidence to support this perception. However, a key point to make is that the perception alone is profoundly troubling, irrespective of its validity. The media is the mechanism through which public opinion is shaped and society is reflected back upon itself. A free and diverse press is a vital plank of any healthy, democratic society. So too is a flourishing broadcasting ecology, an area in which the UK has a strong claim to have been a world leader since the development of radio and then television. If a large portion of society feels entirely misrepresented by the things they read and the content they watch, they will switch off and find new channels for news and entertainment. For those of us who believe in the importance of shared values and social cohesion, developed through the mainstream media, this is a profoundly worrying prospect.

We recognise that the media landscape is changing rapidly. Social media has transformed the ways in which we find and consume news and all traditional news media face an existential threat. Those threats are discussed in relation to print and broadcast media in Chapters 6 and 7. It is clear that the impact of social media on religious literacy is in need of specific and directed attention and the APPG plans to explore this area in its future work. However, in the phrasing of our call for evidence and in the body of this report, we chose to exclude digital media from specific analysis. We feel it self-evident that print and broadcast media continue to have a sufficiently material effect on our national culture that they deserve specific attention. Both will have to adapt significantly over the coming years to new ways of working but they continue to set the national agenda.

There are a number of key findings in this report. The first is that a great deal of illiteracy stems from a narrow understanding of religion. Religion and belief are seen far too often as relating only to propositional beliefs, historical events and rituals carried out today. While faith involves all of these things, to focus on these alone is deeply distortive as this approach fails to recognise, or even show curiosity about, the lived experience of religion today. This has an effect on the media and, in turn, on society. In the media, it creates an artificial binary between 'religion stories' and the rest. Religion in these terms is something that happens elsewhere to be discussed on occasions when something explicitly 'religious' happens; it is sealed, in the words of several panellists, in a 'box'. The effect on society is even greater. It has become trite to state that as a nation we are becoming increasingly divided by a failure of different groups to understand each other's perspectives. Failing to understand the deeply held religious beliefs of those around us accelerates that process.

Several submissions highlighted the vital importance of the media being free to criticise beliefs. To be clear from the outset; we entirely agree. Around the world, important pieces of journalism have exposed malpractice by people of faith and, like all public interest journalism, this is to be commended. However, we believe that this is fundamentally different from the view that religious beliefs are inherently invalid or irrelevant in the modern world. Nothing could be further from the truth; religion matters in our world, in our society and, importantly, to those for whom it is a fundamental part of their identity.

This report aims to explore the causes of religious illiteracy in the media and to show the impact it has on society. It then goes on to make a series of recommendations which, we hope, can foster a more vigorous religiously literate public discussion.

<sup>1</sup> Dinham, A., Francis, M. eds. 2015. Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice. Bristol: Policy Press. p.17

## Chapter 1

# RELIGION, MEDIA, LITERACY

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This chapter provides a brief discussion of media and religion in the UK today and attempts to define some of the key terms used in this report.

### Media

We recognise that the media landscape is changing rapidly. Social media has transformed the ways in which we find and consume news and traditional media face an existential threat. Those threats are discussed in relation to print and broadcast media in Chapters 6 and 7. Digital media, and the effect they have on religion and belief, is clearly in need of specific and directed attention and the group plans to explore this area in its future work. However, in the phrasing of our call for evidence and in the body of this report, we chose to exclude digital media from specific analysis.

Both print and broadcast media will have to adapt significantly over the coming years to new ways of working but they continue to set the national agenda. Moreover, by virtue of both media having a long history and a clearly defined cultural and social role, print and broadcast media share a number of traits which make for fruitful comparison.

This report will be specific where possible. Where evidence has been provided which relates directly to the print or broadcast media, that will be made clear. Where submissions and panellists provide opinions about 'the media' more generally, this is the term that we will use.

### Legal understandings of 'religion and belief'

Throughout this report, we use the word 'religion'. We acknowledge that this is a contested and complicated term. Religious freedom has been protected by law in the UK since The Human Rights Act 1998. This act gave effect to the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects peoples' right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 9).<sup>2</sup> The Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 protects people from religious discrimination at work. These regulations defined the terms as "any religion, religious belief, or similar philosophical belief".<sup>3</sup>

Religion and belief are now protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. The Act does not define "religion" but case law has established that religions are distinguishable by defined structures/belief systems. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has produced a guide to the law on religion and belief which explains that, although the Equality Act does not define religion, 'The courts have interpreted this as including any religion of sufficient seriousness which has a clear structure and belief system'.<sup>4</sup> The Act also says that 'religion includes... a lack of religion'. This means that people without a religion, such as atheists, humanists and secularists, are protected under the Act.

This is an important point. An understanding of religion – and therefore, religious literacy – will be worse than useless if it fails to recognise the reality that a large proportion of UK society (nearing 50%) now describes themselves as 'non-religious' and that the beliefs within that term are complex and sincerely held.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Act 1998. Article 9. [Accessed 19.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1/part/1/chapter/8>

<sup>3</sup> Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003. Part 1, Regulation 2. [Accessed 18.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2003/1660/regulation/2/made>

<sup>4</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission. 2016. Religion or Belief: A Guide to the Law. [Online]. November 2016. [Accessed 19.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/religion-or-belief-guide-to-the-law.pdf>



## Religion in the world today

In the late 20th and early 21st century, many believed that religion was in a state of irreversible decline and that it would become ever less influential and significant. This argument is often described as “the secularisation thesis”. The thesis held that as countries around the world industrialised and modernised they would reject the belief systems of the past and embrace secularity. However, while there has been a steep decline in traditional adherence in the UK, it is now clear that many of those assumptions were wrong.

“There is this I would like to call a misconception [...] often here in Europe and in North America. That the world is, in fact, not very religious anymore, that modernism has made us a much more secular society. And for the majority of the world’s population, that simply isn’t true.”<sup>5</sup>

Determining and comparing the number of adherents of any given faith is a difficult and necessarily reductive process. Different methods produce different results according to how the question is asked and what options are provided – for instance, how someone raised within a particular tradition but who is now non-practicing defines themselves will often depend on the phrasing of the question. While we recognise these difficulties, a number of studies have provided useful accounts of how religious adherence and practice is changing in the UK and across the world.

The ONS has used census data to show that in the UK, traditional religious adherence has declined significantly; ‘More than 33 million people identified as Christian in 2011, and this was 59% of the population at this time. However, the number of people identifying as Christian has declined since 2001, when there were around 37 million Christians, representing 72% of the population.’<sup>6</sup> However, this decline in Christian belief was not matched by other faiths. The 2nd largest religious group is Muslims, a group whose size rose from 1.5 million (3%) in 2001 to 2.7 million people (4.8%) in 2011.<sup>7</sup> All other religious groups also saw an increase between 2001 and 2011. The next census in 2021 will no doubt reveal further changes in majority and minority religious groups in the UK.

The 2019 British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey found 38% of respondents were Christian while 52% did not regard themselves as belonging to any religion.<sup>8</sup> It is clear then that, while traditional Christian worship has steadily declined, well over a third still describe themselves as Christian and nearly half affiliate to a religion. These proportions are far too large for religion to be dismissed as a purely minority interest or for the UK to be simplistically described as a secular country.

Indeed, the story is not one of straightforward decline. The BSA study found ‘There is also an element of polarisation; as it becomes more socially acceptable to be non-religious, so the centre-ground disappears. Over the past two decades the proportion saying they are “very or extremely non-religious” has more than doubled (from 14% to 33%), while, at the same time, the proportion saying they are “very or extremely religious” has remained stable.’<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Anna McNamee, Sandford St Martin Trust, [21/05/2020].

<sup>6</sup> Office for National Statistics. 2015. How Religion has Changed in England and Wales. [Online]. 4 June 2015. [Accessed 20.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/howreligionhaschangedinenglandand-wales/2015-06-04>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

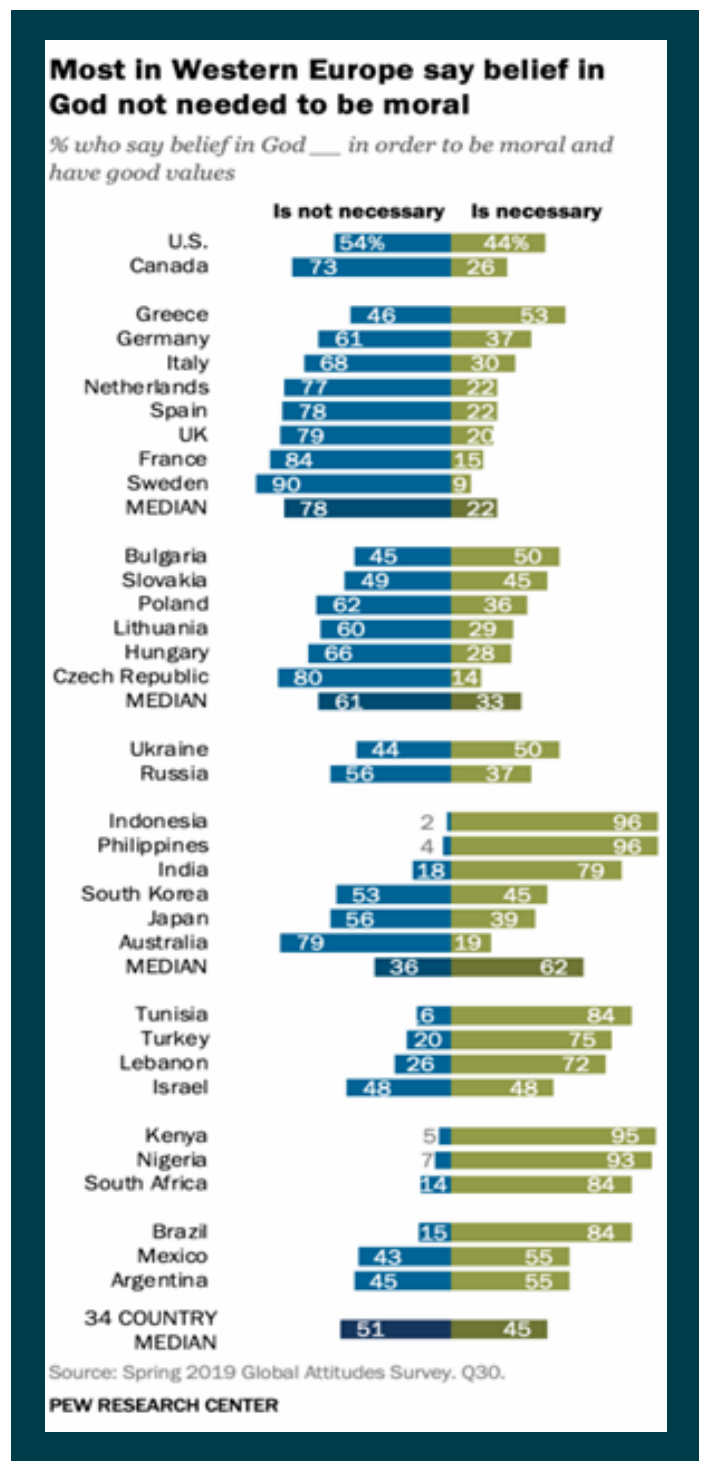
<sup>8</sup> Curtice, J., Clery, E., Perry, J., Phillips M. and Rahim, N. eds. 2019. British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report. London: The National Centre for Social Research. p4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p5.

Lazy narratives about religious adherence need to be questioned. A recent study by Theos did just this.<sup>10</sup> They found that while London is often perceived to be more liberal and more secular than the rest of the UK, the city's inhabitants 'are not just more likely to belong to a particular religion, but to actively participate by, for instance, attending services on a regular basis'.<sup>11</sup> They concluded that 'London's religious microclimate is paradoxical: a secular, liberal and cosmopolitan city in which religion is becoming more visible and significant'.<sup>12</sup>

If understanding religion is important when understanding the UK, it is just as vital if not more so when looking to the wider world. Figures published by the Pew Research Centre in 2017 found that 84% of the world's population identifies with a religious group.<sup>13</sup> Members of this demographic were disproportionately younger and more likely to have more children than individuals without a religious affiliation. The study found that Christians were the largest group (2.3 billion adherents, 31.2% of the world's population), followed by Muslims (1.8 billion, 24.1%), Hindus (1.1 billion, 15.1%) and Buddhists (500 million, 6.9%). Based on population trends, a 2015 report by Pew estimated that in 2050, 'Atheists, agnostics and other people who do not affiliate with any religion – though increasing in countries such as the United States and France – will make up a declining share of the world's total population'.<sup>14</sup>

A later Pew Research study<sup>15</sup> done using the 2019 Global Attitudes Survey finds a wide variance in the percentage of people in each country surveyed (34 in total, including countries from every inhabited continent) who believe that 'belief in God is necessary to have good values'. On average, 51% surveyed agree with this statement compared to 45% who disagree. 61% agree with the statement 'God plays an important role in my life' and 53% stated that 'prayer plays an important role in my life'.



<sup>10</sup> Bickley, P., Mladin, N. 2020. Religious London. Theos. [Online]. [Accessed 01.07 2020]. Available from: <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2019/02/19/religious-london>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hackett, C., McClendon, D. 2017. World's largest religion by population is still Christianity. Pew Research. [Online]. 5 April 2017. [Accessed 13.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-butthey-are-declining-in-europe/>

<sup>14</sup> Hackett, C., et al. 2015. The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050. Pew Research Centre. [Online]. [Accessed 15.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

<sup>15</sup> Tamir, C., Connaughton, Aidan, Salazar, A.M. 2020. The Global God Divide. Pew Research. [Online]. July 20 2002. [Accessed 29.08.2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/20/the-global-god-divide>

There are divergent trends around the world and in Europe. Since 1991, the proportion of people who say God is important to them has fallen in Western Europe while increasing in Russia and Ukraine.

We draw attention to these reports because too many people continue to view religion as a thing of the past. In 'Religion and change in modern Britain', Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto describe a characteristic assumption of the post-war period: that religion has become a 'purely private matter with no public or political significance'.<sup>16</sup>

This assumption has proved to be incorrect. Religion continues to play a rich and diverse role in everyday life around the world. One submission quoted the late AA Gill's statement, 'Religion has never been more tangible in world affairs and public life. Not having more sensible and serious religious broadcasting isn't modern, it's a failure to face modernity'.<sup>17</sup> This is just as true today as when he said it, if not more so.

## Religious Literacy

Religious literacy is a term which has achieved significant cultural currency. Although it has been a source of controversy, for want of a better phrase we will use it. An excellent submission by Dr Lois Lee<sup>18</sup> suggested a focus instead on 'worldview literacy'. This term aims to reflect demographic shifts away from 'traditional religion' and recognise the diversity of perspectives within the constituency which ticks the 'no-religion' box. Although those who identify as 'nonreligious' are often simplistically represented by the most voluble atheists, this by no means represents the wider community. She compellingly argues that this is an area deserving more study.

However, we have settled on 'religious literacy' for three reasons. Pragmatically, this term is already in widespread use. Although it is controversial and its precise focus is disputed, it quickly situates a reader or audience in a way that 'worldview literacy' does not. Secondly, what Dr Lee terms as 'traditional religions' are sometimes poorly understood. While she argues that 'knowledge of religious worldviews will continue to be a priority'<sup>19</sup> because of the large proportion of the country which is religious, we heard strong evidence over the course of our Inquiry that knowledge of religious worldviews is already worryingly limited in many parts of society. Finally, religious literacy as defined below should be a sufficiently broad concept to incorporate an understanding of the new perspectives that are increasingly replacing traditional religion in some parts of the world. As noted by Dinham and Francis, 'religious literacy need not (and we would argue should not) exclude non-religious identities which are equally complex, but we focus on religion because there is a need for a far more nuanced understanding of the real religious landscape than has usually been the case'.<sup>20</sup>

We define it as:

Religious literacy involves a broad, balanced knowledge of religions in the world today including a basic understanding of their histories, central beliefs, and practices, and the many ways in which religion intersects with wider society and influences everyday life. It also describes the ability to engage successfully with religious ideas and navigate the cultural codes which define both particular religions and the wider conceptual categories of religion and belief.

In practice, we think that religious literacy also incorporates respect for religion and belief as a valid source of guidance and knowledge to the majority of the world's inhabitants.

<sup>16</sup> Woodhead, L., Catto, R. 2012. Religion and Change in Modern Britain. Abingdon: Routledge. p2. This study was brought to our attention in written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Culham St Gabriel's Trust, [21/04/2020].

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Sandford St Martin Trust on 24/04/2020

<sup>18</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Lois Lee, University of Kent, Submitted on 24/04/2020

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Dinham, A., Francis, M. eds. 2015. Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice. Bristol: Policy Press. p11.



## Previous attempts to define religious literacy

'What do you understand by the term religious literacy?' was the first question in our call for written evidence. It was answered by three-quarters of our written submissions and the practical implications of the term were raised in the course of the oral evidence sessions. Religious literacy is a competency; it requires sufficient knowledge to appreciate what religions mean to people who believe them and the ability to engage successfully with religious concepts and people. Beyond this, however, there is significant disagreement over what should be emphasised and how this competency can be put into practice.

Several submissions from academics highlighted the growing body of literature which centres on this term. This debate can be interminable, often returning to questions around the nature of religion and the inherent limitations of the term. However, the submissions provided to us showed a series of consistent threads that are worth exploring.

A study written for the Council for Europe found that 'the term "religious literacy" is used in the literature in at least three quite different ways, related to: Learning about religions, including developing an understanding of religious uses of language in an open and impartial way; Studying religions and making judgments about them using a particular view of knowledge and truth; Learning religiously'.<sup>21</sup> In this report, we will be focusing on and developing the first of those. While the second is useful, it places an excessive focus on the propositional facets of religion; the final definition of 'learning religiously' would be both impractical and undesirable as a model for media practitioners to adopt in a diverse society with a substantial proportion of people who ascribe to no faith.

Culham St Gabriel's submission explores various different understandings of the term with particular reference to religious education, summarising that while 'we recognise [...] the contestation of the term religious literacy [...] there is a possible consensus around which education and other professionals can gather'.<sup>22</sup> This reads as follows:

"Religious literacy should be understood to mean broad, balanced, multi-aspectual or multi-disciplinary knowledge and understanding of religion and worldviews. It also means the capacity to participate freely and critically in discourse on religion and worldviews."<sup>23</sup>

Religious literacy in these terms involves two related but distinct features: knowledge, and a 'capacity' to engage with religion 'freely and critically'. Both features are well represented across the body of our submissions. Although different in wording, this definition is structurally and substantively similar to that used by Diane L Moore, Director of the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard University. Her definition is quoted in five submissions<sup>24</sup> and it is worth quoting in full.

"Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, R. 2014. Signposts – Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education. Council for Europe. [Online]. August 2014. [Accessed 28.07.2020]. Available from: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806cd2f5>. p30.

<sup>22</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Culham St Gabriel's, [21/04/2020]

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Dr Salman Al-Azami, Open University, Professor Elizabeth Poole, Media Diversity Institute, MEND

<sup>25</sup> Harvard Divinity School. What is Religious Literacy. [Online]. Undated. [Accessed 04/08/2020]. Available from: <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/our-approach/what-is-religious-literacy>

There are some differences; the first sentence makes explicit the complex relationship between religion and wider society which is only implicit in the 'multi-aspectual' quality described in Culham St Gabriel's definition and Moore's emphasis on 'basic understanding' also clearly provides a different emphasis to 'broad [...] knowledge'. However, the main thrust of each definition is similar and both make clear that expert knowledge of all major faiths is not necessary to achieve religious literacy. Moore's definition echoes Culham St Gabriel's in emphasising both (1) knowledge and (2) the capacity to use it to 'discern and explore'. There is more of an emphasis on the changing nature of faiths as they 'continue to be shaped' in Moore's interpretation but this could reasonably be inferred as being incorporated in the 'multi-aspectual or multi-disciplinary knowledge' advocated by Culham St Gabriel's.

Most submissions supported the view that religious literacy is generally conceived as requiring both knowledge and a capacity to use that knowledge to explore and engage with religion and belief in practice. Indeed, few submissions suggested understandings of the term which are contradictory to those above. Instead, they chose different emphases. For the purpose of our wider Inquiry, it is worth noting trends between and within stakeholder groups; the rest of this chapter provides an overview of those trends through reference to the submissions which we received.

Responses from media organisations tended to emphasise only knowledge as an important facet of religious literacy. This is significant because a focus on knowledge alone will inevitably focus more on the observable propositional and ritual parts of a belief system than the experiential facets. Understanding the latter requires, in the words of a collective submission by seven Church of England Bishops who specialise in the media (hereafter, 'the Media Bishops'), 'stimulating the imagination and a capacity to empathise with people who approach the world differently'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, our wider pool of submissions supplemented the emphasis on knowledge with a focus on the ability to engage with, question and analyse religious beliefs and people. Finally, others added to this something that we argue is key; respect.

This does not mean respecting individual beliefs or sympathising with particular faiths – many actions justified by claims to faith are deeply harmful and should be recognised as such. Rather this is a respect that comes from acknowledging that beliefs are genuinely held and respecting the validity of a system of belief and morality different to your own.

<sup>26</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Media Bishops, [29/04/2020]

## Organisational Responses: An overview

Responses to requests for information tended to conceptualise religious literacy as being principally defined by knowledge. The Society of Editors' response is characteristic of this trend, defining religious literacy as 'The knowledge and understanding of religion and religions and how this interacts with everyday life and relationships between individuals, communities and nations.'<sup>27</sup> The official response from the NCTJ developed a nuanced understanding of the kinds of knowledge incorporated in the term, concluding 'Ultimately, it is an ability to understand facts about religion and to set them in context.'<sup>28</sup>

Responses from broadcasters provided similar emphases. Sky's describes the term as 'An understanding and knowledge of different faiths and beliefs, and their cultural context.'<sup>29</sup> Channel 4's response appears to draw on Diane Moore's, describing 'A knowledge and understanding of religion and the multiple and complex ways in which it intersects with our social, political and cultural life.'<sup>30</sup> Both get to the heart of the kind of knowledge needed and describe the importance of religions and the broader context in which they live.

All understandings of religious literacy above suggest it is primarily a matter of knowledge and understanding. We agree that this is fundamental; however, this alone could perhaps be better termed as religious knowledge. ITV's submission goes further and draws on the definition developed by the APPG on Religious Education which defined religious literacy as "the ability to understand and engage effectively with religion and religious issues".<sup>31</sup> The addition of engaging effectively is a useful and productive one that was well supported in our wider pool of evidence.

Religious knowledge is important but an emphasis on knowledge alone may well not improve religious literacy. We call on media organisations to recognise that religious literacy is a competency which entails ability as well as knowledge.

<sup>27</sup> Written response submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Society of Editors, [14/05/2020].

<sup>28</sup> Written response submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by NCTJ, [15/05/2020].

<sup>29</sup> Written response submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Sky, [20/07/2020].

<sup>30</sup> Written response submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Channel 4, [09/07/2020].

<sup>31</sup> Written response submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by ITV, [29/05/2020].

## Religious literacy requires an understanding of the diversity of religion and belief

Where previously an understanding of Christianity and its denominations would arguably have been all that could reasonably be expected of a journalist, the UK's multicultural society today requires a much wider range of knowledge. One way of conceptualising this knowledge was provided by the Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences at Lancaster University, who described religious literacy as having 'depth and breadth'.<sup>32</sup> In these terms 'depth relates to an individual's knowledge of the practices, culture, denominations and concepts of a specific religion. Breadth relates to how that depth of understanding extends to a range of religions'.<sup>33</sup> This is useful in conceptualising the wide variety of faiths and the complex traditions and distinctions within them.

Clearly it is essential to grasp major distinctions such as denominations in Christianity or the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims. However, the more subtle tensions and strands within each branch and the diverse ways similar beliefs are lived in practice in different places are also important, even if in-depth knowledge cannot be expected. The Methodist Church emphasised how religious beliefs are characterised by the context in which they are held; a 'basic understanding of world religions' should be complemented by an 'appreciating the diversity of ways these beliefs and practices may be expressed in relation to different social, political and historical contexts'.<sup>34</sup>

Drawing on Dr Lee's discussion of the wide array of perspectives within 'non-belief', a recognition of the complexity of traditional religions should be applied to non-traditional belief systems.<sup>35</sup> Those who self-identify as non-religious may be humanist, atheist, agnostic, secular – or they may choose a different label entirely. A similarly nuanced discussion of those distinctions should be expected if an informed, balanced understanding of religion and belief is to be achieved.

## Religious literacy requires an understanding of the complex ways religion intersects with culture, politics and society

The central role that Christianity has played in the UK's history has left religious notions and assumptions deeply embedded in our language, our shared beliefs and even our working week. Journalist and ex-editor of the Guardian's Comment is Free section Andrew Brown contextualised his view of religious literacy with the reflection: 'that the shared assumptions of our present conventional humanism such as the belief that there are such things as human rights, or that inequality is a self-evident wrong, are just that – assumptions – and that they are entirely dependent on a Christian past and on an understanding of human nature derived from the Abrahamic religions'.<sup>36</sup>

Although the phrasing of his point may be controversial, the sense that religious literacy requires an understanding of the multiple and complex ways in which religion is woven into both the UK's history and its ongoing, everyday life was a recurring theme in our submissions and oral evidence sessions. Evidence session 5 focused on this. Revd Dr James Walters described the need to 'recognis[e] how much more deeply ingrained our Christian culture is than many people recognise', drawing on the examples of the Sabbath, Christmas and Easter as religious events which continue to influence how many otherwise secular people live.<sup>37</sup> The Bishop of Ripon, Helen-Ann Hartley similarly highlighted events which are 'taken for granted, the things that we don't actually realise are just woven into the fabric of life' are 'why religious literacy is important in terms of understanding how life is structured and oriented and ordered'.<sup>38</sup>

The deep relationship between religion and wider society is true of all religions and the cultures in which they emerged and now exist. Recognising those relationships requires what Hindu Forum of Britain terms (drawing on Moore) as 'the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses'.<sup>39</sup> Whether or not an individual has faith, a failure to understand the deep, varied connections between religious beliefs and society more widely will inevitably foster ignorance and a reduced quality of public debate.

<sup>32</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences (CASS) – Lancaster University, [27/04/2020].

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Inform, [21/04/2020].

<sup>35</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Lois Lee, University of Kent, [24/04/2020].

<sup>36</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Andrew Brown, [23/04/2020].

<sup>37</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Revd Canon James Walters, Director LSE Faith Centre, [18/05/2020].

<sup>38</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Helen-Ann Hartley, Bishop of Ripon, [18/05/2020].

<sup>39</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Hindu Forum of Britain, [07/05/2020].



## Religious literacy involves acknowledging the 'lived experience' of religion and belief

We heard evidence that many people of faith feel that religion is often represented as one facet of life among many, clearly delineated from other areas of experience and neatly separated from important concerns such as politics. In these terms, religion is a matter confined to particular times (i.e. particular ceremonies and festivals) and spaces (the church, the synagogue or the mosque). Knowledge about faith is reduced to memorising quotes, events and practices.

It was noteworthy then that many responses framed their understanding of religious literacy through an emphasis on what it is not; in most cases, this involved a call to privilege the lived experience of faith instead of focusing on facts or details. 'It is not about being a religious anorak who can tell the difference between a cassock and a chasuble' – noted the Church of England's Communications team; instead, 'religious literacy can be as simple as being aware that that profound motivation exists, looking for it and trying to understand it'.<sup>40</sup> This typifies several key themes and raises related issues about religious literacy; one about the content of the knowledge the religiously literate person develops and secondly, about the actions which stem from that knowledge.

The desired knowledge is less orientated around a detailed understanding of, for instance, scripture or rituals, than the fundamental understanding and recognition that religion is deeply important to many people and that faith is interrelated with every part of their life and the wider society in which they live. AVOW's submission phrased this understanding as being 'equally conversant in theory and praxis'.<sup>41</sup> This involves 'not seeing Muslims or other religions just through the prism of their teachings and devotions, but also through their life journeys, through contexts and situations that are ever-changing'.<sup>42</sup> Religious literacy in these terms allows journalists – and through them, the wider public – to understand people of faith not just in terms of their devotional practice but through the way that religion inspires their politics, their activism, their engagement with their wider community and the reasoning behind many decisions they make.

This need for greater awareness of the lived reality of religion was described by journalists as well as faith groups. Religion Media Centre Chair and ex-Head of Religion for the BBC Michael Wakelin similarly moved from defining religious literacy negatively as not being limited to knowledge to defining it positively as a stance or disposition towards faith based on an understanding of its importance: 'Religious Literacy is not about being religious, nor is it about having huge amounts of general knowledge about religion'.<sup>43</sup> Instead, it requires the recognition that 'religion matters a great deal to the vast majority of the world's population and deserves to be taken seriously'.<sup>44</sup> From the knowledge comes a mode of engagement, or what Wakelin terms a 'disposition'. This is as true in local print journalism as it is in national broadcasting. Daniel Mumby, a local democracy reporter for Reach Plc, similarly highlighted the need to understand 'not only the practical mechanics of worship [...] but the reasons for people to hold these beliefs'.<sup>45</sup>

This is one of the key findings of our Inquiry. Religious coverage or programming which focuses only on religious ritual, liturgy and visible practise will miss a great deal of what it is to have faith. Religious literacy requires recognition of the multiple and complex ways in which faith is woven into our everyday lives. To recognise only the existence of faith, without trying to understand the experience of it, can lead to religion being treated simply as another object of journalistic enquiry. While it certainly is this, reducing religion in this way can miss out on religion and belief as a lived process.

Religion continues to play a fundamental role in peoples' lives around the world. This goes beyond scriptural debates or disputes between different clergy; it is deeply woven in peoples' lives. Dr Munnik provides a useful summary: 'religious literacy is not encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject but familiarity with the terrain – not knowing everything that is important but knowing that it is important to people and proceeding accordingly'.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Church of England Communications Team, [05/05/2020].

<sup>41</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by AVOW, [30/06/2020].

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Michael Wakelin, [24/04/2020].

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Daniel Mumby, [18/05/2020].

<sup>46</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion by Dr Michael Munnik, Cardiff University, [04/24/2020]

## Religious literacy incorporates a capacity to engage with religion and belief

We believe that ‘proceeding accordingly’ involves developing the ability to interact successfully with religious ideas and people. Indeed, recurring words in submissions such as ‘interpret’ and ‘engage’ highlight that attaining religious literacy go beyond the acquisition of knowledge; they imply competency and confidence to actively engage with religion. ‘Analyse’, ‘explore’ and ‘discern’ similarly appear across our submissions.

This relates to the meaning of ‘literacy’; the ability to read or write. Just as this usually describes going beyond the ability to identify and understand language to using it comfortably, so too religious literacy involves an understanding of religion such that you can recognise its themes, patterns and engage with and question them. A submission from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations described how ‘in her research, Dr Cheruvallil-Contractor (a member of the Centre) recommends a model of religious literacy that equips the enquirer to ask the questions that are needed of religion or belief groups to answer the question/s at hand. Asking the correct question requires skill and confidence to know that the answer is important irrespective of whether or not one may offend while also being aware of the politics of questioning.’<sup>47</sup> The submission by Paul-François Tremlett, with contributions by other members of the Religious Education Department of Open University, described ‘critical religious literacy’, an approach which enables learners to “discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social, political, cultural life through multiple lenses” (taken from Moore in Biesta et al 2019, p. 20).<sup>48</sup> They note that this approach ‘equips learners with the tools they need to successfully navigate varied digitally mediated representations of religion, culture and society’.<sup>49</sup>

“Navigation” was a term chosen by several respondents. Dr de Rooij described it as ‘being able to understand and navigate the codes and conventions of religion that affect society and social praxis’.<sup>50</sup> This does not mean simply accepting what religions say. The National Secular Society stated that ‘true religious literacy must include a critical understanding of both the positive and negative aspects of religion’.<sup>51</sup> This view was supported by several faith groups. AVOW’s submission noted that it is perfectly possible for good journalists ‘to fundamentally disagree with the tenets of a religion or the way it is interpreted and practised by a religious group’.<sup>52</sup> The Media Bishops described the importance of unearthing uncomfortable truths: ‘Accurate reporting will not (indeed should not) always deliver stories in terms that religious groups will welcome’.<sup>53</sup> No submission suggested that particular faiths should be advocated for; nor did any imply that faith should be characterised simplistically as a good thing. Instead, navigation requires sufficient knowledge about different faiths to be able to assess their claims fairly and accurately.

Religious literacy does not just require careful navigation of the codes and beliefs that constitute particular faiths; it entails the same informed engagement of the broader category of faith. It is clear that many groups frequently described as religious – or ‘faith’ – sit uneasily with such categorisation. Dr Kahn-Harris’s highlighted the need to understand and interrogate the ‘category of religion’; ‘Religious literacy is the ability to navigate the complexity of the category of religion so that the particular identities and sensitivities of individuals and groups that are ‘caught up’ in the category are taken into account’.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Centre for Peace, Trust and Social Relations – University of Coventry, [01/05/2020].

<sup>48</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Paul-François Tremlett (Head of Department) with contributions from Dr Hugh Beattie, Professor Graham Harvey, Dr John Maiden, Dr Stefanie Sinclair and Professor John Wolffe, Open University, [01/05/2020].

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Laurens de Rooij, University of Chester, [27/04/2020].

<sup>51</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the National Secular Society, [04/23/2020].

<sup>52</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by AVOW, [30/06/2020].

<sup>53</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Media Bishops, [29/04/2020].

<sup>54</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Keith Kahn-Harris, Birkbeck College, [29/04/2020]

“Religion” and “faith” are both terms which may jar with those who view their beliefs to be more of a philosophy (as some Buddhists do). Similarly, the complex relationship between ethnic, cultural and religious identities mean that many people may describe themselves as Jewish or Hindu without necessarily believing in the propositional statements made by those faiths. They may feel their identity is more accurately captured as an ethnicity or culture. Religious literacy necessitates an understanding of the limitations of ‘religion’ as a marker of identity and the ability to navigate the alternative narratives of community and identification that are ‘caught up’ in the language of religion and belief.

## Respect

Religious literacy describes both a body of knowledge and the ability to competently use that knowledge to engage meaningfully with people of faith and navigate cultural codes. In practice, we feel that it also incorporates a stance or attitude towards religion. In their study, Professors Adam Dinham, Goldsmiths, and Grace Davie, Exeter, argued that religious literacy can best be understood as tolerance and acceptance of religion in society.<sup>55</sup> They suggested that the term can be defined as the opposite of religious illiteracy, which is an assumption that society is secularised, religious beliefs are absurd and a problem and religious belief is in decline.

This attitude is determined not by sympathy with particular beliefs. Rather it describes a stance or perspective, what the Bahá’í Office of Public Affairs termed as a set of ‘values, attitudes and methods that enable people to engage with and explore diverse belief systems.’<sup>56</sup> They list these as ‘openmindedness, respect for difference, an eagerness to genuinely learn from people and a willingness to let go of long-held assumptions.’<sup>57</sup> It should be clear that these are not exceptional values; indeed, they could reasonably be understood as the requisite values of all balanced, inquiring journalism. A similar point was made by the Centre for Media Monitoring: ‘For ‘religious literacy’ to be effective, media practitioners should respect the beliefs of others even if they disagree with them, treat them in a non-judgemental, nuanced way and not interpret them from a Eurocentric paradigm.’<sup>58</sup>

Religion should not be afforded a special place compared to other belief systems; nor should claims made by faith groups be taken uncritically. Instead, we feel that it is important to emphasise that one cannot understand a belief unless you acknowledge that it is sincerely held and approach it with an open mind. Several specialist journalists corroborated this view. Sophia Smith Galer, a religion and belief journalist for the BBC, noted that ‘being religiously literate also means that you live comfortably and tolerantly in a multicultural, multi-faith society.’<sup>59</sup> Kristine Pommert, a journalist for CTVC, describes religious literacy as ‘a matter of open-mindedness and respect: journalists and programme-makers should be able to meet people of all faiths and none without prejudice.’<sup>60</sup>

Whether this attitude is termed as ‘tolerance’, ‘openmindedness’ or ‘respect’, it describes a disposition which recognises religion and belief as deeply important to many people and a part of everyday life for the majority of the world’s inhabitants. To be clear, we are not advocating respect for individual truth-claims or practices. Rather we are calling for journalists to demonstrate the broader respect which derives from viewing religion to be a valid source of beliefs and values.

<sup>55</sup> This understanding of the term was highlighted in the Religion Media Centre’s written submission. The relevant text is Day, A., Lövheim, M. eds. *Modernities, memory and mutations: Grace Davie and the study of religion*. London: Routledge

<sup>56</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Bahá’í Community - Office of Public Affairs, [05/04/2020]. 57 Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Centre for Media Monitoring, [11/05/2020].

<sup>59</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Sophia Smith Galer, BBC Video and Social Media Journalist, [22/04/2020].

<sup>60</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Kristine Pommert, CTVC, [21/04/2020]

## Chapter 2

# THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS ILLITERACY ON THE MEDIA; A REVIEW OF EVIDENCE RECEIVED

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Through the course of the Inquiry, we received extensive written and oral evidence on the negative impact of religious illiteracy on the media. In the course of this chapter, we identify broad trends and supplement them with case studies.

A number of submissions foregrounded the fact that a certain degree of friction between religion and the media is natural. Journalist Andrew Brown suggested that this is true of any subject matter;

'You have to remember that any news organisation is always yanking out of context the stories that it does. I mean, that's almost a definition of what journalism does. It takes stories from one context and puts them into another. And so everybody feels that they're traduced and misrepresented and misunderstood by journalists and everybody is pretty right about that.'<sup>61</sup>

However, there appear to be modes of misrepresentation which are particular to stories about religion and belief. Exploring this, Professor Abby Day has suggested media practitioners and people of faith often have competing perspectives: each have a different version of 'the truth'; there are often differences as to who they may feel is the best, most valid 'source'; and finally, each recognises a different 'legitimate authority'.<sup>62</sup> Several others highlighted the aversion of journalists to understanding religion and belief on its 'own terms'. When discussing religious illiteracy in newspapers, columnist Peter Osborne drew a parallel with academia;

'Academia treats religion as a form, [...] like social anthropology. You know, here is something which we study, we don't absorb its values or understand what it's about because it's ridiculous, because it's a primitive thing. That is the technical position adopted by the universities. I think newspapers are like that only much worse.'<sup>63</sup>

Some of these tensions are unavoidable and even desirable. Journalism needs to maintain a distance which allows it to critique and question. However, it is problematic if journalists consistently misrepresent beliefs and those who hold them. There was a widespread perception in the evidence we received from faith groups that their beliefs are systematically and repeatedly misrepresented. This feeling is not new. Qualitative data taken in a 2012 research project by members of the Centre for Trust Peace and Social Relations at the University of Warwick, 'Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality', indicated that all religion and belief groups feel that the media inaccurately represents their views. According to participants, including those who described themselves as 'non-religious', the media focuses on sensationalism and had no interest in presenting "good news" about the positive impacts of religion or belief in British societies and globally through charitable and other works.<sup>64</sup>

Quantitative data collected for the same study showed that Muslim, Other Christian (including blacked churches), New Religious Movements / Pagan and Jain organisations were most likely to indicate feelings of unfair treatment in relation to the media. Written comments in the survey provided insights into what respondents perceive to be unfair treatment including: "Buddhism being portrayed as very new age with little depth", "Christianity being treated as fair game", "Muslim bashing that affects the mental health of Muslims", "Coverage of 'Jain' religion is very poor. Lots of people are not aware of this most ancient religion".<sup>65</sup>

Question 7 of our study asked whether religious literacy had improved in the last ten years. The majority of respondents who answered this question felt that it has stayed broadly the same or that it was too difficult an issue to measure and assess accurately. Significantly more respondents felt that religious literacy had declined than had improved. The misrepresentation of people of faith was also an issue raised repeatedly in the 2015 CORAB report. In that report, the vast majority of evidence provided through testimony demonstrated a concern about the representation of religion in the media. In the course of our Inquiry, faith groups have also provided significant evidence of systemic misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

<sup>61</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Andrew Brown, [08/06/2020].

<sup>62</sup> Day, A. 2016. The conflict between religion and media has deep roots. LSE BPP. [Online], 27 August 2016. [Accessed 03.07.2020]. Available from: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-conflict-between-religion-and-media-has-deep-roots/>

<sup>63</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Peter Osborne, [08/06/2020]

<sup>64</sup> Findings published in Weller, P., Purdam, K., Ghanea, N., Cheruvallil-Contractor, S. (2014) Religion or Belief, Discrimination and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts. London & New York: Continuum



This chapter is informed by responses from across the full breadth of our written and oral evidence but draws particularly on the answers to questions 2 (What effect does a lack of religious literacy have on broadcast and/or print media?) and 4 (What effect does religious illiteracy have on decisions journalists make when assigning, researching, and reporting news stories?). It explores consistent themes raised in the evidence which we received. We do not claim that every example in this chapter is an irrefutable demonstration of illiteracy; however, taken together, we hope that they demonstrate that there is at the very least a pervasive perception that there is a problem. We view this perception to be well-founded and list the examples below both as a reference for anyone interested in recognising illiteracy in practice and as a demonstration of the wide variety of ways in which religion is misrepresented. The suggestions provide a guide on how to avoid religious illiteracy. Through the course of our written and oral evidence, several themes emerged;

- A reduction of religion to its visual, liturgical and doctrinal facets
- Sensationalising religion
- Reinforcement of problematic stereotypes
- Basic mistakes and imprecise language
- Ignoring diversity within faith groups
- Misleading use of representatives

### **Religion and belief is reduced to its visual, liturgical and doctrinal facets**

The key point raised in submissions provided to our Inquiry was that religious illiteracy means that religion is far too narrowly understood. All too often it is only seen as relevant when something explicitly “theological” is in dispute or the morality of a religious person is seen to be in conflict with wider society. Arguments about female bishops in the Anglican church, or the worries of certain imams about sexual education in schools, are clearly newsworthy. It is vital that these stories are reported on because they matter deeply to many people and, in a free and open society, public debate about these issues is the primary mechanism by which feelings are expressed and resolution achieved. The media plays an essential role in platforming different voices, investigating weak arguments and challenging orthodoxies.

However, there was a strong sentiment provided by people of all faiths, and Christians in particular, that an emphasis on dispute or theology misses many of the most important qualities of a person’s faith. For many people, religion and belief is not wholly, or even always mainly, about the propositional beliefs that they hold. To reduce religion to conflict over those beliefs is misleading. The definition of religious literacy developed in Chapter 1 highlighted the importance of recognising the full, lived reality of faith. Many submissions, when describing the impact of religious illiteracy, focused on precisely this point. Dr Andrew Rodgers discussed how religious illiteracy can lead journalists to ‘miss the heart of a religious tradition’.<sup>66</sup> He described the need for media ‘to look beyond the surface rituals to get to the real motivations of practitioners (e.g. undue focus on the flamboyant and a tendency to ‘exoticise’ certain religious groups, especially if dress is involved- religion is mostly felt and known and done in the everyday)’.<sup>67</sup> An explanation for this made by several journalists in our oral evidence sessions is that the media, and journalism in particular, does not deal in “the everyday”. However, focusing on religion only in stories in which faith is visually obvious, or when theological questions are explicitly in dispute, fails to recognise that religion informs every part of life.

<sup>66</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion Media by Dr Andrew Rodgers, University of Roehampton, [30/04/2020].

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

The submission by the Sandford St Martin Trust provides a useful exposition of this point.

‘Our definition of religious literacy highlights the inadequacy of understanding religions simply through learning about ritual practices, or exploring what religious texts or scriptures say. However this is what many media professionals (and many audiences) understand when one talks about “religious broadcasting” or even “broadcasting about religion”. It is our contention that, un-supplemented, such a limited interpretation of the genre leads to simplistic and inaccurate representations of religions as unchanging monoliths separate from what motivates people or informs how they interact with the world.’<sup>68</sup>

The way in which this view of faith can lead to an overemphasis on ritual or visual aspects of a faith, at the expense of an understanding of “what motivates people”, was developed in a collective submission made by several communications specialists who work in different parts of the Church of England. They felt that ‘too often faith is reduced to the right to wear (or not wear) something, to eat or not eat something or to perform a rite or ritual in a certain way. Those outward manifestations are, of course, deeply important for many people and rightly protected in law – inevitably providing a rich seam of news stories when conflicts arise. But, for many, including many Christians, those things are just not the heart of their faith, a reality which doesn’t always fit into the black-and-white confines of a news “list line”’.<sup>69</sup> Unless stories show an awareness of why people have done things the story will only be half told. This is a key point stemming from a basic misunderstanding of religion. Subsequently, a wide variety of important stories are being lost.

## RECOMMENDATION

Journalists and programme-makers should aim to explore the ‘lived experience’ of religion as well as its doctrinal, ritual and ceremonial elements.

<sup>68</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion Media by Sandford St Martin Trust, [24/04/2020].

<sup>69</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion Media by Church of England Communications Team, [05/05/2020]

## Sensationalising religion

Professor Eileen Barker, the founder of Inform, whose work continues to play an important role in understanding minority faiths (popularly known as cults) highlighted the tendency to ‘select sensational, bizarre, sexy stories that will appeal to potential audiences.’<sup>70</sup> When stories about faith are covered, Dr Paul Smalley’s submission describes how ‘a lack of religious literacy can lead to broadcast and print media only focusing on the more spectacular and sensationalist aspects of religion and belief. This can often lead to religions such as Islam only being associated with international relations, bombings or terrorist incidents rather negative stereotyping than Muslims being represented as parents, teachers or as healthcare workers’. Catherine Pepinster, the ex-editor of the Tablet, describes a growing tendency to cover religion much like politics; ‘As the tendency has grown to increasingly report politics as tussles between personalities i.e. Johnson v Starmer, May v Corbyn, Brexiteers v Remainers, so coverage of religion is written about as concerning dominant personalities involved in clashes i.e. Archbishop of Canterbury attacks banks; Cardinal Nichols attacks government over church closures.’<sup>71</sup>

We found this insight to be an illuminating one; stories that are modelled on the inherently adversarial structure of political discourse are often ill-equipped to deal with the religious discussions which are developed through consensus over long periods of time. Tim Stanley, a comment writer for the Telegraph, described the same phenomena, stating ‘the problem [...] is that a lot of religious representing, of reporting, comes through the prism of politics. And there’s an assumption that a church is a bit like a political identity. [...] And the problem with that is that faith does not translate into that.’<sup>72</sup> The submission by the Bahá’í Office of Public Affairs echoed this, stating that ‘another concern with a lack of true religious literacy is that journalists disproportionately write and cover stories that amplify the most dramatic and polarising expressions of religion, often ignoring and obscuring the way that the vast majority of religious people live and contribute to the betterment of society’.<sup>73</sup> This is, to an extent, unsurprising. News in particular covers changes of events and rarely covers everyday happenings. However, it is a problem when religion is depicted only as a source of conflict.

## PROPOSED ACTION

Journalists should avoid fitting stories to simplistic, preconceived expectations of conflict where none exists.

<sup>70</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion Media by Prof. Eileen Barker, London School of Economics, [18/04/2020].

<sup>71</sup> Written evidence submission to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Catherine Pepinster, [06/05/2020]

<sup>72</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Tim Stanley, [08/06/2020]

<sup>73</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Bahá’í Office of Public Affairs, [05/04/2020]

## Reinforcement of problematic stereotypes

Professor Peter Hopkins described how 'a lack of religious literacy can lead to the reinforcement of problematic stereotypes about specific religions. These homogenise the religious experience and downplay the diversity found within many religions. For example, a lack of religious literacy can lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes that associate Muslims with terrorism'.<sup>74</sup> A wide range of stereotypes were cited in submissions; one example quoted was the belief that 'all Pentecostal pastors want to make money out of their congregations';<sup>75</sup> another described reportage which imply that many cults might end up like Jonestown or Waco, when in fact such events are extremely rare. Stereotypes are usually specific to particular faiths and often appear to be a case of journalistic laziness. As the Media Bishops note, 'the frequency with which stories about religious groups are framed in terms of internal conflict (the CoE), irrational aggression (Islam) or weird dissonance with assumed social mores (all religions) is evidence of this preference for fitting stories to predetermined templates rather than informing readers/viewers accurately'.<sup>76</sup> This leads to stories or pictures which simply affirm preconceptions about faith groups end up being repeated over and over again.

While some stereotypes leave particular groups as unseen, others reduce faiths to deeply negative archetypes which bear little relationship with reality. The Centre for Media Monitoring describes the stereotypes their analysis has found in the media; 'Muslims are barbaric; Islam is inherently violent; Islam is a threat to the West; Islam is monolithic; Islam is intolerant of other religions; Islam is inherently antisemitic; Islam is oppressive to women'.<sup>77</sup> MEND echoed this last point, describing the studies which have demonstrated that within British media discourse Muslim men and women are consistently presented as homogenous and unitary groups, with the former portrayed as misogynistic, angry, and violent extremists and the latter as passive, oppressed victims.<sup>78</sup> AVOW's submission noted that the 'narrow frames in which the media report on Muslim women, or the agendas under which they are absorbed as "newsworthy", whether stories about "jihadi brides"; "honour killings" or "forced marriages", undermine the agency and voice of Muslim women – the educated, independent, career women just trying to juggle a work/life balance and live a faith-inspired lifestyle in an increasingly secular society'.<sup>79</sup>

Dr Zahera Harb, a journalist and academic at City University, explored the orientalism of many depictions of Muslims and Arabs, arguing that for 'some Anglo writers/ journalists to use the word Islam, Muslims or Arabs, he or she would be presenting their audiences/readers with a set of negative perceptions that forms a body of knowledge about more than a billion Muslims worldwide and more than 400 million Arabs spread over 22 countries'.<sup>80</sup> These negative perceptions foster a simplistic stereotype which homogenise Muslims 'as backward, irrational, unchanging, fundamentalists, threatening and manipulative in the use of their faith for political and personal gain'.<sup>81</sup>

## PROPOSED ACTION

Journalists should aim to develop rounded, balanced depictions of religion and belief which avoid stereotyping and generalisation.

<sup>74</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Peter Hopkins, Newcastle University, in collaboration with Dr Robin Finlay, Dr Kawtar Najib, Dr Katherine Botterill and Dr Gurchathen Sanghera, [24/04/2020].

<sup>75</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Andrew Rogers, University of Roehampton, [30/04/2020]

<sup>76</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Media Bishops, [29/04/2020]

<sup>77</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Centre for Media Monitoring, 11/05/2020

<sup>78</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by MEND, [24/04/2020].

<sup>79</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by AVOW, [30/06/2020].

<sup>80</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Zahera Harb, University of London, [06/05/2020].

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



## Basic mistakes and imprecise language

Several submissions detailed the frequency with which basic errors are published or broadcast. Repetitive mistakes were discussed by submissions from a wide spectrum of religious groups; these mistakes can become widely accepted, such as the 'common irksome error' of 'the reference to Holy Saturday as Easter Saturday', and other errors including 'A Daily Mail Online article [which] described Pentecost 'as the entire 50 days of Passover' and claimed that 'Christ descended to earth in flames'.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, an article on INews described how 'Many Muslims take the time to fast as they would on Eid ul Fitr'.<sup>83</sup> This contains a basic misunderstanding; it is forbidden to fast on Eid ul Fitr. The author appears to have confused Eid with Ramadan.



BBC Wales mistakes Brighton Pavilion for a mosque:  
April 2020

Alongside basic mistakes, many written submissions commented on the frequency of misleading or imprecise phrases. Dr Andrew Rogers described the tendency to 'elevate terms that have little meaning outside of specific contexts', as exemplified in the term 'fundamentalist', which he describes as 'a poorly defined term that is rarely used as a self-designation and is largely now a 'boo' word or a term used within traditions to mean "anyone more conservative than me"'.<sup>84</sup> This point is corroborated by a number of other submissions. The Methodist Church in Britain described how 'terms such as "fundamentalist", "extremist", "radical", "conservative" and "liberal" are often used without providing a definition and often without a proper understanding of the context'.<sup>85</sup> These are all terms which depend almost entirely on the perspective of the speaker and which are very hard to define.

In their submission The Centre for Media Monitoring provided extensive analysis of terms they view to be problematic specific to Islam and Muslim.<sup>86</sup> Words such as "Islamic terrorism", "Islamist", "Islamic State", "Jihadi", "Allahu Akbar", "Sharia Law", "Taqiyya", "Da'wah" and "Muslim grooming gangs" are all terms which have become popularised in the media despite often being used incorrectly. To take one example, "Jihad(ist)" is a classical Arabic term meaning "to struggle to one's utmost"; in much press coverage, it has simply become shorthand for "terrorist".

## PROPOSED ACTION

Journalists should work to build sufficient knowledge to avoid basic factual mistakes and work to avoid simplifying, misleading terminology.

<sup>82</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Rosie Dawson, [24/04/2020].

<sup>83</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Centre for Media Monitoring, [11/05/2020]

<sup>84</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Andrew Rodgers, University of Roehampton, [30/04/2020].

<sup>85</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by The Methodist Church in Britain, [29/04/2020].

<sup>86</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Centre for Media Monitoring, [11/05/2020]

## Ignoring diversity within faith groups

Another frequent impact of religious illiteracy on representations of religion and belief is the homogenisation of faith groups and belief systems, such that they are treated as “monoliths”. Every religion and belief system is characterised by enormous diversity in the way it is lived and practised; these differences are determined by place, community, family and tradition. A failure to acknowledge those distinctions can provide a profoundly misleading impression of faith groups.

A submission by Revd Steve Tinning, Public Issues Enabler at the Baptist Union of Great Britain, noted that ‘Baptists tend to be quite sensitive to broad strokes journalism – terms like “Christians believe” should be used sparingly as they rarely allow for the huge diversity of views, beliefs and practices within the faith. Sadly there does seem to be an uncomfortable assumption within some sectors of the media that Christianity and Anglicanism are synonymous with one another’.<sup>87</sup> A submission from the Methodist Church in Britain made a similar point, stating ‘it is common to read about “Christian beliefs” or “Christians” in general being opposed to equal marriage, rather than a more balanced acknowledgement that such views are not held by all Christians’.<sup>88</sup>

The submission goes on to note a failure to recognise denominational distinctions, describing how ‘a recent interview on BBC Radio 4’s Sunday Programme reported a “split in the Methodist Church” over the issue of same-sex marriages. The story was actually about the United Methodist Church that primarily exists in the USA and beyond. No mention was made in the interview of the very different discussions going on in the Methodist Church in Britain’.<sup>89</sup> In this specific case, after several complaints to the BBC, the programme in question hosted an on-air interview to clarify this point. However, this speaks to a widely evidenced tendency to see faiths, and the denominations and traditions within them, as homogenous. While uniformity was never the case in practice, it is certainly not today.

A failure to recognise internal diversity was highlighted with particular prominence in responses from Jewish organisations and experts. All three submissions, which focused explicitly on the representation of British Jews, highlighted the diversity of the Jewish community in the UK and the frequent failure to recognise and represent this diversity. A submission from Senior Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner on behalf of Reform Judaism noted that ‘Whilst religious communities of all types have become increasingly complex and diverse, the coverage of them has not kept up with the fact that religious groupings cannot be considered as monoliths’.<sup>90</sup> This deep complexity makes apparently simple statements which attribute particular practices to groups and communities very difficult. Thus, ‘to be a member of a synagogue or denomination does not always imply identifying oneself as a Jew primarily in terms of that membership. For that reason, to state “Reform Jews believe...” or “Orthodox Jews practice...” is sometimes to risk inaccuracy’.<sup>91</sup> This diversity necessitates an awareness of the deep internal diversities of faith groups.

Failures to recognise and acknowledge the diversity of religious groups frequently lead to the stereotyping of communities. Often, the most orthodox, or simplistically “other”, aspects of a community come to stand for the whole community.

## PROPOSED ACTION

Journalists should work to understand the many traditions and distinctions within religions they are writing on and take care not to homogenise when describing beliefs.

<sup>87</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Revd. Steve Tinning, Public Issues Enabler at the Baptist Union of Great Britain, [29/04/2020].

<sup>88</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by The Methodist Church in Britain, [29/04/2020].

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Senior Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, on behalf of Reform Judaism, [29/04/2020].

<sup>91</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Keith Kahn-Harris, [29/04/2020]

## Case study:

### The use of Haredi Jews in stock photos

Submissions from the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Dr Kahn-Harris and Reform Judaism all described the frequency with which stories about Jewish people in the UK are illustrated by pictures of Haredi Jews. The Board of Deputies' submission describes how 'the overwhelming majority of stories about British Jews in general (rather than a specific individual) are illustrated with pictures of Haredi Jews. The reason is understandable, to a degree [...] but if the story is about something happening within another denomination of Judaism, or to UK Jews as whole, but is illustrated – often even exclusively – with pictures of Haredi Jews, it can feel alienating and disrespectful to the vast majority of British Jews who belong to different streams.'<sup>92</sup>



This trend was explored by Dr Kahn-Harris in his written and oral evidence. His submission explores the use of the same stock photo in dozens of stories (see above).<sup>93</sup> Of those stories which used this picture, 'Some of the stories concern Haredi Jews specifically and others concern British Jews generally, without specific reference being made to Haredi Jews.'<sup>94</sup> He also highlights a 'clear preference of photos where Haredi men are pictured with their backs to the photographer'. A photo of the same two men which shows their faces (see below), taken in the same photo session, appears to have never been used.

Dr Kahn-Harris argues that 'This case study is revealing of an apparently wide consensus in the UK press that, visually at least, Haredi men signify 'Jew' better than anyone else. Moreover, the preference for "faceless" photographs suggests that they signify "Jew" in a mysterious and exotic alluring way.'<sup>95</sup> Representing faith groups entirely through their most visibly 'other' representatives can be harmful. As Reform Judaism note, 'In the extreme, reinforcing this caricature of a Jew can strengthen antisemitic viewpoints around the "otherness" of the Jewish community.'<sup>96</sup>



<sup>92</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by The Board of Deputies of British Jews, [29/04/2020].

<sup>93</sup> Photo provided in written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Keith Kahn-Harris, [29/04/2020]

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Senior Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, on behalf of Reform Judaism, [29/04/2020].

## Misleading use of representatives

No one can accurately be seen as representing the full width and diversity of any given belief system. However, it is inevitable that particular representatives will be used in both print and broadcast media to articulate particular viewpoints and to provide a sense of what people of a given faith may think. Our Inquiry suggests that this should be done with care and research. Mishandling this process or choosing the wrong representative was cited by a wide variety of submissions from both academics and faith groups. The former generally involves using representatives in a way which fails to understand the nuances of their relationship with other members of their faith. Even for organisations with a relatively well-known structure, such as the Church of England, the relationship of leaders to other members of the faith is often misunderstood. The Media Bishops explain this point:

'Religious stories are often explained through inappropriate models and metaphors. For example, the nature of the Church of England as an Established Church is often misunderstood. Because the media's default model for any institution tends to be that of the corporation, the dispersed nature of authority in the church is ignored and the Archbishop of Canterbury misrepresented as a kind of CEO. His relationship with the wider Anglican Communion cannot be understood through this model, leading to confused reporting of international church issues which can create relational difficulties around the Communion.'<sup>97</sup>

The relationship between religious leaders and their wider community is even more complicated in other communities; indeed, a number of submissions reflected on the fact the many journalists simply transpose their understanding of the Church of England onto other communities where this structure may be even less applicable. The Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations submission describes how journalists often rely on "community leaders" who they see as reliable sources. They argue that 'behind this lies the assumption that if Christians have a Pope or Archbishop, Jews have a Chief Rabbi then there must be an equivalent Muslim, Sikh or Hindu "single point of contact"'. The reality is that representation is far more complex, even in Christianity and Judaism, let alone in the more "exotic" religions.<sup>98</sup> Reform Judaism's submission corroborated this view, stating 'A lack of religious literacy [in the media] becomes apparent when deciding who speaks for the Jewish community. Whilst the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth speaks for one large sector of the Jewish community, it is incorrect to say the Chief Rabbi represents the entire UK Jewish community.'<sup>99</sup> A simple rule is to understand that figures very rarely speak for the entirety of their faith. Rather, they represent a view within it – perhaps even the view of the majority – and should be understood as such.

A related and perhaps more worrying trend is the tendency to confuse the most vocal voices with the most representative. The Church of England Communications team, a group which includes several ex-journalists, described the 'tendency to confuse the loudest voices with the most representative. Under tight deadlines, it can be all too easy to reach for the same "rent-a-quote" voices to back up a flimsy story and to present certain voices to readers as the "Christian" view, without questioning whether they really speak for all'.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Media Bishops, [29/04/2020]

<sup>98</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Centre for Trust Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University, [01/05/2020]

<sup>99</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Senior Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, on behalf of Reform Judaism, [29/04/2020].

<sup>100</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Church of England Communications Team, [05/05/2020]

This can lead to the dangerous belief among the public that the most extreme voices are the most representative. Dr Munnik's submission describes this process, arguing that 'Religious illiteracy suggests an inability to identify good, reliable resources to learn more about a topic, and we can assume that the religiously illiterate newsroom does not have a well-stocked contacts file. "Islam? Oh yeah, there's that Al-Muhajiroun guy. He's always on about something, and he makes good telly".<sup>101</sup> This process is deeply damaging; not only can it provide a platform to potentially dangerous opinions, it can also provide viewers or readers with an entirely unrepresentative impression of a given faith. Over time, this can profoundly distort the public's perception of whole religions.

## PROPOSED ACTION

Journalists should recognise that few speakers can "represent a faith" and work to find the best representative rather than the easiest or most controversial.

<sup>101</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Michael Munnik, Cardiff University, [24/04/2020]



## “Good practice”

Several submissions presented instructive examples of what they consider to be “good practice”. Evidence from the Alwaheed Centre referenced the personal experiences of one of the submission’s authors, Dr Yahya Barry, formerly Imam of Edinburgh Central Mosque.<sup>102</sup> In April this year, BBC Radio Scotland (BBC-RS) invited Dr Barry to record an audio diary in light of Covid-19 reflecting ‘on the importance of a daily routine of prayer and contemplation’ and how this ‘integrates into family life’. It aired on the ‘Sunday Morning with ...’ (SMW) show, with Dr Barry joining several Christian speakers in discussion about their respective experiences in lockdown. As the Alwaheed submission notes, ‘the range of topics and depth covered in these engagements provide a good model of religious literacy provided by a state broadcaster not only because they go beyond the common tropes and sensationalism, but also because they weave the Muslim narrative as a part of the Scottish socio-cultural fabric.’<sup>103</sup> This demonstrates the power of public service broadcasting to educate and inform, breaking down preconceptions and aiding social relations between different groups in the process.

Stories about faith need not actively try to break down barriers; simply by exploring alternative ways of living in a fair-minded and neutral way, programmes can foster empathy and understanding. The Church of Latter-Day Saints cited the example of an episode from The W Channel series *Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over*. It showed Dooley staying with a Latterday Saint family and their local congregation. The submission stated that the programme ‘included a moving interview with a father about the resonance of his belief in the afterlife, as well as a conversation with a former drug user whose life had been transformed following a profoundly significant faith journey. The presenter’s willingness to pursue an honest path was the most significant factor in the programme’s success.’<sup>104</sup> While Dooley does not necessarily agree with or advocate for the beliefs discussed, she engages with them on their own terms and explores how they act as a source of motivation and comfort. By doing this, she recognises the validity of an alternative way of thinking about the world. The Media Bishops’

submission described religious literacy as an ‘an engagement of the imagination’.<sup>105</sup> This kind of television can be seen to aid precisely this process of imagination by explaining not just the facts of someone else’s life, but their personal understanding of their own beliefs and their relationship with their faith.

The Sandford St Martin Trust submission also provided several examples of good practice. *Hijab & Me* was made by CTVC for Truetube.co.uk and was shortlisted for the Sandford St Martin 2020 Children’s Award. The Sandford St Martin Trust’s submission used it to exemplify how content can explore the ‘huge diversity around attitudes towards gender and gender roles within many religions’.<sup>106</sup> Despite being aimed at children, it provided a nuanced depiction of different attitudes towards faith and alternative ways of expressing belief. It handled a sensitive area in a balanced way which foregrounded the views of adherents, illuminating differences without aggravating artificial conflict.



Another video shortlisted for this year’s Sandford St Martins 2020 Journalism Award discussed ‘How a conference call sparked America’s abortion obsession’.<sup>107</sup> While the piece was interrogative, political and occasionally critical of the beliefs it reported on, the Sandford St Martin Trust highlighted the way in which it demonstrated how ‘religions evolve and change over time’.<sup>108</sup> Several submissions also discussed good practice in print media. The Sunday Times and The Guardian have both provided detailed accounts of controversy surrounding a Christ Church don and the fragment of an early gospel. Alongside telling a modern story of rumour and potential fraud, they carefully historicised the religious text in question and explored why it creates such strong feeling today among a particular group

of Evangelical Christians in America. Each of the examples above referred to different media organisations creating content for different formats. The consistent theme across each example was that they engaged with religion as a serious subject. Beliefs were placed in their historical and social context and connected explicitly to the personal experiences of real people.

We should emphasise that good journalism about religion does not mean supporting faith groups. In evidence provided to the APPG, Dr Nadia Haq highlighted a recent article that usefully illustrates this point. Matthew Parris's comment piece, 'Islam can't be the only faith above criticism', was published in the Times in 2019 in response to the APPG on British Muslims' report Islamophobia Defined, in which they propose a "working definition of Islamophobia."<sup>109</sup> Many members of our APPG would entirely disagree with his arguments at every stage of the piece – indeed, some were actively involved in developing that very definition and continue to advocate for it. They would argue particularly vehemently against the view that the Islamophobia definition put forward is an attempt to 'introduce blasphemy laws via the back door' as has sometimes been claimed, and which Parris himself seems to argue. However, as a piece of journalism

about an issue that has attracted widespread debate, Parris's column is a useful exemplar of fair and balanced argument. People of faith are understood to be valid participants in the conversation, even while the author disagrees with their perspective. The piece carefully contextualises and explains the views it argues against and acknowledges the sincerity with which those views are held. It is a vital part of a healthy democracy that such articles are written, published and debated. Were all debates to demonstrate the same empathy and rigour, our national conversation would be a great deal more informed and nuanced.

Controversy cannot and should not be avoided for the sake of it; difficult and controversial issues need to be dealt with. Another submission highlighted the thorough investigative reporting by the Daily Telegraph on the Iwerne Trust, reportage which provided a clear public service. What matters in each and every case is an awareness that religions and beliefs are rich, diverse and complex and that they should be engaged with seriously. While it is entirely legitimate to criticise the actions or beliefs of faith groups, the most rounded and productive discussions take place when there is a desire to understand the claims made by people of faith, even if the commentator then moves to criticise them.

<sup>102</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Alwaheed Centre, University of Edinburgh, [24/04/2020]

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Church of Latter-Day Saints, [01/05/2020]

<sup>105</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Media Bishops, [29/04/2020]

<sup>106</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Sandford St Martin Trust, [24/04/2020]

<sup>107</sup> Notelovitz, L.S.G., Pierce, J., Kape, B., Baxter, R., Boyd, P. 2019. How a conference call sparked America's abortion obsession – Video explainer. The Guardian. [Online]. 1 August 2019. [Accessed 18.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2019/aug/01/how-a-conference-call-sparked-americas-abortion-obsession-video-explainer>

<sup>108</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Sandford St Martin Trust, [24/04/2020]

<sup>109</sup> Parris, M. 2019. Islam can't be the only faith above criticism. The Times. [Online]. 17 May 2019. [Accessed 21.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/islamophobia-leads-us-back-to-blasphemy-laws-0jsj2wxqk>

## Chapter 3

# THE EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS ILLITERACY ON SOCIETY

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Religious illiteracy in the media has a profound effect on society. This comes in several forms: a reduced quality of public debate; discriminatory attitudes towards people of faith; and scepticism towards the media.

### A reduced quality of public debate

A religiously illiterate media will inevitably fail at one of its primary purposes; to educate and inform. As noted by the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs, 'One of the fundamental and important roles of the media landscape is that it is a tool for education, providing the population with information that would otherwise be inaccessible. With this information, populations are able to make better-informed decisions. If, however, broadcast or print media is not sharing accurate information about large groups of people, or pockets of the population, it runs the risk of falling short of this aim.'<sup>110</sup>

If the media continues to represent religion as an out of touch minority, it will fail to recognise some very basic trends. Theos' recent report found that London is now the UK's most religiously active region.<sup>111</sup> While London is often represented as a hot-bed of liberal secularity, Theos found that 'what we can say with confidence is London is not currently a secular city, or if it is, its secularism is not popular but elite.'<sup>112</sup> One reason that this reality has been so widely missed is because it does not conform to popular narratives circulated by the media. It is useful to note here the view given in one submission that 'the priorities of the media are too driven by metropolitan perspectives.'<sup>113</sup> Both views are concurrently true if we recognise that the media is driven more specifically by the wealthier, whiter and more secular perspectives within the metropolis. The parts of London being represented – often wealthy, white and professional – may well have become increasingly secular in the last 50 years. These are overwhelming the parts of society journalists tend to come from and they appear to be reflecting their own experiences more than the wider society they live in. It should not come as a surprise then that many people of faith do not recognise the city as it is so often represented.

Perhaps the primary failure of religious illiteracy is the failure to educate and inform. This is particularly pronounced for public service broadcasters who have a duty to do this but the need for the press to disseminate knowledge and challenge ignorance is also well established and widely respected. In a society where the majority of citizens have not gone to university and so left formal education before they turn twenty, the media is the primary medium by which ideas are circulated. Newspapers and broadcasters alike have a duty to use the facts at their disposal to foster a more informed understanding of the world around us. Where inaccuracies are perpetuated in mainstream media outlets, they can become broadly established as true. Jasveer Singh of the Sikh Press Association described the reporting on a Vaisakhi, a Sikh festival. Widely and incorrectly described by various media as the Sikh New Year, the Sikh PA engaged with IPSO over a Times article in 2018 which described the festival as Sikh New Year:

'To cut a long story short, they basically took the side of the Times and they said this mistake has been repeated so much by the media because you can Google right now, BBC and Vaisakhi and you'll see various pages referring to Vaisakhi as the Sikh New year, this mistake has been repeated so much that we don't feel the Times is at fault here.'<sup>114</sup>

This understanding of Vaisakhi is now deeply embedded, to the frustration of many Sikhs in the UK whose religion is now frequently misrepresented. Going beyond a failure to educate, the media has now fostered a false belief such that it is now held by many to be accurate.

Despite its deep cultural roots in the UK, basic misrepresentations also characterise depictions of Christianity. An example of this was *Downton Abbey*, a hit ITV show which reportedly went to some effort not to show the main family saying grace. Removing this practice has little obvious dramatic purpose and removes an important detail about how lives were led in the period depicted. The comments of the series' historical advisor are instructive: Speaking to the *Telegraph*, he said: "I think that the view was that we'd leave religion out of it. I suggested a Latin grace, but they decided that was too far, and no one would've known what was going on".<sup>115</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs, [05/04/2020].

<sup>111</sup> Bickley, P., Mladin, N. 2020. Religious London. Theos. [Online]. [Accessed 01.07 2020]. Available from: <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2019/02/19/religious-london>

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Media Bishops, [29/04/2020]

<sup>114</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Jasveer Singh, Sikh Press Association, [14/05/2020]

<sup>115</sup> Foster, P. 2015. God banished from *Downton Abbey*, says show's historical advisor. *The Daily Telegraph*. [Online]. 15 November 2015.

Peter Fincham, ITV's director of television, also revealed that the channel considered renaming the series because it featured the word 'Abbey' in the title. When religion is avoided in this way, modern viewers end up with a distorted view of this country's past. Such aversion to representing normal practices of early 20th-century life also demonstrates a failure to recognise the capacity of broadcasting programming to inform as well as entertain. It is a problem if viewers do not know 'what was going on when grace takes place because it displays a worrying lack of knowledge about this country's past and the reality of life for many of our fellow citizens today.

Over time, a failure to educate can create deep social divides. Numerous polls have shown that the British public derives much of its information from the media and is generally quite ill-informed about Islam and Muslims. A YouGov poll conducted in 2018 by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) found that of the 1,629 Britons surveyed, 90% had not been inside a mosque in recent years.<sup>116</sup> Another poll conducted by YouGov in 2002 found that 74% knew "nothing or next to nothing about Islam" and 64% stated that what they did know was "acquired through the media".<sup>117</sup>

The understanding many have acquired through the media is a troubling one. According to Hope not Hate's 2017 report, 39% of people overestimate the amount of Muslims in British society, while just 13% estimated the correct figure of nearly 5%.<sup>118</sup> This misunderstanding affected all groups; only 4% of Muslims accurately estimated the number of Muslims there were in Britain. A 2016 Ipsos Mori 'Perils of Perception' poll, found that most people think 1 in 6 Britons are Muslim, when fewer than 1 in 20 are.<sup>119</sup> A 2018 poll found that this is not improving.<sup>120</sup>

Hope Not Hate's in-depth 2017 analysis of public attitudes towards Muslims found that there is a now sizable percentage of the population (52%) who agree that Islam poses a serious threat to Western civilisation, a central tenet of anti-Muslim ideology.<sup>121</sup> Their report noted that 'consistently, since 2006, polling has produced data concluding that one in four or one in five people in the UK hold strongly negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims, specifically when asked about integration and associations with violence'.<sup>122</sup>

In research conducted by YouGov for Hope not Hate in 2018, in a sample of 10,383 people, 32% of believed that there were no-go areas in Britain where Sharia law dominates and non-Muslims cannot enter, with almost half of all Leave voters (49%) and Conservative voters (47%) stating that this was the case.<sup>123</sup> Hope not Hate noted that 'discussions in less diverse areas were less informed, and opinions were often drawn from the media and peer group debate'.<sup>124</sup> This clearly provides the media with a significant amount of responsibility. This illiteracy does not just impact Muslim communities. Recent years have seen numerous examples of attacks on Sikhs based on the assumption that they are Muslims. Beyond the appalling discriminatory attitudes this demonstrates, it shows a view of faith groups based only on clothing perceived as 'other'.

<sup>116</sup> Muslim Council of Britain. 2018. 90% of people haven't been inside a mosque - change that this weekend. [Online]. 13 February 2018. [Accessed 04.08.2020]. Available from: <https://mcb.org.uk/press-releases/90-of-people-havent-been-inside-a-mosque-change-thatthis-weekend/>

<sup>117</sup> YouGov. 2002. Attitudes Towards British Muslims, A survey commissioned for Islam Awareness Week 2002 by the Islamic Society of Britain 4th November. [Online]. 4 November 2002. <http://www.isb.org.uk/iaw/docs/SurveyIAW2002.pdf>

<sup>118</sup> Carter, R., Lowles, N. 2017. Fear and Hope 2017: Race, Faith, and Belonging in Today's England. Hope Not Hate. [Online]. [Accessed 12.07.2020]. Available from: <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/fear-and-hope-4-2017-08-final-2.pdf>. p7.

<sup>119</sup> Ipsos MORI. 2016. Perceptions are not reality. [Online]. 14 December 2016. [Accessed 05.09.2020]. Available from: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/perceptions-are-not-reality-what-world-gets-wrong>

<sup>120</sup> Ipsos MORI. 2018. Perils of Perception 2018. [Online]. [Accessed 05.09.2020]. Available from:

<https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-12/ipsos-mori-perils-of-perception-2018.pdf>

<sup>121</sup> Hope Not Hate. 2017. Societal Attitudes to Islam and Muslims. [Online]. [Accessed 17.08.2020]. Available from: [https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/research/islamophobia-hub/societal-attitudes-islam-muslims/#\\_edn28](https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/research/islamophobia-hub/societal-attitudes-islam-muslims/#_edn28),

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. 123 Carter, R. 2018. Fear, Hope and Loss. Understanding the Drivers of Hope and Hate. Hope Not Hate. [Online]. [Accessed 02.09.2020]. Available from: <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/FINAL-VERSION.pdf>. p14.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. p13.

Alongside negative coverage, religious illiteracy can lead to particular faiths and denominations receiving a disproportionate quantity of coverage, to the exclusion of others. Professor Peter Hopkins described how 'a lack of religious literacy can result in the focus of broadcast and print media being about Christianity, Judaism and Islam to the exclusion of other forms of religion and belief. This means that minority religions, such as Sikhism and Hinduism, tend to receive minimal coverage, are ignored completely or end up being conflated with other religions'.<sup>125</sup> We should note that the homogenising representations of Judaism and negative portrayals of Muslim show that more coverage is not necessarily good coverage. Further, while Abrahamic faiths may receive disproportionate discussion, such coverage will often engage exclusively with prominent branches of those faiths. However, a focus on particular faiths – even when that focus is negative – leads to a narrowing of coverage such that important stories are ignored. A submission from a broadcast journalist supported this perspective when explaining that 'it is still really difficult getting 'spiritual but not religious' stories through and also stories that are not about the main Abrahamic faiths, particularly those outside of the western world'.<sup>126</sup>

The failure to represent diverse cultures and faiths is particularly inexcusable in light of the growing diversity of the UK over the last century as immigrants from outside of the three Abrahamic faiths have settled in the UK and become citizens. There are now over 400,000 Sikhs and 800,000 Hindus; failing to acknowledge them creates a misleading representation of modern Britain. An AHRC-funded study described in Professor Peter Hopkins's submission highlighted the impact of such misrepresentation. The study worked with 382 young people from diverse ethnic religious and cultural backgrounds to understand better the everyday experiences of Muslim and non-Muslim young people growing up in Scotland. The study found that, of the participants from ethnic minorities, 'the vast majority [...] are assumed to be Muslim even although they may be Sikh, Hindu, Christian or of no faith at all. All of seventeen Sikhs who we interviewed in Scotland in [the study] said that they had been mistaken for being Muslim, as did many Hindus. Furthermore, a number of Central and Eastern European migrants claimed to be misrecognised as belonging to the Islamic faith which may be down to them being 'not quite white''.<sup>127</sup> Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal has conducted extensive research specifically on the history and impact of Sikhs being mistaken for Muslims; as she summarised in her submission, 'it was clear that across the board, whether that be amongst the public, school or university students, media or government circles, people did not always know the difference between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims'.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Peter Hopkins, Newcastle University, in collaboration with Dr Robin Finlay, Dr Kawtar Najib, Dr Katherine Botterill and Dr Gurchathen Sanghera, [24/04/2020].

<sup>126</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Sophia Smith Galer, BBC Video and Social Media Journalist, [22/04/2020].

<sup>127</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Peter Hopkins, Newcastle University, in collaboration with Dr Robin Finlay, Dr Kawtar Najib, Dr Katherine Botterill and Dr Gurchathen Sanghera, [24/04/2020]. The study in question was 'Encountering Misrecognition: Being Mistaken for Being Muslim'.

<sup>128</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal [03/06/2020]. She explores this issue at length in Jhutti-Johal, J., Singh, H. (2019). *Racialisation, Islamophobia and Mistaken Identity: The Sikh Experience*. London: Routledge.



The tendency of mainstream media to focus on particular faiths to the exclusion of others is becoming ever more outdated as the world continues to become more connected. The rise of nationalism in India and increasingly in Thailand; separatist movements in the Tibetan region of China and the Punjab region of India; conflict in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. These issues are often treated as political disputes or ethnic clashes and they are both of these things. However, religion is deeply woven into each of them. A framing of these issues that does not involve religion will be misleading and will fail to equip the public with a rounded understanding of the world today. At a more local level, Yoga and meditation are often written about and discussed as 'fads' or aesthetic choices when for many both hold strong religious and philosophical associations that are ignored in Western media and culture.

### **Discriminatory attitudes towards people of faith:**

The impact of the media on popular beliefs has long been an area of study for communications experts (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) and more recent work has attempted to link media coverage with particular instances of violence and prejudice. Eileen Barker described the capacity of journalism to 'create inaccurate and/or one-sided images of the religion concerned, and thereby foster prejudice, discrimination and general misunderstanding, which can result in a wide range of emotional, psychological and physical harm, and, on occasion, gross violations of human rights'.<sup>129</sup> Dr Munnik's submission points to international examples to highlight the dangers of misrepresentation;

News reports can also trigger specific violence: scholars highlight non-UK examples of media complicity in social violence involving religion: the secular US state against a religious group, the Branch Davidians in Waco (Wessinger, 2006); the Myanmar state with a national Buddhist religion against a religious minority, the Rohingya Muslims (Lee, 2019); sectarian violence among Christians of different ethnicities in Rwanda (Mitchell, 2012).<sup>130</sup>

It would be calming to think that such complicity could not take place here. However, we received thorough and detailed evidence discussing the various ways in which consistent misreporting can and has engendered harm in the UK. In particular, the last decade has also seen profoundly worrying reemergence of both antisemitism and Islamophobia across British society. All three submissions focussing on the Jewish community described a broad lack of understanding of their community. This has been blamed in part on the rise of social media but mainstream outlets have also played a role. By failing to represent the Jewish community in its full diversity, a shallow understanding of the religion has developed which, in a vocal minority, has transmuted into fullblown antisemitism.

A feeling that the media – and in particular the press – have played an active role in fostering anti-Muslim sentiment was more extensively evidenced in the submissions which we received and a growing body of academic literature. Imam Qari Asim noted that 'there is sometimes conflation of religion with criminality in particular', a conflation which he argued 'feeds directly into attitudes of Islamophobia and racist views'.<sup>131</sup> A joint report by Professor Peter Hopkins, Dr John Clayton and Tell Mama included the findings of an online survey they ran which found 'a general agreement that the printed media (89.7%), broadcast media (82.5%) and social media (83.5%) increase Islamophobia'.<sup>132</sup> Focus groups convened for the same report reflected this view, commenting on the association between Muslims and terrorism and the perceived disparity of reporting on terror incidents involving Muslims and non-Muslims. This perception is a valid one; analysis by communications specialists Signal A.I. showed that Islamist attackers are three times more likely to be called terrorists in the media than Far-Right attackers.<sup>133</sup> They noted that the Christchurch attack was 'exceptional, in an attack by a white person, in how willing the media was to label the attacker a terrorist'.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Eileen Barker, Professor Emeritus, London School of Economics, [18/04/2020].

<sup>130</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion by Dr Michael Munnik, Cardiff University, [04/24/2020].

<sup>131</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Imam Qari Asim, 18/05/2020

<sup>132</sup> Hopkins, P., Clayton, J., Tell Mama. 2020. Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hatred in North East England. [Online]. <https://www.tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ISLAMOPHOBIA-AND-ANTI-MUSLIM-HATRED-IN-NORTH-EAST-ENGLAND-090620.pdf>

<sup>133</sup> Moore, B. 2019. Lessons from Christchurch: How the media finally acknowledged far-right terrorism. Signal. [Online]. 3 April 2019. [Accessed 14.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.signal-ai.com/blog/lessons-from-christchurch-how-the-media-finally-acknowledged-far-right-terrorism>

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

A US-based study found that when controlled for a number of characteristics, terrorist attacks by a Muslim perpetrator attract on average about 4.5 times more media coverage than those perpetrated by non-Muslims.<sup>135</sup> A CfMM report this year provided in-depth evidence that the same trends exist in the UK. It found 'a significant disparity in the association of "terror" between so-called Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators: over half of the terms "terrorist", "terrorism" or "terror" were used with the terms "Islam" or "Muslim" – almost nine times more than when the perpetrator was identified with the terms "far-right", "neo-Nazi" or "white supremacist"'.<sup>136</sup> LSE study suggested that coverage in the aftermath of terrorist attacks can in turn lead to further violence. Using empirical connections between anti-Muslim hate crimes and international terror attacks, they found that 'local Muslim populations face a media-magnified likelihood of hate crime victimization in the days following such incidents'.<sup>137</sup>

*"But the reality is that at the moment [...] I'm scared about going on public transport. I'm scared for my daughter who would tomorrow go on public transport, who happens to wear a headscarf. And I don't think I should be. I'm a member of this society. I'm a member of this community."<sup>138</sup>*  
Anjum Peerbacos, Co-founder of AVOW

In 2018, a ComRes poll into Islamophobia found a majority of those surveyed agreed that the mainstream media was a key source in perpetuating Islamophobia in our society (40% agreed, 18% strongly agreed). When asked 'do you think the marginalisation of Islam in British public life is increasing, decreasing or staying the same' in the media, 37% said it was increasing, 31% felt it was staying the same and just 10% felt it was decreasing (21% did not know).<sup>139</sup> Deeply prejudiced views have been fuelled for several decades such that an entire faith has become deeply distorted in the public imagination. Imam Qari Asim emphasised this point when arguing that consistently misrepresentation 'fuels hatred and prejudice', causing 'increased anti-Muslim hatred, which is obviously not a healthy sign of society. So media does have some responsibility towards creating that kind of division between communities'.<sup>140</sup> Evidence provided to us by Dr Jhutti-Johal and the Sikh Press Association also emphasised that the impact of rising prejudice does not just impact Muslims; Sikhs are often mistaken for Muslims and abused on that basis.

One of the issues raised repeatedly in written and oral evidence was the misrepresentation of Muslim women and the impact this has on their lives. As argued by a submission from AVOW (Advancing Voices of Women Against Islamophobia), media commentary rarely acknowledges or recognises the impact it has on the subject of discussion; "Muslim women and what they wear, or as the media commentary more properly reported in the subject, what Muslim women should wear, is obviously news fodder. Much less consideration is given to the impact of the way in which reporting on the subject unfolds, the inclusion of Muslim women's voices, and the framing of the debate on Muslim women".<sup>141</sup> This dynamic, whereby Muslim women are debated by a largely secular media and rarely if ever allowed to respond, has fostered a deeply stereotypical view of Muslim women that silences them even while it discusses them rampantly.

<sup>135</sup> Kearns, E.M., Betus, A., Lemieux, A. 2019. Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?. Justice Quarterly, 36:6, 985-1022. [Accessed 07.05.2020]. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07418825.2018.1524507>

<sup>136</sup> Centre for Media Monitoring. 2020. CfMM Special Report: How The British Media Reports Terrorism. [Online]. 24 August 2020. [Accessed 27.08.2020]. Available from: <https://cfmm.org.uk/resources/publication/cfmm-special-report-how-british-media-reports-terrorism/>

<sup>137</sup> Ivandic, R., Kirchmaier, T., Machin, Stephen. 2019. Jihadi Attacks, Media and Local Hate Crime. [Online]. April 2019. [Accessed 28.05.2020]. Available from: <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1615.pdf>

<sup>138</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Anjum Peerbacos, Co-founder of AVOW, [30/06/2020].

<sup>139</sup> ComRes. 2018. MEND - Islamophobia Poll October 2018. [Online]. [Accessed 07.05.2020]. Available from:

<https://2sjjwunnq141ia7ki31qub1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/MEND-Islamophobia-Poll-October-2018-1.pdf>

<sup>140</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Imam Qari Asim, [18/05/2020].

<sup>141</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by AVOW, [30/06/2020].

Very rarely are Muslim women shown having agency or as individuals. Professor Tony McEnery described the frequency with which Muslim are targeted and vilified through discriminatory imagery 'as Daleks or letterboxes or Darth Vader, bats, vampires, etcetera'.<sup>142</sup> In *Muslim Women in Britain* (2012),<sup>143</sup> Cheruvallil-Contractor explored Muslim women's perceptions of media coverage of themselves. The central message from over 50 women interviewed for this research was that portrayals of Muslim women in the media are overwhelmingly inaccurate and often negative:

"About Muslim women the media is not just inaccurate, it looks at Muslim women in terms of pitying them, as oppressed [...] They look at us with a lens of pity and of looking down at us – that we are not progressing and that we are somehow incapable of thinking for ourselves. That we don't know what happens in the world, that we have been misguided in the religion."  
Young British Muslim woman.<sup>144</sup>

Over time, negative and misrepresentative depictions of minorities have a devastating impact on communities themselves as many come to question their own identity and sense of belonging. At Channel 4's Annual Diversity Lecture at the House of Commons in March 2017, Riz Ahmed, a British actor and activist, stated that a lack of diverse voices and stories in broadcasting can lead those from minority backgrounds to "switch off and retreat to fringe narratives, to bubbles online and sometimes even off to Syria... If we fail to represent, we are in danger of losing people to extremism... Where is the counternarrative? Where are we telling these kids they can be heroes in our stories, that they are valued?"<sup>145</sup>

## Distrust of the media

These are very real problems for the media as much as they are for wider society. Print media is increasingly struggling and traditional broadcasting faces an existential threat from on-demand content. When whole groups feel that their views are systematically represented they become increasingly likely to simply disengage.

Inaccurate reporting can lead to whole communities developing fearful or actively antagonistic relationships with the media. This is true at both national and local levels. Community reporter Rachael Nichol noted that bad representation can lead to groups 'feeling like they can't trust the press'. Michael Wakelin described how repeated mistakes can 'undermine'<sup>146</sup> the confidence religious communities have in the British media. They don't feel safe when religious stories are being covered for fear their precious beliefs may be distorted or used to incite hatred. Many, especially Muslims, have lost all patience with the leading media outlets.<sup>147</sup> Research suggests that media and political attention on Muslim minorities has led Muslims to give detached and distant answers to reporters' questions, a response labelled by the academic as an 'understandable fatigue'.<sup>148</sup> One representative of a different faith group expressed their frustration at journalists and explained how repeated bad experiences have led them to not provide quotes; 'Sorry, but we haven't got time because people think that as they are press, we are just jumping up and down and dance to their tune. But we don't need to do that'.<sup>149</sup> This frustration is understandable but a breakdown between the press and a community it seeks to represent is profoundly troubling.

<sup>142</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Tony McEnery, Lancaster University, [11/05/2020].

<sup>143</sup> Contractor, S. 2012. *Muslim Women in Britain: De-mystifying the Muslimah*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>144</sup> Quoted in written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, [01/05/2020]

<sup>145</sup> Ellis-Petersen, H. 2017. Riz Ahmed Warns Lack of Diversity on TV Will Drive Young to Isis. *The Guardian*. [Online]. March 2 2017. [Accessed 2.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/mar/02/riz-ahmed-warns-lack-of-diversity-on-tv-will-drive-young-to-isis>

<sup>146</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Rachael Nichol, [18/05/2020].

<sup>147</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Michael Wakelin, [24/04/2020].

<sup>148</sup> Schmidt, G. (2011). Understanding and approaching Muslim visibilities: lessons learned from a fieldwork-based study of Muslims in Copenhagen. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34(7), 1216–1229, quoted in Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the media by the Alwaleed Centre [24/04/2020]

<sup>149</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Trupti Patel, Hindu Forum of Britain, [14/05/2020].

<sup>150</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Sandford St Martin Trust, [24/04/2020].

The Sandford St Martin Trust reiterated this point, describing the real possibility that ‘journalists and broadcasters who ignore religion risk alienating audiences’<sup>150</sup> The example of the US was adduced by several submissions here where a media widely understood as secular leads to a growing sense of disenfranchisement and disaffection between religious constituencies and the media. Michael Gerson, President Bush’s speechwriter, noted how during the 2000 US election George W Bush made the off-the-cuff remark that “we ought to take the log out of our own eye before calling attention to the speck in the eye of our neighbour.”<sup>151</sup> Many reporters and their editors failed to recognise the biblical reference, an allusion not lost on Evangelical voters. It can be argued that this sort of condescension and lack of religious literacy did much to widen the gap between religious constituencies and the mainly secular media – an effect which is still being felt in US politics today.

The impact of negative representation can lead to minority groups feeling antipathy towards mainstream media. This was discussed in a study developed by the University of Cambridge which found that “British minority group disaffection with local media is encouraging their members to turn to media from their regions of origin, which may be concerning for government”<sup>152</sup>. Several faith groups also described their increasing development and use of specialist media run by and for their community. Jasveer Singh of the Sikh PA described the use of YouTube to provide new avenues for representation.<sup>153</sup> New specialist Christian and Muslim channels have emerged alongside online media sites such as 5 Pillars. While this growing breadth of choice is positive, the fragmentation of the media market comes at a cost as shared narratives, experiences and truths undergo the same process.

This comes at a time when trust in the media is low. The 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer report found 36% of the UK have ‘trust in media’, a 5% rise on the year before but still 7 percentage points behind Germany, 11 behind the U.S. and 20 behind Canada.<sup>154</sup> This year’s Reuters Institute Digital News Report found that ‘trust in the news has fallen over 20 percentage points since 2015. Even the most trusted brands like the BBC are seen by many as pushing or suppressing agendas – especially over polarising issues like Brexit.’<sup>155</sup> As stated in the submission from the Media Bishops ‘The greatest loss [as a result of religious illiteracy] is that trust in the media itself is eroded. When millions of people fail to see and hear the things they do know about reported accurately, they will be disinclined to believe that any subject which they know less well will be reliably represented.’<sup>156</sup>

Unless this is rectified, it can have profound longterm effects. Newspapers will continue to decline at a time when many are already under financial strain. With regard to broadcasters, a BBC journalist described communities feeling underreported and misrepresented as ‘an existential concern for broadcasters like the BBC who have a distinct remit to serve all audiences.’<sup>157</sup> If those audiences do not feel represented and turn away to find new outlets, public service broadcasters are failing to achieve their remit.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> University of Cambridge. 2016. Media fuelling rising hostility towards Muslims in Britain, University of Cambridge/ESRC Roundtable held at the House of Lords. [Online]. 28 April 2016. [Accessed 06.06.2020] Available from: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/mediafueling-rising-hostility-towards-muslims-in-britain>

<sup>153</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Jasveer Singh, Sikh Press Association, [14/05/2020].

<sup>154</sup> Edelman. 2019. Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report. [Online]. [Accessed 01.09.2020]. Available from [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019\\_Edelman\\_Trust\\_Barometer\\_Global\\_Report.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report.pdf)

<sup>155</sup> Newman, N., Fletcher, R. Schulz, A., Andi, S., Nielsen, R.K. 2019. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020. Reuters Institute. The University of Oxford. [Online]. [accessed 20.08.2020]. Available from: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR\\_2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf)

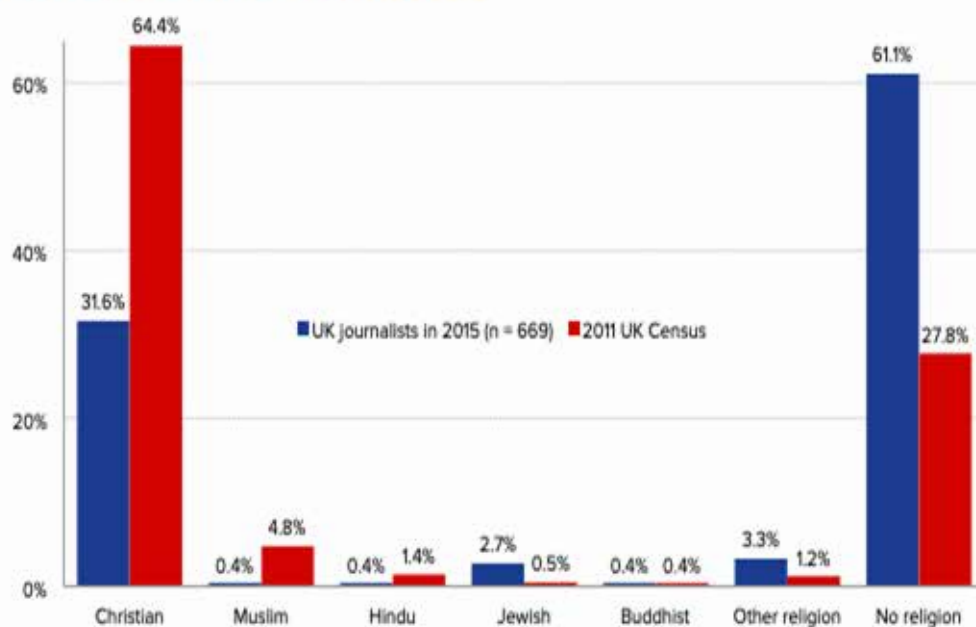
<sup>156</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Media Bishops, [29/04/2020].

<sup>157</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Sophia Smith Galer, [22/04/2020]

## Chapter 4

# RELIGIOUS LITERACY THROUGH EDUCATION

**FIGURE 1.3a: PERCENTAGE OF UK JOURNALISTS AFFILIATED WITH A RELIGION (OR NONE) COMPARED WITH THE 2011 CENSUS.**



Question 3 of our call for evidence asked ‘When, where and how is religious literacy learnt?’ Although there were numerous different formulations, many submissions included some variation of ‘at home’ or ‘in the family’ as part of their answer. As one response from a faith group described, ‘Religious literacy is initially learnt at home from parents who give a basic understanding of their faith’.<sup>158</sup> Although this may be true of those born into religious families, that group is a minority in the journalistic profession. Indeed, research has shown that journalists are disproportionately non-religious, white and middle-class. This is an issue; as argued in AVOW’s submission, ‘we cannot expect our media to do justice to the lives and views of religious groups in society when individuals writing or producing these insights have either no attachment to or little understanding of the communities which they cover’.<sup>159</sup>

AVOW highlighted a 2016 study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism which found that, compared to the rest of the population, journalists in the UK are much less likely to ascribe to a religious belief.<sup>160</sup> 61% of journalists surveyed stated that they had no religion while only 27.8% said the same in the 2011 census. Although comparing the 2001 and 2011 census suggests that the proportion of people who identify as non-religious is increasing, extrapolating this to 2016 would still not account for the size of the disparity. Most major religions are also unrepresented; there are under half as many Christian journalists as would be expected if journalism matched wider society and one-twelfth as many Muslims.

<sup>158</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Hindu Forum of Britain, [07/05/2020]

<sup>159</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by AVOW, [30/06/2020].

<sup>160</sup> Thurman, N., Cornia, A. and Kunert, Jessica. 2016. Journalists in the UK, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. [Online]. [accessed 01.08.2020]. Available from: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/14664/1/Journalists%20in%20the>



In many regards, it does not matter what religion a journalist ascribes to, or whether they do at all. Good journalists should be able to engage with religious issues sensitively and knowledgeably through the process that one respondent described as just 'doing their job'; fact-checking, engaging with sources and relating events accurately. However, as we shall explore more in Chapters 6 and 7, having people who care about faith – a group that intersects significantly with those of faith – in the newsroom when decisions are made is important.

The level of disproportionality is also concerning because it suggests significant barriers may exist to some people of faith entering the profession of journalism; the above data implies this is particularly true of Muslims. Minority faiths are often disproportionately likely to be poor and from first- or second-generation immigrant backgrounds. This means that there are significant barriers which may prevent them from entering a highly professionalised, predominantly middle-class profession such as journalism. These barriers will not be overcome without significant thought, effort and funding. This disproportionality of non-religious journalists also demonstrates why religious literacy education is vital. Where religious literacy is not learnt at home, it falls to educators to provide it.

## Education

We received extensive information on the quality of religious education in the UK today. While our focus is the media, it was made clear that primary and secondary education also play an important role in providing the basic standard of religious literacy on which people then build. It is important to emphasise that this is not the primary area of focus of this Inquiry. However, we attempt to deal substantively with it because a) we received numerous, excellent submissions which showed the severity of the perceived problem and b) because it provides a vital context for understanding what later education must cover.

Evidence provided to our Inquiry showed that religious literacy training for journalists is patchy and uncoordinated. It is perfectly possible for a journalist to pass through primary, secondary, and university education, receive professional qualifications and work as a full-time journalist without sustained engagement with religious literacy. There is some joined-up, proactive work now being done by a number of organisations; they need support and buy-in from newspapers and broadcasters.

## Primary and Secondary Education

In responses to Question 3 [where is religious literacy learnt], alongside 'the family', 'schools' was frequently cited as the most important place. As Professor Chris Frost noted, 'Religious literacy is, or should be, taught in schools and so many reporters get their basic knowledge at this level.'<sup>161</sup>

The Ofsted School Inspection Handbook states that "all pupils in maintained schools are expected to study the basic curriculum, which includes national curriculum, religious education and age-appropriate relationship and sex education. Academies are expected to offer all pupils a broad curriculum that should be similar in breadth and ambition."<sup>162</sup> A letter sent from the Department for Education (DfE) to the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (NASACRE) makes clear that the DfE expects that all schools provide pupils with a curriculum that is high quality and promotes progression through the key stages, including in RE.<sup>163</sup>

Several submissions questioned whether this duty is being fulfilled. Dr Paul Smalley highlighted a 2019 NATRE survey which found that "At Key Stage 4 almost 40% of community and 50% of Academy schools without a religious character do not meet their legal or contractual requirements for RE."<sup>164</sup> This corroborated the findings of an earlier report which found that '28% of secondary schools told the Department for Education that they gave no dedicated curriculum time to RE.'<sup>165</sup> That report estimated that around 800,000 pupils were deprived of their legal right to learn about major religions and beliefs. On this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that school leavers cannot be expected to have achieved religious literacy through primary or secondary education. Criticisms of the current depth and standard of RE

<sup>161</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Chris Frost, NUJ Chair of Ethics Council, [02/04/2020].

<sup>162</sup> Ofsted. 2019. School Inspection Handbook. [Online]. [Accessed 16.06.2020]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/843108/School\\_inspection\\_handbook\\_-\\_section\\_5.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/843108/School_inspection_handbook_-_section_5.pdf). p42.

<sup>163</sup> Lawson, N. 2019. Compliance with the duty to teach religious education - Letter from DfE to NASACRE. [Online] 22 March 2019. [Accessed 8 August 2020]. Available from: <http://www.nasacre.org.uk/file/nasacre/1-97-item-2.pdf>

NATRE. 2019. An analysis of a survey of teachers on the impact of government policy on student opportunity to study GCSE. [Online]. July 2019. [accessed 28.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/NATRE%20EBacc%20Survey%202019%20FINAL%20v3.pdf>. p2.

NATRE. 2017. The State of the Nation: A report on Religious Education provision within secondary schools in England. [Online]. [accessed 20.07.2020]. Available from: <https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/SOTN%202017%20Report%20web%20version%20FINAL.pdf>. p5

in schools were strongly evidenced in our written submissions; the submission from an academic group described it as ‘in something of a crisis’.<sup>166</sup> Faith in Media argued that ‘The delivery of RE itself can be constrained by a lack of subject specialists and a consequent tendency to treat it as an ‘add-on’ to core humanities subjects.’<sup>167</sup> Inform noted that ‘Provision for RE is often not taken as a serious curriculum requirement’<sup>168</sup>; broadcast journalist Kristine Pommert similarly opined that many leave school with serious knowledge deficits in this area.<sup>169</sup> Others also questioned the content of the wider curriculum; MEND’s submission stated that ‘It is only through this decolonisation of education that a true appreciation for our shared history can be developed and nurtured’.<sup>170</sup> Several also highlighted the central problem of removing the study of religion from the broader social context in which faiths invariably exist. The submission by Dr Paul-François Tremlett, with contributions from other members of his Department, described the tendency to present religions as ‘static essences, defined by unchanging sets of beliefs and practices, set apart from each other and from historical and contemporary social realities such as politics, racism, capitalism and climate change’.<sup>171</sup> It is precisely this understanding of religion which we believe significantly damages the quality of reporting about faith.

Alongside the apparent falling standards in the basic curriculum, fewer students are taking RE as an elective course. A 2019 report by the Religious Education Council found that entries for GCSE RS (combined short and full courses) in England and Wales peaked in 2011 at 461,795: then declined 42.6% in eight years with almost 200,000 fewer pupils last year achieving a qualification in RS at the end of KS4.<sup>172</sup>

Both the National Secular Society<sup>173</sup> and filmmaker

Anwar Akhtar<sup>174</sup> were also strongly critical of faith schools; although they clearly addressed the issue from different perspectives, they shared the belief that these schools deprive children of a rounded understanding of religion, belief and non-belief, and that grouping children in this way reduces the opportunities for cross-cultural interaction.

Although children in diverse areas may well develop understanding through engaging with the faiths and beliefs of their peers, several submissions argued convincingly that we cannot reasonably expect the current curriculum to ensure that students leave school with a reasonable level of knowledge about religion and belief. This becomes an issue if there is an assumption later in the educational journey that religious literacy can be expected.

### Further Education and Professional Qualifications:

Journalism is now a professionalised vocation with high educational requirements to entry. The Standard Occupational Classification (2020) on journalists states that ‘entrants usually possess a degree or equivalent qualification. A variety of postgraduate diplomas is available.’<sup>175</sup> A 2018 NCTJ report found that 81 percent of journalists hold a journalism qualification.<sup>176</sup> This represented an 18 percent increase on 2012 (63 per cent in 2012, 58 per cent in 2002). Over the same period, the proportion whose qualification was from the NCTJ also rose from 73 per cent to 81 percent.<sup>177</sup>

Prior to our Inquiry, there was significant anecdotal evidence that religious literacy was not a particular focus for educational establishments teaching journalists. Dr Michael Munnik’s submission provided an overview of the landscape of journalist education.

“We cannot assume journalists have had proper

<sup>166</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Paul-François Tremlett (Head of Department) with contributions from Dr Hugh Beattie, Professor Graham Harvey, Dr John Maiden, Dr Stefanie Sinclair and Professor John Wolffe, Open University, [01/05/2020].

<sup>167</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Faith in Media, [24/04/2020].

<sup>168</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Inform, [21/04/2020].

<sup>169</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Kirstine Pommert, CTVC, [21/04/2020].

<sup>170</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by MEND, [24/04/2020].

<sup>171</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Paul-François Tremlett (Head of Department) with contributions from Dr Hugh Beattie, Professor Graham Harvey, Dr John Maiden, Dr Stefanie Sinclair and Professor John Wolffe, Open University, [01/05/2020].

<sup>172</sup> Religious Education Council. 2019. Religious Studies GCSE entries fall despite popularity among pupil. 22 August 2019. [accessed 19.05.2020]. <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/religious-studies-gcse-entries-fall-despite-popularity-among-pupils/>

<sup>173</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by National Secular Society, [23/04/2020].

<sup>174</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Anwar Akhtar, Director of Samosa Media, [14/05/2020].

<sup>175</sup> Office for National Statistics. SOC 2020 Volume 1: structure and descriptions of unit groups. [Online]. [accessed 18.08.2020].

Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc/soc2020/soc2020volume1structureanddescriptionsofunitgroups>

<sup>176</sup> Spilsbury, M. 2018. Journalists at Work. NCTJ. October 2018, [Online]. 18.08.2020. <https://www.nctj.com/downloadlibrary/JaW%20Report%202018%20web.pdf>. p5.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. p8.

training in matters relating to religion. Past its compulsory instruction in school (and I recognise even here that such education is uneven and can be inadequate), few will take religion as a subject of further study. Many journalists may not take a degree before training for journalism, going straight into accredited programmes at universities and colleges or perhaps studying a related subject such as media and communications before taking an MA or a diploma. They have mostly learned about journalism, not the stuff that goes into it. Further, we cannot assume journalists have familiarity drawn from a personal identification with a religion: a recent study found over 60 per cent of journalists claimed no religious affiliation – more than double the population as a whole, according to the 2011 census of England and Wales (Thurman et al., 2016). Training is therefore important.”<sup>178</sup>

A variety of respondents corroborated the view that this was a potential area for positive development, with divergent views on what should be included and how it should be encouraged. The Hindu Forum of Britain suggested ‘compulsory modules for all media persons to learn about all major faiths, cultures and their traditions prior to being allowed to write articles, or make statements on Social Media’.<sup>179</sup> The Church of England Comms team also suggested that ‘Serious consideration should also be given to introducing religious literacy as a key component in the training of journalists. This could start with simple seminars covering the basics, on discrete topics, perhaps provided by clergy or specialist trainers. But it might also involve exercises dealing with ‘tricky’ subjects where some religious motivation may come into conflict with accepted, contemporary attitudes’.<sup>180</sup> Exploring how religious literacy could be improved, one journalist’s response argued that ‘much of this can be achieved through education (e.g. making a module on ‘religious affairs’ part of NCTJ training and/ or journalism degrees)’.<sup>181</sup> He also ‘recommend[ed] religious literacy be incorporated into the public affairs exams for all those sitting NCTJ or equivalent exams’.<sup>182</sup>

To explore further the education and training of

journalists, we invited Professor Martin Conboy and Dr Paul Lashmar to provide evidence on universities and Will Gore, Head of Partnerships at the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) to provide an insight into professional qualifications and later professional development.<sup>183</sup> The NCTJ is an awarding institution regulated by Ofqual and the only organisation in the UK which is solely focussed on developing and awarding journalism qualifications.

Dr Paul Lashmar, the Head of the Department of Journalism at City University of London, provided both written and oral evidence. He stated that ‘we don’t teach religious literacy, we would hope that they come with that’.<sup>184</sup> While this is desirable, it seems an optimistic expectation given the inconsistency of religious education in the primary and secondary school system and the wide variety of degrees pursued prior to students pursuing a postgraduate degree at City University.

Dr Lashmar described the ‘Postgrad Ethics modules which are taught across two terms for all PG [postgraduate] students’.<sup>185</sup> The course included several lectures which could reasonably cover religion (‘Reporting Terrorism’ and ‘Policy Ethics’). However, no lectures explicitly discussed religion; an omission we feel could be usefully remedied. When questioned about some negative depictions of faith groups, Dr Lashmar explained that ‘as educators, we can’t make people moral’.<sup>186</sup> He later elaborated ‘there is only so much we can teach students when they are with us [...] I’m not telling them what to think. I’m making sure they are thinking and they have a context in which to think’.<sup>187</sup> This is entirely fair and where an editor decides to wilfully discriminate there is little education can do. However, as Professor Chris Frost noted when providing

<sup>178</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Michael Munnik, Cardiff University, [24/04/2020].

<sup>179</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Hindu Forum of Britain, [21/04/2020].

<sup>180</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Church of England Comms, [07/05/2020].

<sup>181</sup> Daniel Mumby, Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Daniel Mumby, [18/05/2020].

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Professor Conboy is Professor of Journalism History at the University of Sheffield and Dr Lashmar is Head of the Department of Journalism at City, University of London.

<sup>184</sup> Oral evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Paul Lashmar, City, University of London, [21/05/2020].

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

evidence, most mistakes and misrepresentation are likely to stem from ignorance.<sup>188</sup> Targeting this through education certainly is possible. We would suggest that at least one mandatory segment of an ethics course should focus on religion; it is a deeply controversial area and our wider Inquiry finds that there is currently significant religious illiteracy in the media.

Will Gore highlighted<sup>189</sup> the importance of practical skills over specific thematic concerns; the NCTJ's submission noted that their 'primary focus has always been on the fundamentals of good journalism, not necessarily on increasing understanding about particular subject areas (be it religion or politics or health)'.<sup>190</sup> However, the 'NCTJ's qualifications were quite considerably rewritten after the Leveson Inquiry because I think it was an acknowledgement that greater focus needed to be given to regulation, ethics and law and so on'.<sup>191</sup>

Professor Chris Frost provided the sobering but realistic perspective that 'there is a limit to what Universities can do. Journalism programmes are constrained by university requirements, industry requirements and those from accreditation organisations and regulators'.<sup>192</sup> While this may be true, we do not entirely concur with his assessment that a 'decent programme of religious literacy would require a minimum of around 30-50 hours of study including at least five to ten hours contact time', a quantity of time which he argued would be 'difficult to see how this could be managed or even justified'.<sup>193</sup>

While this amount of time may be unjustifiable, currently many courses appear to have no mandatory exploration of religion or assessment of religious illiteracy. Incorporating the broad awareness of the fact that religion matters, as explained in Chapters One and Two, across the whole course, and supplementing that with one or two specific classes on the complexities pertinent to reporting on faith would be, we think, a useful and feasible amendment.

## RECOMMENDATION

Professional media qualifications should include religious literacy training.

<sup>188</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Chris Frost, NUJ, Chair of Ethics Council, [08/06/2020].

<sup>189</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Will Gore, Head of Partnerships & Projects at the NCTJ, [21/05/2020].

<sup>190</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the NCTJ, [15/05/2020].

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Chris Frost, NUJ Chair of Ethics Council, [02/04/2020].

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

## Case Study

### INCREASING DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

Both Dr Lashmar and Will Gore highlighted the positive impact of the ongoing diversification of the students in journalism courses. Dr Lashmar noted that 'younger people in some ways are bringing in a new understanding of religion to universities.' Mr Gore agreed with this point, arguing that:

'The diversification of many student bodies has [...] actually encouraged that understanding of religion and faith. And I think you see that trickling into newsrooms, particularly those where there's [...] a younger demographic in the newsroom'.<sup>195</sup>

Dr Lashmar and Mr Gore also provided examples of various attempts to diversify their intake of students through bursary and scholarship programmes. In subsequent evidence, Mr Gore highlighted the ongoing work of the Journalism Diversity Fund (JDF).

The JDF was established by the NCTJ 15 years ago and is funded by a multitude of media companies (BBC, Sky, Reach, Newsquest, Daily Mail Group, Reuters, FT, Bloomberg, Printing Charity, Google, Newspaper Licensing Agency, Dow Jones, PA Media). It awards bursaries to people from diverse backgrounds who cannot afford to take NCTJ-accredited training courses. Since 2005 it has helped over 350 people study to become journalists at an average cost of a bursary of about £8,000. Other funds and bursaries have emerged, including paid postgraduate placements supported by the Sun and the Daily Mirror at City, University of London through the Widening Media Diversity Scholarship, which aims to develop "a pool of Muslim journalists who can advance diversity in the media industry, improve reporting on religion and minorities in the media, and champion under-represented communities". The Widening Media Diversity Scholarships are jointly funded by the Randeree Charitable Trust and Cosaraf Foundation, in partnership with The Sun and The Mirror newspapers, respectively, and provides tuition fees for a Masters degree in Journalism at City University and employment at the newspapers for periods of up to six months. The scholarships were launched in the 2019-20 academic year.

While these are important positive measures, Professor Conboy questioned whether a process of 'diversification by default' would be sufficient to change cultural practices.<sup>196</sup> Although clear diversification is being actively pursued, increasing diversity alone is unlikely to disturb current practises in hierarchical news organisations.

<sup>194</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Paul Lashmar, Head of the Department of Journalism, City, University of London, [21/05/2020].

<sup>195</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Will Gore, Head of Partnerships & Projects at the NCTJ, [21/05/2020].

<sup>196</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Martin Conboy, University of Sheffield.



## Continued Development Training

A wide variety of submissions suggest that a key answer could be the development and uptake of Continued Professional Development training, as is standardised in other professions. Rosie Dawson, a long-time BBC staffer who now works freelance, wrote, 'journalism college courses could usefully develop modules on religion in the same way that they do in law and public administration/government, but this would not reach the large proportion of journalists who come into the profession via different routes. Clearly developing religious literacy needs to be part of ongoing professional development'.<sup>197</sup> Faith in Media, a charity working to improve the representation of religion in the media, opined that 'there clearly needs to be religious literacy training for media professionals. If compulsory training for news agencies was supported by government grants, then this would remove any excuse for non-compliance'.<sup>198</sup>

Similarly, Culham St Gabriel's noted that 'Media professionals should be supported to develop their religious literacy in post. Teacher continuing professional development materials are adaptable to this purpose. Media professionals should work with religion and worldview specialists in order to improve the religious literacy of outputs'.<sup>199</sup>

There is already work being done in this area. The Religion Media Centre provides briefings and contacts and the Centre for Media Monitoring works directly with editors and journalists. Centre for Media Monitoring Director Rizwana Hamid, described this process:

'We've also been working quite a lot with editors, journalists through [...] one to one meetings, roundtable discussions that we have, the reports that we bring out, but also training and meet the media in advance, because often when we speak to the media, they say, oh, well, we want to cover stories differently and we want to cover religion and, you know, BAME communities, but we just don't know how to reach these where they are. What stories? When you speak to people on the ground, they're saying we've got stories to tell, but we don't know how to get them across'.<sup>200</sup>

Most journalists continue to receive some kind of training throughout their career. The NCTJ 2018 report *Journalists at Work* found that 'the majority of journalists (55 per cent) had undertaken some learning activity in the previous 12 months'.<sup>201</sup> However, it appears that ongoing training and education appears to relate primarily to developing new technological and practical skills. Mr Gore noted that:

"What doesn't happen is you don't get that sense of progression through a journalist's career of developing skills other than perhaps around technology where there may be skills development and training. [...] It's an area that the NCTJ has been involved in for a long time but in a fairly ad hoc way. And I do think there is there is a good argument to say that a more compelling and structured system of professional development within the industry would be a positive thing."<sup>202</sup>

His written submission detailed some of the steps the NCTJ is taking to provide further training:

"The NCTJ has increasingly recognised the need to develop skills not only around journalistic techniques or changing technology but also around specific topics beyond the practice of journalism per se. Last year, we ran an innovative course for journalists interested in women's sport; this year we are running a course which has a particular focus on disability issues."<sup>203</sup>

It also highlighted the Community News Project, a programme funded by Facebook involving nine regional news publishers, for which the NCTJ has run sessions for community reporters on a range of issues including political elections, self-harm and suicide, and religion. The latter was run in partnership with the Religion Media Centre.

<sup>197</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Rosie Dawson, [24/04/2020].

<sup>198</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Faith in Media, [24/04/2020].

<sup>199</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Culham St Gabriel's, [21/04/2020].

<sup>200</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Rizwana Hamid, Director, Centre for Media Monitoring, [18/05/2020].

<sup>201</sup> Spilsbury, M. 2018. *Journalists at Work*. NCTJ. October 2018, [Online]. 18.08.2020. <https://www.nctj.com/downloadlibrary/JaW%20Report%202018%20web.pdf>. p8.

<sup>202</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Will Gore, Head of Partnerships & Projects at the NCTJ, [21/05/2020].

<sup>203</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the NCTJ, [15/05/2020]

We welcome Mr Gore's openness to a more structured system and agree that this could have a positive impact. There is already some work being done on this front and a number of organisations were discussed. The Religion Media Centre is working to provide briefings to journalists and over the course of the Covid-19 crisis, it has hosted weekly Zoom calls on topical issues open to journalists. Faith-specific organisations such as the Centre for Media Monitoring have also run a variety of roundtables bringing together people of faith and journalists.

Dr Munnik described partaking in several sessions in the last five years, some of which were hosted by local branches of the NUJ.

"The most concerted effort was a pair of workshops in 2016 and 2017 organised by NUJ Training Wales and hosted by news organisations – ITV Wales and BBC Wales. These events served over 80 and over 100 and were day-long workshops bringing journalists from Cardiff and South Wales together with members of faith communities to understand each other's needs and foster better relations.<sup>204</sup>

A more formalized approach which builds on the work by the NUJ, the NCTJ and specialist organisations like the Religion Media Centre and the Centre for Media Monitoring could have a significant impact. This could be modelled on the CPD training already standard in many other industries and currently used in journalism to improve technical skills.

## RECOMMENDATION

Religious literacy training should be developed as a key part of continuing professional development for journalists.

<sup>204</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Michael Munnik, Cardiff University, [24/04/2020]

## Chapter 5

# STEPS JOURNALISTS AND RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS CAN TAKE

The following chapters will explore print and broadcast media in more detail. In this chapter, we explore some of the suggestions provided for steps that journalists and religious organisations can take to improve religious literacy in the media more generally.

*“I don’t think that covering faith groups sensitively is essentially different from covering any other groups that way. Our trade notoriously reflects and amplifies popular prejudices. “How do you cover Muslims sensitively?” is a question similar to “How do you cover Germans sensitively?” and just as difficult for the press to answer. You need to recognise the diversities and class differences within any faith label. You need to listen to people and have conversations with them, not just quote extraction. You need a genuine interest in the story and the people for their own sakes. None of this is easy, especially in today’s ever more pressurised media environment. But there are few shortcuts. You try to avoid stereotypes, but need to recognise that completely ignoring or treating as unspeakable the half-truths behind most stereotypes is a self-defeating strategy, especially in the age of social media”.*  
Andrew Brown<sup>205</sup>

### Recognise that religion matters

This may seem a simplistic statement but it is too rarely the case and worth emphasising. Although he clearly supports more and better religious literacy training, Dr Munnik argues that there’s a limit to what can be accomplished in a day of teaching. The most crucial thing to convey ‘is the importance of getting religion right – that it matters deeply to many people and ought to be taken seriously. The work for journalists is, first, to recognise that the story matters and that their knowledge may not be adequate to report it fairly and accurately and, second, to get the knowledge they need’.<sup>206</sup>

Religion is here to stay and a media that fails to recognise this will inevitably be out of touch and increasingly viewed as such by a large and significant minority. There are few areas where religion is irrelevant, if only because there are no major fields where no one of religion works. In every part of life and society, religion and belief is part of the story. The view that religion was irrelevant was always a misleading one; between 2000 and 2019, the height of post-secularity, all four Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom were people who have at various points expressed a religious conviction. Gordon Brown’s memoir argued that ‘to expect those of us with strong beliefs to leave them at the door of the House of Commons or No 10 is to require us to bring an incomplete version of ourselves into the public arena’<sup>207</sup> Theresa May stated while in office that ‘faith guides me in everything I do’.<sup>208</sup> Ignoring this fact does not make it go away.

This does not mean being uncritical. The media plays a vital role in rooting out hypocrisies and exposing when a religious group or person is acting harmfully or cynically. However, even this is best done from a position of understanding rather than ignorance.

### Develop relationships and engage in ongoing dialogue

Working to build relationships is a theme which panellists and submissions return to repeatedly. In the broadcasting sector, it is clear that this is already beginning to happen. Following a 2017 review of its religion coverage, the BBC has committed to building its network of experts and contributors, establishing a network of specialists. ITV News has a network of 16 ‘Diversity and Inclusion Panels’ across the Nations and Regions that meet every three months to discuss story ideas and to explore ways to improve coverage of groups which feel under-represented or misrepresented in the media.

<sup>205</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Andrew Brown, [08/06/2020].

<sup>206</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Michael Munnik, Cardiff University, [24/04/2020].

<sup>207</sup> Wyatt, T. Gordon Brown: I should have been more forthright about faith. Church Times. [Online]. 1 December 2017. [accessed 25.07.2020]. Available from: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2017/1-december/news/uk/gordon-brown-i-should-have-been-more-forthright-about-faith>

<sup>208</sup> Jones, M. 2017 Theresa May talks faith, the Church and the election. Premier Christianity. [Online]. Undated. [Accessed 18.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.premierchristianity.com/content/view/full/766434>

These panels include (but are not solely comprised of) people of faith, with members from all the main faiths including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, the Baha'i and Pagan communities. We should note that several faith groups who provided evidence described broadcasters as responsive and engaged with the questions relevant to their communities. This is a significant success in and of itself. An academic submission similarly suggested that while the BBC does make mistakes, it takes its public purpose remit seriously and works to respond to concerns.<sup>209</sup>

Clearly most print publications do not have the resources to match this approach. However, it is important that any journalist writing on religion attempts to engage directly with the community they are writing about. A variety of academics and faith groups emphasised that a key step is engaging at times when there is no forthcoming story. Dr Munnik described his previous experience as a journalist; 'Though this might not yield a story on the day, it communicated our desire to be in relationship with them, so that when there was a need for contact – when they had a story to share or I urgently needed someone to speak to a story – we knew each other already. That investment may seem luxurious for time-poor journalists, but it can yield good fruit.'<sup>210</sup>

Make use of training resources and materials  
A variety of organisations, academics and journalists suggested that briefing material has an important role to play. There is clearly an issue around who is authorised to create such content and ensure that it is accurate and balanced. The main press regulator, IPSO, has been preparing guidance on reporting Islam for around 18 months. It is unclear when this will be released and the length of this process highlights the difficulty in producing informative briefs which accurately represent the diversity of perspectives within any given faith. However, there is a growing body of resources which are available to journalists. In the interest of disseminating the information provided to us, those sent to as part of this Inquiry can be found on the APPG's website. The Scottish Parliament's Cross Party Group on Tackling Islamophobia created a set of media guidelines which aimed to improve the portrayal, accuracy, representation and terminology used about Muslims and Islam.<sup>211</sup> There is also now a growing number of groups who work to provide such insight. These range from religion-specific organisations like the Sikh Press Association, to specialist organisations like Inform, an educational charity which provides information about minority religions and sectors, to the Religion Media Centre, which aims to be an impartial, 'onestop-shop'<sup>212</sup> for journalists covering religion. As these groups emerge, it is important that journalists make use of them.

### **Value and encourage specialism**

A Reuters' study into the demography and views of journalists in the UK found that 'only three journalists (0.4% of our sample) identified themselves as being specialists in religious affairs.'<sup>213</sup> Although a larger group described themselves as covering 'social affairs', this beat spans a spectrum of topics including 'education', 'youth affairs', and 'religion' and still only constituted 2% of those asked. As the study suggested, the 'importance of religion in both UK society and in international relations requires, perhaps, a greater proportion of experts in the field.'<sup>214</sup> This is true of both print and broadcast media.

<sup>209</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Elizabeth Poole, Professor of Media and Communications, Keele University, [27/04/2020].

<sup>210</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Michael Munnik, Cardiff University, [24/04/2020].

<sup>211</sup> Cross Party Group on Tackling Islamophobia. 2019. Media Guidelines of Reporting Muslims and Islam. [Online]. November 2019. [Accessed 05.05.2020]. Available from: <https://36vc53.myftupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Media-guidelines-reporting-on-Muslims-and-Islam-summary.pdf>

<sup>212</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Religion Media Centre, [05/04/2020]

<sup>213</sup> Thurman, N., Cornia, A. and Kunert, Jessica. 2016. Journalists in the UK, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. [Online]. [accessed 01.08.2020]. Available from: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/14664/1/Journalists%20in%20the.p25>.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid. p25.

One point raised in an evidence session was that there are several significant faith-specific newspapers and producers; the Jewish Chronicle, the Tablet, the Catholic Herald, The Muslim News in the press space, CTVC in broadcast production. Specialism is being developed but it exists outside of the mainstream media. Professor Beckett suggested that there may be 'more religious specialist journalists out there than ever before, but they're often on niche publications or niche websites or they're freelancing'.<sup>215</sup> The CORAB report suggested 'the possibility of short placements in religious media outlets and organised exchanges of journalists in religious media with those in other outlets'.<sup>216</sup> If newspapers decide it is too expensive to retain specialists full-time, it is essential that they find other ways to access and nurture talent and knowledge and this would be one potential way forward.

### Embrace diversity

The same Reuters' study suggested that the disproportionately small numbers of people who affiliate with a religion may be 'a partial explanation for why so few go on to develop into specialists in this field'.<sup>217</sup> A lack of senior journalists who affiliate to a given belief can lead to important stories being lost. As the Centre for Media Monitoring noted, 'stories that are deemed important by certain faith groups or minority communities can often be overlooked by decision-makers and journalists, 94% of whom are white and only 0.4% of whom are Muslim. Challenging this cycle of ignorance as well as decisions made in high-level editorial meetings can be a daunting task as many Muslim and BAME journalists will attest'.<sup>218</sup> Steps should be taken to explore why there are such large disproportionalities of ethnicity and faith and then work done to remove any barriers and create a more representative media workforce. A number of important initiatives have developed specifically targeting minority ethnicities; these are essential steps to enrich and diversify our media and are discussed in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 7. However, it is important that religion is not forgotten in these strategies. Where there are barriers, both real and perceived, preventing people of faith from entering the media or remaining within it, they should also be addressed.

No evidence we received implied that there should be quotas for religious diversity; this could lead to a box-ticking approach and in smaller organisations would be entirely impractical. Several suggestions were made regarding how to go about improving religious representation and diversity:

- More diversity data specifically focusing on religion is needed from both publishers and broadcasters; this should be publicly available and as granular as possible while protecting privacy
- Further funding should be put in place to help journalists from non-traditional backgrounds to enter journalism
- There is also a need for internal cultural change which helps retain journalists of faith. Increasing the number of young Sikh or Christian journalists will do little good if they feel undervalued and discriminated against for their views

### Make use of training opportunities

As discussed in the previous chapter, there needs to be more regular, standardised training courses about religious literacy. However, equally important to them being run is journalists and editors prioritising them and taking part.

### Faith groups

There is a great deal that journalists need to do to develop more balanced reportage. At the same time, faith groups need to recognise that the media's job is a difficult one and that hostility will do little good. This issue is, in the words of two submissions, 'a two-way street'.<sup>219</sup> Dr Al-Azami noted that 'It is important not to view journalists as the 'enemy' who are determined to demonise their community';<sup>220</sup> most are trying to report accurately and fairly.

<sup>215</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Charlie Beckett, LSE, [11/05/2020]

<sup>216</sup> Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life. 2015. Living With Difference: community, diversity and the common good. Cambridge: The Woolf Institute. file:///Users/olimac3/Downloads/Living-with-Difference%20(10).pdf

<sup>217</sup> Thurman, N., Cornia, A., Kunert, Jessica. 2016. Journalists in the UK, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. [Online]. [accessed 01.08.2020]. Available from: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/14664/1/Journalists%20in%20the>. p25.

<sup>218</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Centre for Media Monitoring, [11/05/2020]

<sup>219</sup> The submissions from the Church of England Communications Team and the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations both used this phrase

<sup>220</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Salman Al-Azami, Liverpool Hope University, [15/04/2020].



As a subject religion and belief is, as we have emphasised, complex and nuanced. However, Michael Wakelin asserted that 'religious communities need to really get their act together in terms of what is the story they're trying to tell. And if they do that and they communicate their story well, then that is the best way, I think, to improve the way religion is covered in the media.'<sup>221</sup> Communications mix-ups will often be picked up by journalists because they provide a more striking story than the press release that the organisation chose to run with. The media will naturally prioritise and favour voices who can respond quickly to a request.

Organisations including Catholic Voices, the Sikh Press Association and the Centre for Media Monitoring demonstrate the ability of faith groups to influence the media through sustained engagement. Each organisation works to enable ongoing dialogue with a variety of media contacts. This is key because it is inevitable that mistakes will be made. Having trusted points of contact will allow those mistakes to be rectified quickly and learnt from. Establishing and building ties between the media and the communities it seeks to report on is essential if the general standard of conversation is to be improved.

### **Develop a greater understanding of the role and interests of journalists**

While we have called for journalists to explore new ways of telling stories and focus more on positive, nuanced accounts of religion, it is important to recognise the constraints and reality of their work and to respond accordingly.

Those who complain that journalists are not telling the "right kind of story" may need to consider further what the readership would be for the stories they want told. Unless there is an "angle" to a good news story which makes it interesting to a wider audience, it is unlikely to receive much attention.

Further, journalists working to a deadline frequently require short, concise quotes which make good copy. The ability to respond robustly to a wide range of questions is essential if any representative is to appear regularly on broadcast journalism. Reflecting on their own practices, the Media Bishops noted that 'Better media training for clergy and religious leaders would be useful (both initial training and CPD) so that they understand the needs and responsibilities of journalists.'<sup>222</sup> We would suggest this is true of all faith groups.

### **Recognise the difficulties faced by journalists are genuine**

Many communities are incredibly diverse and writing about them with constraints on length and time makes explaining nuances difficult. Sometimes nuances that seem very important to a particular group will be lost in the editing process. It can't also be expected that journalists will have a huge amount of knowledge, or even that they should. Carl Brettell, the CEO of the Neighbourhood Prayer Network, noted 'You know, we were doing a project the other day and we were listing down 48 denominations within Christianity and we didn't finish the list. So how do we expect secular journalism to understand all of the nuances if we ourselves don't outreach and spend time trying to educate?''<sup>223</sup>

The submission from the Church of England communications specialists, who drew on both their current roles and previous work as journalists, argued that 'We must also recognise that even if journalists don't always know what might seem to us to be basic details, that doesn't mean they are hostile or stupid. They are there to ask questions not to have an encyclopaedic knowledge in advance. Indeed, it is certainly not a unique problem for specialist media not to know every detail of their subject.'<sup>224</sup> Journalists can't be expected to have an exhaustive understanding of particular beliefs or practices; where they are ignorant, faith communities should work with them to help, clarify and explain.

<sup>221</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Michael Wakelin, Ex-Head BBC Religion and Ethics [11/06/2020]

<sup>222</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Media Bishops, [29/04/2020]

<sup>223</sup> Oral evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Carl Brettell, Christian Ministry and United Christian Broadcasters, [11/06/2020].

<sup>224</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Church of England Communications, [05/05/2020]

## Work to build relationships with journalists

As far as possible, it is important that faith groups are open to journalists. Most do want to depict communities in a fair light and seek access and explanations in order to do so. As argued by the Media Diversity Institute, 'Even the most religiously literate journalist will not be able to pursue a story properly without some cooperation from the faith group, and so it is vital to foster these relations.'<sup>225</sup> A series of journalists described how often they come across resistant press officers whose reaction is to be silent or defensive.

If a community closes itself off, it runs the risk of attracting only negative media attention. This does not mean engaging repeatedly with journalists perceived to be discriminatory. Instead, it is vital to learn which platforms cover issues important to that community well and which journalists are sympathetic and knowledgeable in a given area. As Kristine Pommert argues, 'learn to understand who the trustworthy media outlets are and how they operate. Engage with them, rather than nobody: that way you are much more likely to get a fair representation than by shutting out all media.'<sup>226</sup> In the current, often antagonistic climate it may be tempting for many faith organisations to speak only to those who support them. However, this approach makes ignorance an inevitability.

## Find, encourage and support experts within the community to engage with the media

Faith groups should work to support, train and nurture strong media performers. This is a long process and is frequently difficult to do. However, being able to quickly suggest intelligent, engaging experts will make it much more likely that they are used. One journalist suggested that 'what non-journalists, and especially faith groups, can do is above all to supply people to talk to. Most of this work needs to be done at the local level. If any local papers survive the pandemic, they will be desperate for stories, and faith groups should make it their business to supply stories of all the ways they are making things better for their local communities.'<sup>227</sup>

Alexander Desforges, the Director of Communications for the Catholic Bishops' Conference, described the importance of having strong specialist speakers. Rather than relying on established faith leaders, "it's much better if you want somebody to talk about teaching, you have a Catholic head teacher; if you want to have somebody to talk about bioethics, have a Catholic bioethicist."<sup>228</sup> One successful example of a faith group working to find new representatives is Catholic Voices. It began as a six-month training programme of 24 lay people and a priest in preparation for the UK visit of Pope Benedict XVI in 2010. Its success led to wider roll-out and it has officially provided media training to over 100 people.

A project jointly funded by the Aziz Foundation and National Zakat Foundation in an effort to improve the representation of British Muslims saw a group of Muslim professionals (doctors, teachers, lawyers, among others) trained in print and broadcast media skills. The success of the skills training organised by Muslim professionals' association ConsortiuM, can be seen in the use of members of the trained cohort in recent months, in particular in news reporting on the impact of Covid-19 on the NHS, doctors and patients from minority ethnic background and on local communities in the north of England. Such initiatives demonstrate the value and impact of well-trained media performers.

## Challenge inaccuracy

There are mechanisms available if a story is factually inaccurate. Several newspapers' representatives – both journalists and an editor – described the importance and value of readers contacting them with their complaints. Many mistakes are genuine and contacting the newspaper or broadcaster in question should be the first port of call. If this process does not work, Ofcom regularly rules on inaccuracy. Although some do feel they do not go far enough, IPSO also rules regularly on inaccuracy in relation to claims about religion. In oral and written evidence, the Sikh Press Association described engaging with IPSO as a means through which to challenge incorrect stories. The Centre for Media Monitoring's engagement both directly with newspapers and through IPSO has led to a series of corrections and amendments to the wording of articles and headlines and changes in the images used alongside copy.

<sup>225</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Kristine Pommert, CTVC, [21/04/2020].

<sup>227</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Andrew Brown, [08/06/2020].

<sup>228</sup> Oral evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Alexander DesForges, Director of News, Catholic Bishops' Conference England & Wales, [14/05/2020].

## Chapter 6

# THE PRESS

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This chapter is separated into two sections. The first explores national and local press and describes steps that can be taken to tackle religious illiteracy through diversity, training and cultural change. The second half engages with the issues of discrimination and regulation.

Our oral sessions made clear that all issues relating to print media must be contextualised by the rapidly changing print media landscape. The majority of people now read news online, with a clear generational trend that shows the younger the audience, the less likely they are to use traditional printed media. At the time of the report's publication, 'aggregate advertising expenditure and net circulation figures equate to about half of their 2007 value'.<sup>229</sup> Circulation numbers have plummeted at the same time that advertising spend has moved to digital marketing through social media. In that same decade, the share of advertising which appeared in the print press fell from 40% to 12%.<sup>230</sup> This is true across the piece; both local and national media have been forced to rapidly adopt new ways of working.

The growth of online media has changed how stories are uncovered, how they are circulated and how we engage with them. Over time, these changes have had an impact on the kinds of news we read. Many journalists no longer have the time to go out and meet the communities they write on. One panellist suggested that "journalism has moved away from its traditional role of picking up phones, going out there in communities, doing the legwork, doing the research. People tend to sit at the computers these days, go on the Internet and kind of trawl for stories. And traditionally, when I set out, it was all about having contacts and building bridges, relationships, you know, getting on the ground, finding out where the people are".<sup>231</sup> This is particularly problematic for stories about faith communities where long-term relationships are essential in building trust.

News spreads more quickly than ever before, with 24-hour coverage and constantly updated websites now the standard for all major outlets. The push towards speed and volume provides more content but can lead to inaccuracies as information is circulated rapidly and stories are in large part simply copied. This is not necessarily a bad thing; however, it reinforces the need for newspapers and online publishers to check carefully that stories are indeed accurate.

The Cairncross Review explored the state of journalism in the UK and suggested how to create a sustainable future. The Review found that the increase in the proportion of news being consumed online had altered the type of content being produced by media outlets. Due to its limitless supply, online advertising is much less profitable than traditional print ads. As a result, many news publishers have tried to compensate through scale, sensationalising their content – through 'clickbait' titling among other tactics – in order to maximise the number of views per article. Local outlets have also suffered from the shift online as they are unable to generate the number of clicks that would make many of their articles worthwhile to produce. Public interest reporting has suffered in particular because of this. The Review also noted the sharp fall in trust in the news media over the past ten years in the wake of the Leveson inquiry.<sup>232</sup>

<sup>229</sup> Mediatique. 2018. Overview of recent dynamics in the UK press market. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. [Online]. April 2018. [accessed 02.08.2020]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/778155/180621\\_Mediatique\\_-\\_Overview\\_of\\_recent\\_dynamics\\_in\\_the\\_UK\\_press\\_market\\_-\\_Report\\_for\\_DCMS.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778155/180621_Mediatique_-_Overview_of_recent_dynamics_in_the_UK_press_market_-_Report_for_DCMS.pdf). p4.

<sup>230</sup> Cairncross, F. 2019. The Cairncross Review: a sustainable future for journalism. [Online]. 12 February 2019. [accessed 01.08.2020]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/779882/021919\\_DCMS\\_Cairncross\\_Review\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf). p40.

<sup>231</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Rizwana Hamid, Director, Centre for Media Monitoring. [18/05/2020].

<sup>232</sup> Cairncross, F. 2019. The Cairncross Review: a sustainable future for journalism. [Online]. 12 February 2019. [accessed 01.08.2020]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/779882/021919\\_DCMS\\_Cairncross\\_Review\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf).

That Review put forward a variety of proposals to tackle the decline in both the scale and quality of UK news. They argued that the government ought to fund public interest news at both a national and local level. A “News Quality Obligation” to ensure the trustworthiness of online news was also recommended, as well as a further review of the online advertising market. We have detailed above the importance of news media producing public-interest journalism which recognises the complexity of religion and belief as it is lived and the slide towards ‘clickbait’ is worrying. We heard from a number of journalists who felt that there is a broadly dismissive attitude towards faith in many major outlets. Daniel Mumby suggested that ‘Journalists have always been marked by a healthy scepticism for any authority, whether temporal or spiritual, but of late that scepticism has all too often mutated into aggressive cynicism or polemicism.’<sup>233</sup> Another submission described religious illiteracy as ‘all-pervasive’.<sup>234</sup>

### Local print

Local print media has historically played a vital social role. It has carried out some of the most important investigative work while providing a community with a sense of shared identity and purpose. We heard compelling evidence that, alongside these important social benefits, local media continues to represent religions in a more balanced, nuanced and informative way than national media. Reporting on local religious festivals, community events and local charities can represent the lived reality of religious practice and experience in a way that is very difficult for national journalism to achieve. Local and regional journalists are also more likely to develop the long-term relationships so important in accurately representing a given community.

There is also now quantitative evidence to support the anecdotal belief that local media develops a more balanced picture. A study by CASS analysed the representation of Tower Hamlets in six million words of reporting from the national and local press between 2008 and 2013. It found that the view of the area provided by the national press was more negative than the local press, with the local press focusing comparatively less on religion (including the proportion of Muslims living in the area) and religiously motivated violence.<sup>235</sup> There are also far fewer cases brought against local media on grounds of discrimination.

Clearly not all local media is of a high quality and there will be mistakes when journalists publish insufficiently researched stories or inadvertently offensive headlines. However, evidence provided to the Inquiry suggested that this is usually a question of limited resources, as opposed to the kind of agenda-driven journalism which several faith groups described in written and oral evidence. Describing his research into press regulation, Professor Frost stated that ‘there is a clear divide between regional newspapers and national newspapers’; while some national newspapers continue to receive complaints based on ‘accuracy and discrimination’, with local newspapers ‘the mistakes are sort of resource-based in one way or another’.<sup>236</sup>

Fair and balanced reporting engenders trust; a Reuters’ report last year found that regional and local newspapers continue to have higher ‘brand trust scores’<sup>237</sup> than all newspapers except the Financial Times. Weller and Contractor’s study into readers’ perceptions suggests that this more balanced approach is recognised by readers; they found that, more than national media, local media was seen as representing positive news of local significance such as reporting on inter-religious dialogue events and charity activities.<sup>238</sup>

<sup>233</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Daniel Mumby, Reach Plc Journalist, [18/05/2020].

<sup>234</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Andrew Brown, [08/06/2020].

<sup>235</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences, [27/04/2020].

<sup>236</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Chris Frost, NUJ, Chair of Ethics Council, [08/06/2020].

<sup>237</sup> Newman, N., Fletcher, R. Kalogeropoulos, A. and Nielsen, R.K. 2019. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019. Reuters Institute. The University of Oxford. [Online]. [accessed 20.08.2020]. Available from: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR\\_2019\\_FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR_2019_FINAL_0.pdf). Graph, ‘Brand Trust Scores (0-10)’. p68.

<sup>238</sup> Chapter 6, Weller, P.; Purdam, K. and Ghanea, N. and Cheruvallil-Contractor, S. (2014) Religion or Belief, Discrimination and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts. London & New York: Continuum. p68.

We heard from Karyn Fleeting, Head of Audience Acquisition and Engagement for Reach Plc, and Luke Jacobs, Brand Editor, Kent Live (also Reach). Both emphasised the steps that the group is taking to reach out to new audiences and to report accurately and sensitively. Mr Jacobs provided insight into an internal audit of all content produced by several Reach titles in the South East over two days; noticing trends such as a disproportionate association between black people and crime stories, and women and domesticity, they sought to both offset negative stories with positive content and review their language to ensure that it was balanced.<sup>239</sup> This proactive approach is to be welcomed.

Facebook has partnered with Newsquest, JPIMedia, Reach, Archant and the Midland News Association, as well as the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), to launch the Community News Project, a £4.5 million (USD \$6 million) fund designed to support local journalism in the UK. This investment will enable the NCTJ to oversee the recruitment of around 80 trainee “community journalists” and place them in local newsrooms on a two-year scheme. The aim is to encourage more reporting from towns and communities which have lost their local newspapers. We received submissions from several participants in the scheme, one of whom explicitly stated that its content had given her greater confidence than her colleagues to report on issues relating to faith. We welcome this step and would encourage religious literacy training to be incorporated into any training programme.

However, it is clear that local journalism faces deep structural challenges. Advertising revenue has declined rapidly and circulation figures have dropped. The Cairncross Review found that ‘the challenges to public-interest journalism are most acute at the local level’<sup>240</sup> and research by the Press Gazette found that between 2005 and 2018 there was a net loss of 245 UK local news titles.<sup>241</sup> This is a significant social loss which may have particularly negative implications for the representation of religion in public life. Among the many benefits of local and regional media, our Inquiry found strong evidence that they play an important role in providing balanced and fair representations of faith groups.

Alongside balanced portrayals of faith, local journalists are often best placed to discover malpractice. Many scandals which become national news will begin at the local level and the initial groundwork will be done by local journalists. This is as true of stories relating to religious groups as it is of those about companies or local governmental bodies. While such stories may be critical or uncomfortable, they protect our civil liberties and nourish our democracy.

Professor Beckett articulated why local journalism often does the most important reporting on religion when noting that ‘there’s a very, very serious problem at a local level, which I think is quite critical to religious literacy because local media is best reflecting, or should be best reflecting, its communities and framing issues in a way that people can understand in a way that’s relevant to them’.<sup>242</sup> This loss of local, public interest reporting is deeply worrying. Not only does local journalism play an important social and democratic role, we received compelling evidence that it fulfils a valuable function in representing religion and belief in an accessible and balanced way. The government has partially implemented the recommendations made in the Cairncross Review and we call on them to fully comply with its recommendations to ensure that local public-interest journalism has a sustainable future.

## PROPOSED ACTION

We support the findings of the Cairncross Review and urge the government to fully comply with its recommendations to support public-interest journalism.

<sup>239</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Karyn Fleeting and Luke Jacobs, Reach Plc, [08/06/2020].

<sup>240</sup> Cairncross, F. 2019. The Cairncross Review: a sustainable future for journalism. [Online]. 12 February 2019. [accessed 01.08.2020]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/779882/021919\\_DCMS\\_Cairncross\\_Review\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf)

<sup>241</sup> Mayhew, F. 2020. UK local newspaper closures: Net loss of 245 titles since 2005, new Press Gazette Research. Press Gazette. [Online]. 11 February 2019. [accessed 09.09.2020]. Available from: <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/more-than-40-local-news-titles-closed-in-2018-with-loss-of-some-editorial-275-jobs-new-figures-show/>

<sup>242</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Charlie Beckett, LSE, [11/05/2020]



## National newspapers

National newspapers face many of the same strategic issues as local and regional papers. In January 2020, 16 daily and Sunday paid-for national newspapers had a combined circulation of 21.2m. By January this year, this combined figure had fallen to a total of 7.4m copies.<sup>243</sup> However, national publications continue to set the news agenda and stimulate the national conversation. Newspaper headlines and frontpages also reach a far wider audience than their original readership as pictures are shared on social media. This reinforces the need for language to be employed carefully and with an awareness of headlines quickly becoming decontextualized. Terms used in newspapers will flow into wider discourse.

Several issues emerge directly from the changing format of online publishing. Several submissions described the impact of a trend towards clickbait as attention-grabbing headlines are circulated online. This is not an entirely new phenomenon; dramatic headlines are a characteristic feature of tabloid newspapers. However, the sensationalising of news about faith can be seen across the spectrum of news;

‘Even outlets which consider themselves serious rather than tabloid reach for tabloid language when dealing with a story about religion. A prime example is the continuing saga of sex abuse. A tabloid paper some years ago dreamt up the headline “Devil in a dog collar”. This has appeared since about different priests in stories in The Times, The Independent, the Evening Standard, the Daily Telegraph and the website of Channel 4 News.’<sup>244</sup>

Further, social media can amplify the already significant impact of headlines. Titles such as “New £5 notes could be BANNED by religious groups as Bank CAN’T promise they’re Halal” (Daily Express), “BBC puts Muslims before you” (Daily Star) and “Halal secret of Pizza Express” drive traffic to the site but can also lead to a deeply simplistic understanding of complex events and beliefs, an issue compounded by evidence that most people only read headlines. Such headlines have long been a characteristic trait of tabloid journalism but they have acquired a new potency when articles are often shared on the basis of their headline alone. Images can become viral and spread in minutes across the UK and the world; in some cases, such images and headlines can be used by extremist organisations to justify their worldview.

The IPSO code does currently prohibit reference to religion unless it is ‘genuinely relevant’<sup>245</sup> to the story. However, in practice this clause rarely sees successful complaints and the meaning of “genuine relevance” is highly disputed. The Woolf submission suggested that ‘the Inquiry recommends that faith and ethnicity should not headline a story if it is not a relevant fact to the story’.<sup>246</sup> Clearly how this would function is a matter of editorial concern and ‘relevance’ is a debatable point. However, we agree that the decision on whether to reference religion and belief is an important one and editors should take greater care.

Similar care is required for photos. Dr Kahn-Harris noted that ‘Now that most articles are published online, it is usual practice to accompany every article with a photograph or illustration (which is not always the case in print). This means that sub-editors and writers are forced to find a single picture that will embody the story, regardless if this is a practical proposition or not’.<sup>247</sup> Stock photos need to be used with care. Like headlines, they are now frequently circulated far more widely than the actual article on social media. Editors should remember this wider audience and take care to not to fall back on a series of tired, stereotyping stock photos. Pictures of Haredi Jews or women with face veils (niqab or burqa), whether taken in front or behind, so that they are faceless and mysterious, have the effect of othering and ‘exoticising’ entire communities.

<sup>243</sup> Mayhew, F. 2020. UK national newspaper sales slump by two-thirds in 20 years amid digital disruption. Press Gazette. [Online]. 26 February 2020. [accessed 09.09.2020]. Available from: <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/uk-national-newspaper-sales-slump-by-twot thirds-in-20-years-amid-digital-disruption/>

<sup>244</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Catherine Pepinster, Ex-Tablet Editor, [06/05/2020].

<sup>245</sup> Editors’ Code of Practice. 12.ii. IPSO. [Online]. [Accessed 22.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-ofpractice/#Discrimination>

<sup>246</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Woolf Institute, [24/04/2020].

<sup>247</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Keith Kahn-Harris, Leo Baeck College, [29/04/2020]

Clearly this is not invariably done with malintent. Miqdaad Versi, media spokesperson for the Muslim Council of Britain, recently drew attention to the apparently disproportionate frequency with which veiled Muslims women and praying men were used to illustrate articles about Covid-19, potentially associating them with notions of contagion, danger and otherness.<sup>248</sup> Although unlikely to have been intentional, journalists and editors should be aware of the impact such associations can have on already marginalised groups. Another recent example involved a broadsheet newspaper using a picture of a Muslim praying to accompany the headline 'Terrorists fool prison staff into believing they have changed.'<sup>249</sup> Upon complaint, this was quickly changed to a generic picture of a prison. While the initial photo aligns all Muslims with scheming convicted terrorists, the latter reframes the issue far more accurately to centre on criminality and the justice system.

## RECOMMENDATION

Newspapers should take greater care with the pictures and headlines they choose, recognising that this is all the majority of readers will see

Journalists face the difficult task of condensing complex stories into less than 500 words to a tight deadline. Further, as many newsrooms face staff cuts and the flow of information increases exponentially with the development of social media, journalists are pushed to turn around stories at an ever-faster rate. This makes mistakes inevitable. The way to reduce this is to ensure that: journalists have strong contacts to check information quickly; that there are people with religious literacy in the room and that they are trusted to either make decisions or provide guidance; and that the newspaper recognises when it has made an error and acts quickly to correct it, learning from its mistakes when it has done so.

## A loss of specialisation

The last forty years have seen a dramatic change in the coverage of religion. In the late twentieth century, many national and even some regional newspapers had a religion correspondent. Although they tended to focus primarily on Christianity, they ensured that someone in the newsroom was arguing the case to include stories relating to faith. These were progressively cut back and the last 'religious correspondent' (in the sense that this is the entirety of their role) was lost in 2015 when Ruth Gledhill left the Times.<sup>250</sup> As Catherine Pepinster's submission notes, 'At one time, the religious affairs correspondent of a national newspaper would be one of the major specialist writers.'<sup>251</sup> Now they tend to be a junior role, often combined with a broader social affairs focus. Professor Barker discussed the loss of specialism across the media industry in stark terms:

'Whilst in the past, most papers and media channels had specialists who had covered religion for years – many of them for decades – today, people with no religious background knowledge whatsoever are expected to write stories or produce programmes on religious subjects. They may be experts in golf or cooking, but the religious illiteracy of some of these people is astonishing. For example, I have spoken with journalists brought up in a so-called Christian society who do not know who Adam and Eve were, let alone Shiva, and have never heard of Shinto or Jainism.'<sup>252</sup>

<sup>248</sup> Miqdaad Versi. Twitter. [Online]. 15 April 2020. [Accessed 23.08.2020]. Available from <https://twitter.com/miqdaad/status/1250373468409004033>

<sup>249</sup> Hamilton, F. 2020. Terrorists fool prison staff into believing they have changed. The Times. [Online]. 24 July 2020. [accessed 05.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/terrorists-fool-prison-staff-into-believing-they-have-changedrb6tt0s66>

<sup>250</sup> As described in Turvill, W. 2014. Fleet Street's last religious affairs position axed as Ruth Gledhill leaves Times after 27 years. Press Gazette. [Online]. 16 May 2014. [accessed 28.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/fleet-streets-last-religious-affairs-position-axed-ruth-gledhill-leaves-times-after-27-years/>

<sup>251</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Catherine Pepinster, Ex-Tablet Editor, [06/05/2020].

<sup>252</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Eileen Barker, Professor Emeritus LSE, [18/04/2020].

Another panellist described a senior journalist they knew being asked to lead a broadsheet newspaper's religion and belief content without training. Increasingly religion has been siloed and treated as a "niche pursuit". This siloing of faith can lead to it being represented rarely and when it is, it is represented only as an infraction into another, separate area of life. Controversies such as those which erupt over faith schools or curriculum changes are treated as educational questions rather than issues relating to faith. This sets up an immediate imbalance where religions are represented as infringing on another area of life, rather than being recognised as a legitimate source of knowledge and teaching. Andrew Brown's submission reflected on this:

"On all the newspapers I have worked for, religious coverage has been ghettoised, and when religious differences have led to open conflict, the story has been treated as a political one, for political specialists to deal with. To put it another way, the religion reporter gets to cover the General Synod, whose deliberations affect practically no one, but faith schools, whose workings matter to millions of parents, are covered by the education correspondent."<sup>253</sup>

The 'ghettoisation' of religion, such that it becomes a niche subject, is not inevitable but it is likely if religion is understood only as what takes place at the General Synod or the Catholic's Bishops' Conference. A number of submissions suggested that newspapers should have specialist correspondents. We would also support this move but recognise that it is unlikely during the current crisis. Instead, religious literacy should be expected across the newsroom and newspapers should take further steps to ensure that all journalists are religiously literate and making use of the resources and educational opportunities available to them.

## Diversity

We heard evidence that several newspapers are working to increase the diversity of their staff. Newspapers' staff are currently disproportionately white, middle-class and secular. This has significant effects on both the stories that get told and the way they are told. Several initiatives have been developed to improve diversity in newsrooms. The Guardian Foundation offers three annual MA bursaries aimed at students from a lower socio-economic background, BAME, LGBTQ+ and those with a disability. The Sun and The Daily Mirror run access schemes which aim to attract students 'actively engaged in British Muslim communities'.<sup>254</sup> These are welcome developments and we hope that similar initiatives are launched across the industry.

Dr Steel, an academic currently leading an AHRC funded comparative project on press regulation internationally, argued that alongside regulatory solutions, improving diversity can play a major role in improving coverage; 'if we can address diversity in the media and address diversity in terms of journalism and community-focused journalism in particular, then I think that religious diversity itself will be communicated and represented across the public sphere'.<sup>255</sup>

Several methods were proposed on how to do this. Poole advocates for 'clear and formal policies on diversity and editorial policy. Evidence from broadcasting shows that these can benefit. While informal arrangements may work at small or progressive organizations, a more rigorous approach demonstrated by the regulation of broadcasting could have a positive impact on other organizations'.<sup>256</sup> A more standardised and transparent system would provide a much greater understanding of who is writing the news. Christopher Landau suggested that media organisations 'could consider producing audits of religious affiliation'.<sup>257</sup> However, it will take many years for those journalists currently entering the workforce to rise to senior editorial roles. It is insufficient to assume that gradually improving diversity statistics will lead – on its own – to more balanced coverage. For change to happen, there needs to be a level of editorial buy-in.

<sup>253</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Andrew Brown, [08/06/2020]

<sup>254</sup> Discussed in more detail on page 49.

<sup>255</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr John Steel, University of Sheffield, [21/05/2020].

<sup>256</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Elizabeth Poole, Professor of Media and Communications, Keele University, [27/04/2020].

<sup>257</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Christopher Landau, [19/05/2020]

Calls to improve diversity in journalism have increased this year following the BlackLivesMatter protests around the world. In July, 50 BAME journalists sent a letter to the Society of Editors which highlighted the importance of recruiting diverse staff so that newsrooms become 'more representative of Britain'.<sup>258</sup> The letter advocated methods including 'properly paid traineeships' and 'equal promotion and pay for BAME staff already in newsrooms' and went on to suggest that 'a good start would be regular reviews of diversity in newsrooms and for an initial assessment and publication of current BAME representations in news organisations'.<sup>259</sup> We support the letter and commend the Society of Editors' positive response. We believe that reviews of diversity should also include a focus on religion and belief as there is significant evidence that there are clear disparities which need to be understood and confronted.

As the country's demography changes, improving diversity will benefit newspapers as much as their readers. Developing loyal readerships is self-evidently vital to major newspapers hoping to survive; as our society becomes more diverse, readers will expect an understanding of and interest in their own lives. Several panellists also referred to the tenuous financial position of many major newspapers and the role the state currently plays in supporting them. Alongside the 20% VAT relief which publishers receive on print sales and digital subscription sales, local councils have a statutory duty to place notices in local newspapers on planning, licensing and traffic orders. This level of government – and thus public – financial support makes it essential that subsidies go towards industries which are representative of the population who fund them. IMPRESS's CEO Ed Proctor noted that 'The government invests 700 million state subsidies in the corporate press, which goes to a very small number of wealthy multimillion-pound businesses and hardly any of that trickles down to independent media. The subsidy that goes into the press, none of that is conditional on quality or diversity issues or morality issues'.<sup>260</sup> We support aid and subsidies provided to the newspaper sector. However, it is important that any organisation supported by the government works to ensure that its workforce reflects the diversity of the UK today.

## RECOMMENDATION

Newspapers [and broadcasters] should audit and publish full accounts of their religion and belief workforce statistics to provide a better sense of who is working in the industry so that disparities can be addressed.

<sup>258</sup> Murray, Ian. 2020. SoE welcomes open letter from 50 BAME journalists and announces 'best practice' initiative on diversity. Society of Editors. [Online]. 24 June 2020 [accessed 08.09.2020]. Available from: [https://www.societyofeditors.org/soe\\_news/soe-welcomes-openletter-from-50-bame-journalists-and-announces-best-practice-initiative-on-diversity/](https://www.societyofeditors.org/soe_news/soe-welcomes-openletter-from-50-bame-journalists-and-announces-best-practice-initiative-on-diversity/)

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Ed Proctor, Chief Executive Officer, IMPRESS, [21/05/2020].

## Discrimination in the National Press

Alongside illiteracy, many submissions which we received made reference to perceived discrimination against faith groups in the media. Trupti Patel of the Hindu Forum for Britain argued that 'The Guardian is totally against the Hindus. Whatever they write, every time they write'<sup>261</sup> She adduced the example of a cartoon in The Guardian which depicted Home Secretary Priti Patel, as a bull.<sup>262</sup> Although The Guardian defended the cartoon on the grounds that the Prime Minister was also depicted as a bull in the same picture, it was widely condemned at the time of its publication. The Board of Deputies of British Jews also raised concerns about perceived biased coverage of Israel by major outlets including The Guardian and The Independent, coverage which has led to 'mistrust' and 'anger'.<sup>263</sup> A common thread between these two submissions is that the publications they reference have chosen not to sign up to either of the press regulators, making effective independent redress impossible.

The vast majority of submissions and panellists that raised the issue of discrimination did so in reference to the representation of Islam. Notably, this perception was shared by a variety of different faith groups, alongside the Muslim panellists who provided evidence. In specific relation to the print media's reporting on Muslims, the Leveson Inquiry found: "The evidence demonstrates that sections of the press betray a tendency, which is far from being universal or even preponderant, to portray Muslims in a negative light".<sup>264</sup> It went on to question "whether articles unfairly representing Muslims in a negative light are appropriate in a mature democracy which respects both freedom of expression and the right of individuals not to face discrimination".<sup>265</sup> Discussing the pejorative representation of women and minorities, the report concluded that 'A new regulator will need to address these issues as a matter of priority, the first steps being to amend practice and the Code to permit third party complaints'.<sup>266</sup>

In December 2019, the outgoing chair of IPSO, Sir Alan Moses, stated that the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the British press had been 'the most difficult issue' facing the press watchdog in the past five years. He elaborated: 'I speak for myself, but I have a suspicion that [Muslims] are from time to time written about in a way that [newspapers] would simply not write about Jews or Roman Catholics'.<sup>267</sup> We asked Lord Faulks, the current Chairman of IPSO, what he understood by this statement, with one of the APPG's chairs citing the example of an article IPSO cleared in 2017 which described 'the Muslim problem'.<sup>268</sup> The piece's author, Sun columnist Trevor Kavanagh, sat on the IPSO Board at the time and his phrasing was widely interpreted as alluding to antisemitic descriptions of 'the Jewish problem' in 1930s Germany. At the time, IPSO stated that their Code had no clause which 'prohibits publication of offensive content'.<sup>269</sup>

Lord Faulks commented: "I know that Sir Alan Moses made that observation and no doubt in his nearly five years or five years or so, he would have had plenty of evidence to back that up. And I'm very mindful of what he said. And I and all the complaints committee will certainly have that very much in our own minds'. He went to explain that he found the reference to the Muslim problem 'a very unattractive and unacceptable description'.<sup>270</sup>

Several attempts have been made to measure the representation of Islam in the press. An ongoing project's early findings were provided to the APPG by the Centre for the Study of Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences (CASS) at Lancaster University. This work attempts to quantify trends in the representation of Islam and Muslims through quantitative analysis of two very large datasets (146 million words of press coverage between 1998 and 2009, and 550 million words between 2010 and 2019). Some of the headline findings are shown in the table below.<sup>271</sup>

<sup>261</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Trupti Patel, President of the Hindu Forum of Britain, [14/05/2020].

<sup>262</sup> Bell, S. 2020. Steve Bell on Boris Johnson defending Priti Patel at PMQs – cartoon. The Guardian. [Online]. 4 March 2020. [accessed 17.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2020/mar/04/steve-bell-on-boris-johnson-defending-priti-patel-at-pmq-cartoon>

<sup>263</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Board of Deputies of British Jews,

<sup>264</sup> Leveson, B. 2012. Report into the culture, practices and ethics of the press. [Online]. 29 October 2012. [accessed 07.08.2020].

Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/270941/0780\\_ii.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270941/0780_ii.pdf).

p671.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid. p673.

<sup>267</sup> Nilsson, P. 2019. Muslims treated differently by newspapers, says press watchdog. Financial Times. [Online]. 30 December 2019.

[Accessed 07.09.2020]. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/60d5bea6-1ff9-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b>.

<sup>268</sup> Please note that the IPSO Board has no control over complaints decisions. IPSO. 2017.17562-17 Elgy v The Sun. [Online]. 26 October

2017. [Accessed 09.09.2020]. Available from: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=17562-17>

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Lord Faulks, Chairman, IPSO, [18/05/2020].

<sup>271</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences, Lancaster University, [27/04/2020].



## 1998-2009

Muslims and Islam were written about in terms of conflict and terrorism.

Iraq (2% of the world's Muslims) and Afghanistan (1.9%) tended to receive much more attention than other countries with higher percentages of the world's Muslims.

Muslims often referred to as extremists. 'Moderate' Muslims were less common (9:1 ratio).

Muslim world and Muslim community were used to collectivise Muslims (on a global and national scale) and present them as a homogenous undifferentiated group, separate from nonMuslims, easily offended and afforded special treatment to which they weren't entitled.

About half the newspapers referred to Islam itself more than different branches of Islam. When branches were referred to, it was often in the context of conflict reporting.

Muslim women were mainly presented as being forced to wear the veil as opposed to choosing to wear it.

The veil was presented as problematic with arguments that it oppresses women.

When writing about veiling, columnists referred to Muslim women as Daleks, bats and zombies, and the veil itself as a shroud.

## January 2010 onwards

Fewer conflict terms, but a rise in terms marking political instability and jihad.

References to Syria, Libya, Iran and Egypt have increased.

Muslim extremist references have fallen. Mentions of extreme Muslims and moderate Muslims are slightly more equal (5:1 ratio).

Muslim world and Muslim community continue to be used to collectivise large numbers to imply the same. However, the most salient pattern when discussed as a collective is in the context of the radicalisation of young British Muslims.

Broadsheets are more likely to refer to denominations of Islam as opposed to Islam itself, with the Independent being most likely to do this. Tabloids tend not to distinguish them.

Mentions of denominations still mostly occurred in the context of conflict between Sunni and Shia groups.

Wahhabism is represented as a dangerously extremist form of Islam.

However, there is evidence that from 2015 onwards the identification and reporting of denominations has lessened.

A small increase in positive representations of Muslim women, particularly in terms of questioning their oppression and discussing positive female role models. Nevertheless, Muslim women are still presented as victims and their dress is problematized and mocked.

The main argument against Muslim women wearing the veil has changed from the oppression of women to a focus on difficulties surrounding communication with the veil wearer.

The veil is still described as a shroud and veiling women are referred to in negative terms (e.g. as Daleks, Darth Vader, bank robber) and mocked (e.g. letterbox).

There are notable trends here. Unsurprisingly the representation of Muslims has been significantly affected by international events as conflicts in different Muslim-majority countries led to an increased association with those countries in the media. However, some worrying trends persist that cannot be explained through external events. Islam continues to be associated with conflict and instability; Islam is often referred to as a monolithic faith and broad terms such as “the Muslim world” are used to collectivise large groups; Muslim women continue to be represented as victims and their clothing is described dismissively.

In 2010, the Council of Europe’s European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance found that ‘Muslims, migrants, asylum-seekers and Gypsies and Travellers are regularly presented in a negative light in the media, especially the tabloid press’.<sup>272</sup> The Leveson report referred directly to this finding, commenting that ‘This conclusion, and in particular, the identification of Muslims, migrants, asylum seekers and gypsies/travellers as the targets of press hostility and/or xenophobia in the press, was supported by the evidence seen by the Inquiry’.<sup>273</sup>

In the 1990s the Rushdie affair brought a renewed focus on Muslims in the media; however, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and later, of July 7, 2005, fundamentally altered the representation of Muslims in the media. This has led to representations of Muslims as, variously, anti-British, opposed to modernity, irrational, inherently disposed to terrorism and violence. Poole’s booklength study discussed many of the trends still in evidence, charting the impact of the Rushdie affair and detailing the marginalisation of Muslim women and the representation of Muslims as irrational and primitive.<sup>274</sup>

Since then, a number of studies have attempted to quantify and interrogate these representations of Islam. In a project by Cardiff University, Moore, Mason and Lewis (2008) analysed 974 articles on Islam in the British press from 2000 to 2008.<sup>275</sup> Visual analysis found increasing use of mugshots to portray Muslims and greater numbers of pictures of Muslims engaging in religious practice (e.g. prayer); textual analysis showed a corresponding rise in the number of stories which emphasised the differences between Islamic culture and ‘the West’. They found that in over a third of the articles studied (34%), Muslims were specifically linked to the threat of terrorism and in 26% of articles, Islam was portrayed as either dangerous, backwards, or irrational. In 2010 Jaspal and Cinnirella explored how British Muslims were ‘increasingly constructed in terms of a hybridised threat to the ethnonational ingroup’.<sup>276</sup> Representing Muslims as dangerous, ‘other’ and non-British, such stories create an ‘us-and-them’ binary.

In 2019, the Centre for Media Monitoring published their “State of Media Reporting on Islam & Muslims” quarterly report.<sup>277</sup> It found that:

- “59% of all articles analysed associated Islam & Muslims with negative behaviour
- Over 1/3rd of all articles misrepresented or generalised about Islam & Muslims
- 37% of articles in right-leaning and religious publications were “Very Biased”
- Terrorism is the most recurring theme in the media relating to Islam & Muslims.”<sup>278</sup>

These findings are deeply troubling but appear to have yielded little substantive response. This lack of response provides the worrying impression that many editors and journalists are unaware, or worse, wilfully blind to the widespread perception that there exists strong anti-Muslim prejudice in many national newspapers.

<sup>272</sup> European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. 2010. Final report on the United Kingdom adopted by ECRI at its 50th plenary meeting (15-18 December 2009). [Online]. 19 January 2020. [Accessed 08.08.2020]. Available from: <https://rm.coe.int/16805cfc15>

<sup>273</sup> Leveson, B. 2012. Report into the culture, practices and ethics of the press. [Online]. 29 October 2012. [accessed 07.08.2020]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/270941/0780\\_ii.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270941/0780_ii.pdf). p668.

<sup>274</sup> Poole, E. 2002. Reporting Islam: media representations of British Muslims. London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>275</sup> Moore, K., Mason, P., Lewis, J. 2008. Images of Islam in the UK The Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media 2000–2008. [Online]. 7 July 2008. [Accessed 17.08.2020]. Available from: <https://orca.cf.ac.uk/53005/1/08channel4-dispatches.pdf>

<sup>276</sup> Jaspal, R., Cinnirella, M. 2010. Media representations of British Muslims and hybridised threats to identity. *Cont Islam*. 4 289–310. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-010-0126-7>. Abstract.

<sup>277</sup> Centre for Media Monitoring. 2019. State of Media Reporting on Islam and Muslims. Quarterly Report: Oct – Dec 2018. [Online]. [Accessed 25.08.2020]. Available from: <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CfMM-Quarterly-Report-Oct-Dec-2018.pdf>. p5.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid

## Regulation

Press regulation has been a contentious issue for several decades. Following the phone hacking scandal and widespread perceptions of journalistic and editorial malpractice, a public inquiry was established by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2011 (the Leveson Inquiry). In November 2012, Sir Brian Leveson, published his report on the “Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press”. The report covered only Part 1 of his inquiry.

Part 2 of the inquiry proposed to look at relationships between newspaper organisations and the police, politicians, prosecuting authorities, and relevant regulatory bodies during the “phone hacking” scandal of 2002–2011, as well as failures of corporate governance at newspaper groups. The Government has since committed to discontinue the Inquiry and not to go ahead with Part 2 and the Conservative Party’s 2019 General Election Manifesto stated that it would ‘not proceed with the second stage of the Leveson Inquiry’.<sup>279</sup>

The current system of press regulation is a response to Sir Brian Leveson’s report on Part 1. Part 1 included 38 recommendations for a self-regulatory system. A Royal Charter on press regulation was granted on 30 October 2013. This incorporated key recommendations from the Leveson Report, allowing for one or more independent self-regulatory bodies for the press to be established. Any such body would be recognised and overseen by a Press Recognition Panel; this panel (the PRP) came into being on 3 November 2014. Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act was designed as a financial incentive to encourage newspaper publishers to join a PRP-recognised regulator; however, this section has not been brought into force and the Conservative Party 2019 manifesto committed to repealing it.<sup>280</sup>

After the Leveson Inquiry, major news organisations and Prime Minister David Cameron made clear that they disagreed with the recommendations for self-regulation made by Leveson. There are now two press regulators in operation. IPSO, the Independent Press Standards Organisation, regulates over 1,500 print and 1,100 online titles, comprising 95% of national daily newspapers (by circulation). It enforces a code set in the Editor’s Code of Practice and is funded by its member publishers. It has made clear that it has no intention of applying for recognition by the PRP.

A much smaller number of publications have joined IMPRESS. This body is “Leveson-compliant” and was recognised by the PRP on 25 October 2016 as an “approved” regulator. IMPRESS regulates 83 news publishers, which are collectively responsible for 139 publications. Other publications, for example, the Guardian, the Financial Times and The Independent, have decided against joining any regulator and have alternative complaints systems.<sup>281</sup>

## Evidence provided

Over the course of our Inquiry, we received extensive evidence regarding the efficacy of press regulation. Several journalists provided strong support for IPSO, highlighting its superiority to the Press Complaints Commission. Tim Stanley, a columnist at the Daily Telegraph, supported the view that IPSO has had a significant impact, stating that ‘IPSO has already changed the culture within newspapers. [...] IPSO forced people to think before they published some things. And I have noticed a cultural change within the industry since the introduction of IPSO. It is far, far, far more sensitive place than it used to be’.<sup>282</sup>

The view that journalists do think more carefully now about what they publish was echoed by Peter Osborne, who noted that ‘it has got teeth. And you do fear it as a working journalist, an IPSO judgement against you. And so you will try to correct things before you get to that stage’.<sup>283</sup> Ian Murray, the Executive Chair of the Society of Editors, reiterated this point, arguing that ‘it’s not a toothless tiger by any means. It has the ability to do more than just slap on the wrists. Editors and publishers are very concerned about sticking to the code of practice’.<sup>284</sup>

<sup>279</sup> The Conservative Party and Unionist Party. 2019. Get Brexit Done. Unleash Britain’s Potential. [Online]. [Accessed 21.08.2020]. Available from: [https://assets-global.website-files.com/5da42e2cae7ebd3f8bde353c/5dda924905da587992a064ba\\_Conservative%202019%20Manifesto.pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/5da42e2cae7ebd3f8bde353c/5dda924905da587992a064ba_Conservative%202019%20Manifesto.pdf). p48.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.* p48.

<sup>281</sup> As explained in Press Recognition Panel. 2020. Annual report on the recognition system. [Online]. March 2020. [Accessed 05.09.2020]. Available from: <https://pressrecognitionpanel.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/PRP-Annual-Recognition-Report-March-2020.pdf>

<sup>282</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Tim Stanley, [08/06/2020].

<sup>283</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Peter Osborne, [08/06/2020].

<sup>284</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Ian Murray, Society of Editors, [18/05/2020]

Several other journalists described the necessary balance needed to protect free speech while preventing discrimination. Andrew Brown, while expressing sympathy with the aims of the Leveson Inquiry, argued convincingly that there should be a space for controversial and distasteful content. He drew on his knowledge of the Swedish media, where 'a press with a very strong sense of public duty on what may or may not be written' led them to get 'completely out of step with popular sentiment about immigration', ultimately resulting in a loss of 'a great deal of credibility' and 'a very xenophobic party polling at about 25%'.<sup>285</sup> This was a useful reminder of the need for the media to contain a wide diversity of views so that it remains in touch with public sentiment. Clearly any regulatory system should uphold content diversity, even where some commentary may be distasteful.

Professor Charlie Beckett provided a similar perspective, noting that, alongside press freedom concerns, there are real questions around the effectiveness of any approach which seeks to curtail certain kinds of speech. Wherever 'you try and tell journalists that they shouldn't be saying something, or should be covering [an issue] another way, there's always a public backlash [...] And there is that genuine problem [...] if you start in a paternalistic, elitist way to prescribe certain speech, the danger, especially of this current circumstances, is that it explodes elsewhere'.<sup>286</sup> With the advent of social media, this is a real danger. In recent years several far-right and extremist figures have paradoxically weaponised a perceived infringement of their free speech to cultivate large audiences on unregulated social media sites.

However, we also received a significant quantity of oral and written evidence which was highly critical of the current regulatory model. Several submissions argued that the current regulatory regime is the most serious barrier to accurate and fair reporting of religion. AVOW called for 'implementation of the entire recommendations proposed' by Leveson, 'and in particular the requirement for a print regulator that is independent of the newspaper industry'.<sup>287</sup> Similar suggestions were made by MEND and Professor Poole. CfMM argued 'the Royal Charter for press regulation needs to be implemented' and suggested that a second part of the Leveson Inquiry should include 'an investigation into the prevalence of Islamophobia in the media'.<sup>288</sup> Hacked Off made clear that they feel that IPSO is entirely inadequate and that the Leveson report's recommendations should be fully implemented. They argued that:

'Through either incentives or compulsion, the Leveson Report recommended that all major media titles are regulated by a body which passes the Press Recognition Panel's audit for independence and effectiveness. Only one regulator, the IMPRESS regulator, has passed that audit. Until publishers are incentivised or compelled to join IMPRESS, or reform IPSO to satisfy the PRP's audit, improvements to coverage of religion is unlikely to improve'.<sup>289</sup>

A common demand made in response to questions 8 and 9 of our Inquiry was for IPSO to be compelled to comply with the findings of the Leveson Inquiry. The extent to which it currently does is controversial. In 2016, IPSO commissioned a review by Sir Joseph Pilling. This review found that IPSO satisfies 32 out of the 38 Leveson Recommendations for a self-regulatory system.<sup>290</sup> A review by the Media Standards Trust was significantly more critical. It found that 'Of the 38 Leveson recommendations for a regulatory system, IPSO in 2019 satisfies 13 – just over one-third – and fails 25'.<sup>291</sup>

This is clearly a polarised debate with important arguments for and against reform. It is beyond the scope of this Inquiry to propose an entirely new system. On that basis, we shall not do so. Instead, the following discussion aims to clarify the understanding of the current system which we developed through the course of our Inquiry and to make useful recommendations for change.

<sup>285</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Andrew Brown, [08/06/2020]

<sup>286</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Charlie Beckett, [11/05/2020]

<sup>287</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by AVOW, [30/06/2020].

<sup>288</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Centre for Media Monitoring, [11/05/2020].

<sup>289</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Hacked Off, [11/05/2020]

<sup>290</sup> Pilling, J. The External IPSO Review. IPSO. [Online]. [Accessed 01.09.2020]. Available from: [https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1278/ipso\\_review\\_online.pdf](https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1278/ipso_review_online.pdf). p3.

<sup>291</sup> Media Standards Trust. 2019. The Independent Standards Organisation (IPSO) – Five Years On. [Online]. October 2019. [Accessed 20.07.2020]. Available from: <http://mediastandardstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MST-IPSO-2019-Final-Version.pdf>

## Accuracy

A significant issue raised in written and oral evidence was the wide perception that newspapers frequently make inaccurate statements about religious practices, beliefs and people. We saw in our written and oral evidence the complexity of this. Several submissions provided examples of inaccuracy that fall in the realm of legitimate historical or cultural debate. Clearly it is not and should not be the role of a regulator to adjudicate in cases where the facts themselves are widely disputed or where an argument centres on interpretations of events rather than the nature of the events themselves.

Inaccuracies should also, we hope, be dealt with in part by the measures suggested elsewhere in this report. Improved religious literacy training could help journalists to recognise the nuances of belief. Greater awareness, improved diversity and cultural change in newsrooms should all help to reduce the number of errors and inaccuracies seen in print. However, repeated and sustained inaccuracies are evidently a problem.

### Example A:

Several submissions drew attention to a piece published by The Sun in 2015 under the headline '1 in 5 Brit Muslims' sympathy for jihadis'. This claim was based on a deeply misleading interpretation of polling data and the coverage extended across pages 4 and 5 alongside the cover page. Over 3,000 complaints were made to IPSO; they nominated MEND as the lead complainant.



The Sun front page, 25 November 2015

PSO upheld a complaint against this piece and The Sun published its adjudication on page 2 of the newspaper with the commentary that 'The newspaper had failed to take appropriate care in its presentation of the poll results, and as a result the coverage was significantly misleading, in breach of Clause 1.'<sup>292</sup> This process took over three months and very few of those who read the first headline were likely to read the correction. The original article appeared on 25th November 2015; IPSO's ruling was issued nearly three months later, on the 17th February 2016.<sup>293</sup> The Sun did not publish its correction until 26th March, three months after the event; the lead complainant felt that this was timed to receive minimal coverage over the busy bank holiday weekend.

Further, the correction had significantly less prominence than the original piece. When questioned on the importance of prominence, Lord Faulks explained that 'complaints can result and have often resulted in significant corrections having to be made, sometimes on the front page'<sup>294</sup> In the case discussed above, the grossly distortive headline, when accompanied by the picture in question and a number of highly generalised and misleading statements on Muslim support for Isis, had the potential to have a major effect on wider society. We would suggest that there is a strong case for requiring equal prominence in such significant cases.

<sup>292</sup> IPSO, 2016. 09324-15 Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) v The Sun. [Online]. 17 February 2016. [Accessed 25.07.2020]. Available from: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=09324-15>

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Lord Faulks, Chairman of IPSO, [18/05/2020]



Another mechanism which is technically available to IPSO is to begin a standards investigation. However, while IPSO does have the power to launch a standards investigation, there is significant scepticism over whether this power is likely to be used. Questioned on this point, Lord Faulks said that:

'This is a power which we consider very carefully as to whether or not to invoke. We regularly monitor the level, the nature of complaints as they come in through a liaison committee. So the board is fully aware where there are issues. We pick up themes from the complaints, and if there is something that we think warrants a standards investigation, we will do so in a sense.'<sup>295</sup>

Several groups have argued that the terminology of the Editor's Code makes a standards investigation highly improbable. Leveson stipulated that investigations should be provisional on a member being found responsible for 'serious or systemic'<sup>296</sup> breaches of the standards code; this was changed in the IPSO regulations to 'serious and systemic'<sup>297</sup> breaches. This point was raised specifically by the Media Standards Trust Review as a failure to match Leveson's recommendations.<sup>298</sup> In IPSO's response to that review, they argued that the difference is a largely semantic one. The only substantial evidence we have is that, in the six years since IPSO was established, not a single standards investigation has been made.

As long as a given outlet is happy to face a public backlash, there appears to be little to prevent a newspaper purposefully printing a series of Islamophobic or antisemitic and inaccurate headlines. The subsequent corrections would take up a comparatively tiny amount of space and it is unclear whether the bar for 'serious and systemic' breaches would be reached.

Indeed, it is clear that many of those who provided evidence to our Inquiry clearly feel that several newspapers have already developed such campaigns against a variety of minority groups. Without commenting on the validity of this claim, it is worrying that such a campaign would appear to face little resistance from the major regulator.

## Discrimination

Alongside accuracy, it is widely agreed that a vital function of press regulation is preventing discrimination. In its written response, IPSO stated that 'The Editors' Code is designed to 'balance the rights of the individual and the public's right to know'.<sup>299</sup> It goes on to note that 'details of an individual's religion "must" be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story'. However, the Editor's Code 'does not prohibit prejudicial or pejorative references to a particular group even though criticisms may cause distress and offence'.<sup>300</sup> It is limited in this way because 'were it otherwise, the freedom of the press to engage in discussion, debate and scrutiny and religious ideas and practices would be restricted'.<sup>301</sup>

IPSO's code is not Leveson-compliant for several reasons. Recommendation 15 in the Leveson report stated that 'the power to require a correction and an apology must apply equally in relation to individual standards breaches (which the Board has accepted) and to groups of people (or matters of fact) where there is no single identifiable individual who has been affected'.<sup>302</sup> However, IPSO does not allow groups to bring complaints over alleged breaches of Clause 12 (Discrimination), making standards claims impossible in cases where 'no single identifiable individual' is affected. Further, IPSO's regulations do not allow for apologies to be mandated in remedial action.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Leveson, B. 2012. Report into the culture, practices and ethics of the press. [Online]. 29 October 2012. [accessed 07.08.2020]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/270941/0780\\_ii.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270941/0780_ii.pdf). p1596.

<sup>297</sup> IPSO. Standards Investigations. [Online]. [Accessed 25.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/monitoring/standardsinvestigations/>

<sup>298</sup> Media Standards Trust. 2019. The Independent Standards Organisation (IPSO) – Five Years On. [Online]. October 2019. [Accessed 20.07.2020]. Available from: <http://mediastandardstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MST-IPSO-2019-Final-Version.pdf>. p9.

<sup>299</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by IPSO, [06/05/2020]

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Leveson, B. 2012. Report into the culture, practices and ethics of the press. [Online]. 29 October 2012. [accessed 07.08.2020]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/270941/0780\\_ii.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270941/0780_ii.pdf). p1766

Although most critical submissions focussed on the phrasing of the code such that groups cannot make claims on the basis of discrimination, there is also good cause to question the code's success in dealing with cases raised by individuals. A recent study found that 'of 16,317 complaints received by the regulator between October 2014 and December 2018 in which Clause 12 was raised, only one (0.00006%) was upheld'.<sup>303</sup> It is arguably to be expected that even a majority of cases are not upheld. However, this percentage calls into question the utility of Clause 12 overall.

Several submissions compared this to IMPRESS's code. Clauses 4.1 and 4.2 of that code aim to prevent discrimination against individuals. Guidance to Clause 4.1 clarifies that 'Publishers must not use language that is prejudicial or pejorative, even where such language may be in common use. "Prejudicial" language refers to unfair references to a person based on their identifying characteristics with the intention of undermining them. "Pejorative" language refers to adverse or derogatory language based on a person's protected characteristics'.<sup>304</sup>

Clause 4.3 then goes on to clarify that 'publishers must not engage in hate speech. Hate speech refers to all forms of expression that spread, incite, promote, or justify hatred based on intolerance, and includes insulting, abusive or threatening words related to a person's protected characteristic. Language that qualifies as hate speech is that which is intended to, or is likely to, provoke hatred or to put a person or group in fear'. IMPRESS allows representative groups to bring claims under Clause 4.3. Their submission emphasised that 'this is significant because discrimination in the media, by its very nature, is most likely to arise in articles that make negative references to specific religious or racial groups'.<sup>305</sup>

Several panellists described the importance of newspapers being able to criticise and question religious beliefs. We agree that it is essential that regulatory codes do not prevent criticisms of religion and belief. IPSO made clear in written and oral testimony that they wish to facilitate scrutiny of 'religious ideas and practices'. IMPRESS recognise the same need, interpreting its code in line with section 29J of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, which gives a list of matters that do not constitute incitement to hatred: 'discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents'.<sup>306</sup> That Act recognises a distinction between ridiculing faiths and discrimination against people of faith; press regulation should be able to recognise that same distinction.

We asked specifically about Clause 12 of the IPSO code in a number of evidence sessions. It is clear that this is an issue which IPSO, and Lord Faulks, have considered in detail. He explained that 'I needed some convincing that groups should not be included. But [...] having looked at various cases and having thought about it, I am now convinced that Clause 12 at the moment at least should stay as it is'.<sup>307</sup> Gary Jones, the editor of the Daily Express, argued that 'I think the problem is if you allow groups to complain, it's probably going to be something of a free for all. [...] I think the system does work at the moment. [...] I do think that if you open it up to groups, I think that free speech could be curtailed and people would feel under somewhat more pressure to perhaps restrain some viewpoint that others might find controversial'.<sup>308</sup>

Ian Murray went further, arguing that a change to Clause 12 could 'deadend press freedom in this country. That would stifle debate - a chilling hand over discussion. It would, as Lord Faulks was just saying it would, not just be religious matters, but all kinds of groups coming forward. That would be an end of press freedom as we know it'.<sup>309</sup>

<sup>303</sup> Dr Gordon Ramsay (to be published)

<sup>304</sup> IMPRESS. Standards Code. [Online]. [Accessed 17.09.2020]. Available from <https://www.impress.press/standards/>

<sup>305</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by IMPRESS, [01/05/2020]

<sup>306</sup> Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, 29J. [Accessed 19.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/1/schedule>

<sup>307</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Lord Faulks, Chairman of IPSO, [18/05/2020]

<sup>308</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Gary Jones, Daily Express, [08/06/2020]

<sup>309</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Ian Murray, Society of Editors [18/05/2020]

The campaign and faith groups we spoke to were consistent in calling for groups to be included. Asked for his views on Clause 12, Professor Chris Frost, the Chair of the NUJ Ethics Council, argued that 'I think it should be changed. It's far too limiting. [...] What a lot of the Nationals are doing is picking on certain groups, they're what's called othering them'. He argued that this issue predates IPSO and was central to its creation; it is 'quite clear that the newspaper publishers who run the Nationals, set up IPSO quite specifically so they didn't have to change that particular clause. Other things that they changed from the Press Complaints Commission to IPSO were welcome, although, frankly, I don't think they followed those through and they're certainly not making the most of them. But that clearly was the big issue that they did not want changed and wasn't changed'.<sup>310</sup>

It is clear IPSO's code is quite explicitly not designed to prevent discrimination against groups. This is often lost from the discussion and appeared to be little understood by several panellists, including individuals who were supportive of IPSO and several who were critical of it. No matter how egregious the case, if discrimination is against a group, it is simply not within IPSO's powers to rule on it. Moore and Ramsay noted this, arguing that 'arguably the Code gives license to general discrimination by explicitly excluding it from its definition. News outlets know if they do not refer to an individual, then they cannot be accused of discrimination under the Code'.<sup>311</sup>

On the balance of the evidence we received, we would recommend that this changes. Returning to the example of 'the Muslim Problem', Lord Faulks agreed that 'I know the particular case that was just referred to about the Muslim problem does seem to me, and I speak not having ruled on it, entirely unacceptable and very unattractive indeed. Whether or not these comments actually constitute a breach of the code will depend on the context'.<sup>312</sup>

However, from the evidence we have gathered, it is not at all clear how this comment could have constituted a breach of the code. The author has, it should be stated, argued that he made the comment without reference to the history of the term. However, even if an author meant to use the term with full purposeful reference to its antisemitic history and its genocidal connotations, in its current formulation there is nothing that IPSO could do as long as the article is accurate.

## RECOMMENDATION

Independent regulation should be looked at again by policymakers because there remain significant issues around access to regulatory redress. In particular, groups should be able to make complaints on the grounds of discrimination.

<sup>310</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Chris Frost, NUJ Chair of Ethics Council, [08/06/2020].

<sup>311</sup> Moore, M., and Ramsay, G. 2017. Brexit and discrimination in the UK press. InPublishing, 26 September 2017. [Accessed 25.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.inpublishing.co.uk/articles/brexit-and-discrimination-in-the-uk-press-551>

<sup>312</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Lord Faulks, Chairman of IPSO, [18/05/2020]

## Chapter 7

# BROADCASTING

Broadcasters have a social value succinctly captured in the BBC mission statement to 'inform, educate and entertain'. Indeed, by doing so they can be seen to 'lay claim to a higher civic purpose to promote a democratic and inclusive society'.<sup>313</sup> As ex-regulator and now media historian Professor Tony Stoller argued, broadcasting 'reaches potentially everyone and therefore it is both democratising and [...] a public good'.<sup>314</sup>

Historically, religious programming was a central part of that public good. The Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC) of the British Broadcasting Company was the very first of the BBC's Advisory Committees. From its first meeting in 1923, it was a guiding force whose influence reflected a broader societal imperative for religion and religious worship. For the majority of the 20th century, religious programming formed a central plank of public service broadcasting. Professor Stoller provided a detailed account of religious broadcasting in the UK. From an apogee of influence and strength in the 1960s and 1970s, his submission described the gradual erosion of religious programming as the broadcasting sector has been progressively marketized and deregulated to the point where today, 'The enabling structure for religious broadcasting is now weaker than it has been at any time since broadcasting began'.<sup>315</sup> CRAC no longer sits and all broadcasters except the BBC have significantly reduced their religious output.

Arguably a decline in programming was somewhat inevitable as the number of people who did not affiliate with traditional religions increased and weekly attendance at church services fell. However, today religious programming is massively diminished. This chapter looks first at broadcasters' output, in terms of both volume and content. We then turn to the structures developed within and between broadcasters which work to foster a more religiously literate environment and make a number of suggestions for improvement. Finally, we look at the wider broadcasting and regulatory landscape, exploring some of the suggestions made over the course of our Inquiry.

### Religious programming

Ofcom's operating licence for the BBC's UK Public Services (updated October 2019) includes specific quotas for religious broadcasting. BBC One and Two taken together are required to show at least 115 hours of religious programmes, with some in peak viewing time, in each year. BBC Radio 2 must provide at least 170 hours of 'religious output' in each year and this should cover a broad range of faiths and BBC Radio 4 must provide at least 200 hours of original religious programming, excluding repeats, in each year; again, output should cover a broad range of faiths. All of these requirements were comfortably exceeded last year. Indeed Ofcom's Annual Report on the BBC noted that "Religion and ethics was the only genre to see an increase in the number of programme titles".<sup>316</sup>

Channels 3, 4 and 5 have no set quotas from Ofcom for religious programming. ITV and Channel 4 were formed with highly divergent aims and have very different roles in the Public Service Broadcasting ecology. We received responses from ITV and Channel 4 which highlighted contrasting approaches to religious programming. ITV's coverage has been drastically reduced since 2000, with its spend dropping from £40 million in 2008 to £2 million in 2013. In 2004 it was committed to 104 hours of religion. In 2005, Ofcom allowed that to be halved and in 2012 ITV showed just 2 hours of religious programming; this is now down to 1 per year. Their response clarified that 'Our on-screen public service mission, determined by Ofcom and ultimately by Parliament, lies elsewhere'.<sup>317</sup> Although they do represent faith groups and aim to do so accurately and sensitively, this is no longer a primary aim.

Channel 4's response highlighted their 'remit to reflect the diversity of the UK, educate, stimulate debate, and reflect alternative viewpoints. This includes a commitment to commissioning content that explores religious themes and to reflecting a diversity of religious beliefs across the breadth of our programme output'.<sup>318</sup> However, the number of hours of conventional religious programming broadcast by Channel 4 has declined. This is due to a strategy whereby they aim to 'ensure diversity throughout our shows, including in relation to religion. Religious matters are therefore covered within our mainstream programming – whether that is Ackley Bridge or Gogglebox'.<sup>319</sup>

<sup>313</sup> Campion, M.J. 2005. Look Who's Talking Cultural Diversity, Public Service Broadcasting and the National Conversation. Nuffield College Oxford. [Online]. October 2005. [Accessed 04.08.2020] Available from: <http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/guardian/lookwhostalking.pdf>

<sup>314</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Tony Stoller, University of Bournemouth, [21/05/2020]

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Ofcom, Ofcom's annual report on the BBC, p38, [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/173735/second-bbc-annualreport.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/173735/second-bbc-annualreport.pdf) [accessed 22/07/2020]

<sup>317</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by ITV, [29/05/2020]

<sup>318</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Channel 4, [09/07/2020]

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.





Pilgrimage: The Road To Istanbul followed journalist Adrian Chiles, a Catholic convert; former politician Edwina Currie, a lapsed Jew; Olympian Fatima Whitbread, a practising Christian; broadcaster Mim Shaikh and television presenter Amar Latif, both Muslims; and two confirmed atheist's, comedian Dom Joly and actor Pauline McLynn, on a journey to Istanbul. It explored how each character related to faith over the course of a historic military route.

It is clear then that religious programming has changed significantly over the last two decades. When questioned on this, Ofcom's Kevin Bakhurst, Head of Content and Media Policy, pointed to the wider ecology of broadcasting which has provided new avenues through which religious programmes can be received.<sup>320</sup> Among the public service broadcasters (PSBs), there has been an irreversible move of religious programming to the BBC. There is a great deal of excellent work done in this area, as highlighted each year by the Sandford St Martin Awards.

Documentaries such as *Island Parish*, dramas such as *Broken*, a story about a Catholic priest in Liverpool, and comedies like BBC Two's *Rev*, together show the potential breadth of religious programming. A much-celebrated programme which featured strongly as an example of good practice was *Pilgrimage*. Broadcast on BBC Two, the series combines faith with travel and celebrity reality TV and has been popular with audiences and reviewers alike. It demonstrated how religious programming can be engaging, educational and contemporary. Beliefs are not advocated for but they are explored in a serious and empathetic way through the reflections of a diverse cast of celebrities.

Even so, a range of submissions questioned whether the BBC continues to have a long term and strategic commitment to religious programming. Carl Brettell, the CEO of Neighbourhood Prayer Network who has 20 years experience in Christian media, described the relatively tiny funding allocated to this area, noting that total religion and ethics spend across PSBs is around £13m.<sup>321 322</sup> In a country with over 30 million people of faith, this seems a vanishingly small amount. Due to some criticism, the BBC has recognised in recent years a need to address this question directly and conducted a major review, producing a report that brought together findings from over 150 religious and faith leaders, audience insights from a ten year period, a public survey and publicly available statistics and opinion on religion and faith in the UK. The report made several recommendations which have been implemented, including 'increased representation of different faiths, more specialist expertise through the creation of a Religion Editor in News, and reaching greater audiences, for example, through more content for young people'.<sup>323</sup> Another outcome was the Year of Beliefs, with output including *Pilgrimage*, *Sacred Wonders* and *Inside the Vatican* on TV and *The Secret History of Science and Religion*, *Uncrossing the Religious Divide* and *Fatwa* on radio.

<sup>320</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Kevin Bakhurst, Ofcom, [26/06/2020]

<sup>321</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Carl Brettell, [11/06/2020]

<sup>322</sup> DCMS. 2016. Public Service Broadcasting Contestable Fund Consultation. [Online]. December 2016. [Accessed 17/09/2020]. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/579276/CFConsultationFinalDraft.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/579276/CFConsultationFinalDraft.pdf). p7.

<sup>323</sup> Written response submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the BBC, [14/07/2020].



We commend the work the BBC has done and hope that this will mark a consistent commitment to religion and belief. Its conventional religious programming – whether that be programmes explicitly discussing an individual’s beliefs or the broadcasting of worship – have an essential cultural and social function. The need to attract younger audiences does not negate the fact that the BBC is a universal service equally aimed at older people whose viewing habits may be less affected by the advent of social media and online streaming.

Providing religious programming which focuses centrally and unabashedly on faith ensures that the broadcaster continues to speak in a language that the large minority of people who view religion as central to their identity understand and feel represented by. The BBC is now by far the most significant force in religious programming. This concentration is problematic. One panellist suggested that this has a wider effect on other organisations; ‘I do feel that there are a lot of [...] television execs who’ll leave it to the BBC’.<sup>324</sup> The loss of a plurality of providers makes it vital that the BBC is able to continue producing public service content. Without it, there would be very little public service religious programming in the UK left. It can deliver content across the spectrum of religious broadcasting, whether that be ‘part of its factual specialist factual remit, but also in terms of its ability to show religion as it is lived in its day experience’;<sup>325</sup> however, it is unique in retaining this capacity.

## RECOMMENDATION

The current religious programming hours required of the BBC should be protected in future reviews.

## A wider perspective

We recognise that broadcasters must look to find ways to engage with younger audiences. Here the solution proposed across the whole of our Inquiry was to work constantly to make connections between religious programming and other areas. The categorisation and siloing of religion is in part due to the wider format and structure of television. Deborah Williams, the Executive Director of the Creative Diversity Network, noted that ‘one thing television does is work with the genre spaces. And at the moment we sort of have a religious space and particular religions are represented in particular ways within that space. And so it is abstract from humanity and society, from our culture, from our economy, from our social understanding of who we are and ourselves, which is what television does and broadcasting does.’<sup>326</sup>

Placing religion in a marked off “space” can lead to a culture of box-ticking. Journalist and blogger Sunny Hundal noted that ‘I was surprised and sad to hear from others that when they had pitched good ideas to the BBC, they heard back that the BBC had already commissioned their programming for Sikhs for the year [...] and weren’t looking for anything more. This is tokenistic and feels like commissioning for religious communities is a tick-box.’<sup>327</sup>

This articulates and explains an issue which arose repeatedly over the course of our Inquiry. We believe that a central focus of not just religious programming but of everyone working in public sector broadcasting should be to work against this process of abstraction to reconnect religion with “society”, “culture”, “economy” and our “understanding of who we are and ourselves”.

<sup>324</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Anna McNamee, Sandford St Martin Trust, [21/05/2020].

<sup>325</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Catriona Noonan, Senior Lecturer in Media and Communications, Cardiff University, [21/05/2020].

<sup>326</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Deborah Williams, Creative Diversity Network, [11/06/2020]

<sup>327</sup> Supplementary evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Sunny Hundal, [31/07/2020]

## Case study

### BROADCASTING DEBATE

Several submissions highlighted the important role played by live discussion programmes. The BBC is uniquely placed to resist the “dumbing down” and sensationalisation of public debate. Its ability to produce content where the market will not embody a profound public purpose; it has the capacity to enrich public discourse and provide informed insights in a way that may be viewed as commercially unviable by others. Revd James Walters highlighted the benefit of certain areas ‘being removed from vested interests and market forces and religion perhaps is one in particular, because partly what those vested interests and market forces can do is push things towards the pointlessly provocative.’<sup>328</sup>

It is vital that the BBC, and other news broadcasters, continue to avoid what Revd Walters termed the ‘pointlessly provocative’.<sup>329</sup> This is where religious literacy can play an important role. An example provided by Catherine Pepinster is instructive on this front: ‘I was asked on to Radio 4’s Today programme to comment on a decision made by Pope Benedict XVI that Jews found upsetting. The majority of Catholics also found it upsetting. At the last minute, I was stood down, with the producer who called me saying the item was being dropped. In fact it went ahead with the same Jewish commentator who I was going to talk with, and the Catholic “talking head” chosen instead who thought restoring comments in the liturgy that Jews found insulting was ok. Yes, it balanced the Jewish commentator but it distorted the situation. This was not what most Catholics believed’.<sup>330</sup> Dividing issues by religion such that they are presented in a simple binary may make for good listening but too often it misrepresents the reality of the situation.

We also heard from Heena Khaled of AVOW. She was invited on to BBC Radio London after the Regent’s Park mosque attack; ‘I was invited and the interview was going really well. I was talking about the psychological impacts – the impact of Islamophobia. And suddenly it was a woman who asked me about ‘people would say that there’s a gender equality issue in Islam’, or something along those lines [...]. And I was like, well, I’m not here to discuss theology. And this is what happens, is every time we get, we come on media platforms, we get questioned about things [...] that aren’t relevant to our expertise, our experience, our academic background’.<sup>331</sup> Although wide-ranging and robust discussion is to be expected, invoking controversial beliefs held by some members of a particular faith simply to “liven up” debate shows and radio does little to develop public understanding of that faith and can be interpreted by that group as a kind of cynical whataboutery.

In these two cases, greater religious literacy on behalf of the producers and presenters would have led to a more rounded, informative discussion. In the former example, fitting the story to a ‘two-faiths disagree’ framework ignored the significant complexities of the case and misled the viewer. In the second case, a discussion about the difficulties of being a Muslim in Britain today was reframed through a criticism of perceived Muslim practices and beliefs with limited relevance to the question at hand.

<sup>328</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Revd Canon James Walters, LSE, [18/05/2020].

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Catherine Pepinster, [06/05/2020]

<sup>331</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Heena Khaled, AVOW, [14/05/2020]

Channel 4 recently commissioned research into minority audiences' views of diversity in television programming and on Channel 4. Their response described the findings:

'Participants felt that the primary goal in terms of diversity on TV should be normalisation and should be focussed on including people from a wide range of backgrounds in mainstream programming, rather than content that is tailored to individual minority groups or to the subject of diversity as a whole. Respondents felt that religion was too often a defining trait and instead programmes needed to mainstream different religions and treat them in an inclusive, sometimes incidental, way'.<sup>332</sup>

We heard evidence both for and against a move away from religious programming as conventionally defined and towards an approach which normalises representations of faith across all output. The latter approach has many benefits. Religious programming reaches a comparatively small audience; BARB's 2019 viewing report showed that religious programmes accounted for 0.2% of audience share in 2018.<sup>333</sup> This was a similar proportion to those viewing arts programmes.

Broadcasters should be encouraged to increase this proportion but it is highly unlikely that religious programmes will form a significant proportion of the viewing public's total watched content. On this basis, a wider strategy which normalises religion, recognises the sincerity of people's beliefs and explores the complexity of the many belief systems in the UK is commendable. However, the evidence we heard suggested that it should proceed on two bases: that it does not lead to further encroachment on the already limited religious programming produced by public service broadcasters, and in particular the BBC; and that the programmes go beyond 'tick-box' references to religion and recognise the capacity of broadcasting to educate and entertain.

We heard from Channel 4's then-Head of Specialist Factual and previous BBC commissioner, Fatima Salaria, who suggested the normalisation of religion in broadcasting could play an important role in attracting younger audiences to this kind of content; 'One of the things that I've been incredibly passionate about, both in this job and the BBC, is that to me, to try and get younger viewers coming to religious programmes when they don't know that they are religious programmes, to me is a way that we are going to increase our audience to these programmes'.<sup>334</sup>

<sup>332</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Channel 4, [09/07/2020]

<sup>333</sup> Broadcaster's Audience Research Board. 2019. The Viewing Report: Our annual exploration of the UK's viewing habits. [Online]. May 2019. [Accessed 03.08.2020]. Available from: [https://www.barb.co.uk/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Barb-ViewingReport-2019\\_32pp\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://www.barb.co.uk/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Barb-ViewingReport-2019_32pp_FINAL-1.pdf). p27.

<sup>334</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Fatima Salaria, [26/06/2020]

<sup>335</sup> Supplementary evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Sunny Hundal, [31/07/2020]

<sup>336</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Rosie Dawson, [26/06/2020].

<sup>337</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Anna McNamee, Sandford St Martin Trust, [21/05/2020]

A vital step proposed by a series of speakers was for the quality of content about religion to be raised across all output. As argued by Sunny Hundal, 'one way to stop siloing is to see religion as a social phenomena, one that covers everything from politics and modern culture to philosophy and spirituality. To put it into a narrow box is to misunderstand religion and to underestimate its impact'.<sup>335</sup> While the BBC's religion and ethics department plays a vital role it is essential that it has 'very porous boundaries partly so that [it] can feed other parts of the [BBC]'.<sup>336</sup> This will only happen if religious literacy is seen to be part of the whole organisation's remit rather than just a single department.

*'I think the challenge for religious literacy is to bring that conversation much more democratically within organisations so that it's not ghettoised in any way, shape or form, so that you can't answer the question of are you creating good religious content by saying, well, you know, we have a religious editor, we must be, or we have a religion commissioner or we have Songs of Praise or whatever, It needs to be broader than that.'*

Anna McNamee, Executive  
Director, Sandford St Martin Trust<sup>337</sup>

The APPG calls on the BBC to ensure that religious literacy is a focus across its output, and other broadcasters – PSBs ITV, STV, Channel 4, S4C and Channel 5 and commercial operations such as Sky – to recognise that religious literacy should be expected across all output.

## PROPOSED ACTION

All public service broadcasters should explore how they can use the full breadth of their output to increase religious literacy.

## Institutional knowledge and education

In order to maintain and even raise the quality of religious programming, it is essential that there are specialists at hand to guide the commissioning and production of religious programming. The story here is mixed. While Channel 4 has not had a dedicated Commissioning Editor for Religion since 2009, as part of their review the BBC introduced a Religion Editor. In terms of wider internal expertise, religion and ethics programming saw a larger proportion of spend move from in-house to external than any other genre between 2016 and 2018, with 72% of in-house spend falling to just 28% in two years.<sup>338</sup>

People who understand religion should be in the room when content is produced. A Panorama programme entitled 'Stacey meets the IS brides' was widely cited as an example of the impact of insufficient diversity and expertise in the production process.<sup>339</sup> The episode in question showed a British journalist visiting camps in northern Syria to speak with women who had left their country to join Isis. She described women who raised their index fingers as performing 'the Isis salute'.<sup>340</sup> This gesture is a symbol of Tawhid, a common part of Islamic prayer used by Muslims across the world. We do not wish to criticise a single journalist; mistakes happen. The BBC were also quick to admit wrongdoing and when the issue was raised the relevant section was edited out of the final programme. What is more troubling is that this statement survived the research and editing process. Such basic illiteracy suggests a lack of voices in the entirety of the production process with a basic understanding of Islam. This is particularly surprising for a team working on content matter that is by its nature, highly controversial. It is not difficult to see how genuinely alarming it would be if even a small proportion of viewers came away with the impression that Muslims raising their index finger are performing the "salute" of a terrorist organisation.

Going forward, it is essential that religion is treated on a par with other specialisms. Several responses highlighted the importance of personal and institutional knowledge relating to faith within broadcasting organisations. One ex-staffer who provided a very positive perspective on the BBC's work noted that 'The BBC needs to ensure that it encourages religious literacy generally so that its specialist department can be replenished as more established long-serving programme-makers leave the corporation'.<sup>341</sup> Others were more explicitly critical; 'The BBC treats religion as a subject which requires little or no expertise. During my time at the corporation (1992-2012), there were a number of instances of non-specialists being appointed to senior production and editorial roles – which would not have happened in Science, Arts or Sport'.<sup>342</sup>

There are clearly efforts being made by all of the broadcasters who responded to our Inquiry to provide internal training. Sky has an employee-led group "Multiculture@Sky" which is open to all members of staff which aims 'to deliver cultural, religious and guest speaker events that educate and inspire colleagues'.<sup>343</sup> Channel 4 offers "diversity and inclusion" training alongside events and speakers. Although the BBC's Head of Religion and Media is no longer a full-time role, following their 2017 review BBC News created the role of Religion Editor who is responsible for leading, directing and informing on-air coverage in their subject area. An example provided in the BBC's response described how, during 'coverage of the protests following the death of George Floyd, the Religion Editor was asked for analysis on President Trump's religious allegiance'<sup>344</sup> – copy that was widely disseminated. If those covering stories about religion need specialist guidance they are expected to check with the Religion Editor or the Religion and Ethics department. The BBC also holds events for the BBC's most senior staff 'to further promote religious literacy internally', including events with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi.<sup>345</sup>

<sup>338</sup> Ofcom. 2019. Media Nations: UK 2019. 7 August 2019. [Online]. [Accessed 05.09.2020]. Available from: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/160714/media-nations-2019-uk-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/160714/media-nations-2019-uk-report.pdf). p52.

<sup>339</sup> BBC. Stacey Meets the IS Brides. [Online]. Broadcast on BBC One 5 Aug 2019. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0007fcg>

<sup>340</sup> This was mentioned in several submissions, including evidence provided by Dr Zahera Harb and the Media Diversity Institute.

<sup>341</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Rosie Dawson, [24/04/2020]

<sup>342</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Kristine Pommert, [21/04/2020]

<sup>343</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Sky, [20/07/2020]

<sup>344</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the BBC, [4/07/2020]

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

As mentioned earlier in this report, we believe that religious literacy training should be mandatory. It need not be extensive, but there is an industry-wide need for training which explains the continuing relevance of religion and belief and which provides journalists and programme-makers from every field with the critical tools to understand and explore how religion relates to their given specialism. Another mechanism would be to increase the movement of staff and ideas between specialist organisations such as CTVC and mainstream broadcasters. This was suggested in the CORAB report but was not taken up by any broadcasters or print publications.

## PROPOSED ACTION

Broadcasters should engage with faith groups and specialist religious production companies to ensure that they have access to the specialist knowledge that has been lost with religious correspondents.

### Improving diversity

A key step for improving diversity is understanding the current situation through reliable monitoring mechanisms. Under the Communications Act 2003, Ofcom requires data from broadcasters related to equality of opportunity between men and women, people of different racial groups, and for disabled persons. Although the licence condition currently only requires broadcasters to make arrangements relating to gender, racial group and disability, Ofcom works to take account of the other 'relevant protected characteristics' in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (age, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief, and sexual orientation), and also social mobility/social and economic background.<sup>346</sup> They therefore ask broadcasters to provide information on those characteristics on a voluntary basis.

Ofcom has made clear on several occasions that new powers to collect information would be useful but the government has consistently opposed change on this front. In 2018, a ministerial response to a written question by Afzal Khan MP argued that 'It is right that voluntary approaches are fully explored before legislative change is considered'.<sup>347</sup> A later response to a question tabled by our Chair clarified that 'The Government has received representations from Ofcom regarding powers to collect information on additional diversity characteristics.[...] The Government currently has no plans in this session to introduce legislation granting Ofcom additional data collection powers'.<sup>348</sup>

In the absence of mandatory reporting, there are major disparities in the quality of data provided. While the BBC and Channel 4 have near-complete data sets, Viacom and Sky have large – if diminishing – gaps. ITV has not collected any data on the religion or belief of its employees but plans to do so for the next reporting round. Of the data that was provided there were significant disparities: 48% of Channel 4's staff identified with a religion compared to 37% at the BBC, 31% at Viacom and 26% at Sky. Across the broadcasters, 22% of the television workforce identify as having a religion or belief, compared to 67% of the UK population. Those broadcasters with particularly low figures for the percentage of staff reporting religion and belief should question why and put in place a plan to ensure that there are no barriers to access for people of faith.

## PROPOSED ACTION

The Government should consider providing Ofcom with more powers to collect information on diversity characteristics including religion and belief.

Broadcasters should work towards higher response rates so that a more accurate picture of broadcasting diversity can be developed.

<sup>346</sup> Ofcom: 2019. Guidance: Diversity in Broadcasting. [Online]. 10 May 2019. [Accessed 05.09.2020]. Available from: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/147710/Diversity-in-broadcasting-guidance.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/___data/assets/pdf_file/0020/147710/Diversity-in-broadcasting-guidance.pdf). p3.

<sup>347</sup> UK Parliament. 2018. Telecommunications: Equality: Written question - 123019, [Online]. 19 January 2018. [Accessed 01.09.2020]. Available from: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-01-16/123019/>

<sup>348</sup> UK Parliament. 2020. Broadcasting: Equality: Written question - 37561. [Online]. 24 April 2020. [Accessed 30.08.2020]. Available from: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-04-20/37561/>.



A separate system is used to collate data on external companies contracted by broadcasters. Diamond is a single online system used by the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky to obtain consistent diversity data on programmes they commission. It is funded by the broadcasters and delivered by the Creative Diversity Network. Each year Diamond produces “state-of-the-industry” reports which detail the findings of their diversity monitoring over the previous year. Diamond collects data about the gender, gender identity, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability of people working on or off-screen on all UK-originated productions. However, it does not currently collect this data for religion or belief. This is not Diamond’s “fault”; their remit is set by the broadcasters. One panellist who specialises in improving diversity described a hierarchy where ‘you have some protective characteristics being kind of put to the fore and championed more than others. And I think in TV, I would say religion is kind of more towards the bottom.’<sup>349</sup>

We note that Diamond has been controversial since it was established in 2016. There are two main criticisms; a relatively low response rate (under 30% each year) and an inability to report programme-level data since the inaugural report launched in the summer of 2017. The system has been criticised by a number of Unions and last year BECTU’s (The Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union) black members’ committee became the latest union group to propose a boycott of the project. Following this year’s report, the President of the actors union Equity, Maureen Beattie, stated that ‘This is not an authoritative set of data for many reasons. The results are drawn from only 28% of returns, which is too small a sample. There is no detail about the characters played and whether the roles are simply perpetuating stereotypes, nor is there any indication of the importance of the roles played or the amount of time each performer spends on our screens.’<sup>350</sup>

Developing a system which could include both programme level data and broader industry trends would be ideal. We call on the broadcasters to explore whether this is possible. However, if Diamond continues to be used, it is important that religion is included as one of the reporting categories and that it continues its work to increase response rates.

*‘In the meeting with the radio 4 commissioners to talk about the Radio 4 factual commissioning round last year, there was about 300 people. Five of us were BAME. I was the only one in a hijab who was Muslim in that room.’*  
Saba Zaman, CTVC

Alongside work to improve diversity, there needs to be commitment from senior figures across the media sector to recognising the need for meaningful change. A criticism raised in several evidence sessions was the tendency for positive announcements to be followed with limited meaningful change and inadequate funding. This year, The Black Lives Matter movement has significantly increased the profile and prominence of discussions around representation and diversity in newsrooms and production companies and there are some positive steps being taken. The British Journalism Awards recently announced an award recognising BAME journalists.<sup>351</sup> Named after Barbara Blake Hannah, the first black on-screen journalist in UK, the award comes as part of a wider package of measures aimed at improving diversity. We also welcome June Sarpong’s appointment as Head of Diversity at the BBC and the £100m fund announced this year is a major step forward. We urge the BBC, and other broadcasters, to recognise the importance of addressing disparities in all of the protected characteristics, including religion. As long as people from particular faiths feel disproportionately shut out from positions of leadership, there cannot and will not be meaningful change in the broadcasting sector.

<sup>349</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Amy Turton, Creative Diversity Network, [11/06/2020].

<sup>350</sup> Equity. 2020. Equity President slams quality of equality and diversity research in TV. [Online]. 3 March 2020. [Accessed 17.09.2020]. Available from: <https://www.equity.org.uk/news/2020/march/equity-president-slams-quality-of-equality-and-diversity-research-in-tv/>.

<sup>351</sup> Press Gazette. Barbara Blake-Hannah prize launched as Press Gazette bids to improve British Journalism Awards diversity. Press Gazette. [Online]. 13 August 2020. [Accessed 12.09.2020]. Available from: <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/barbara-blake-hannah-prize-launched-as-press-gazette-bids-to-improve-british-journalism-awards-diversity/>

Mukti Jain Campion's 2005 study, 'Look who's talking: Cultural Diversity, Public Service Broadcasting and the National Conversation'<sup>352</sup> continues to be relevant here. It describes the issues related to the recruitment and retention of a diverse staff, the problems that result from a "box-ticking" approach to diversity and the difficulty in achieving cultural change within a public service broadcaster. Among other recommendations, she describes the value of "cultural intelligence", which is defined as 'a way of valuing diverse cultural knowledge and experience in programme-making'.<sup>353</sup> This goes beyond simply attempting to boost numbers and moves towards an approach that manifests change at every level by embracing diverse knowledge, experience and thought. This can lead to better programmes and a greater likelihood of retaining staff from nontraditional backgrounds.

## RECOMMENDATION

Broadcasters [and newspapers] should audit and publish full accounts of their religion and belief workforce statistics to provide a better sense of who is working in the industry so that disparities can be addressed.

## The wider broadcasting environment: protecting public service broadcasting

Alongside suggestions regarding the internal measures that broadcasters could take, we also received several suggestions on the steps that could be taken to enable good public service broadcasting about religion.

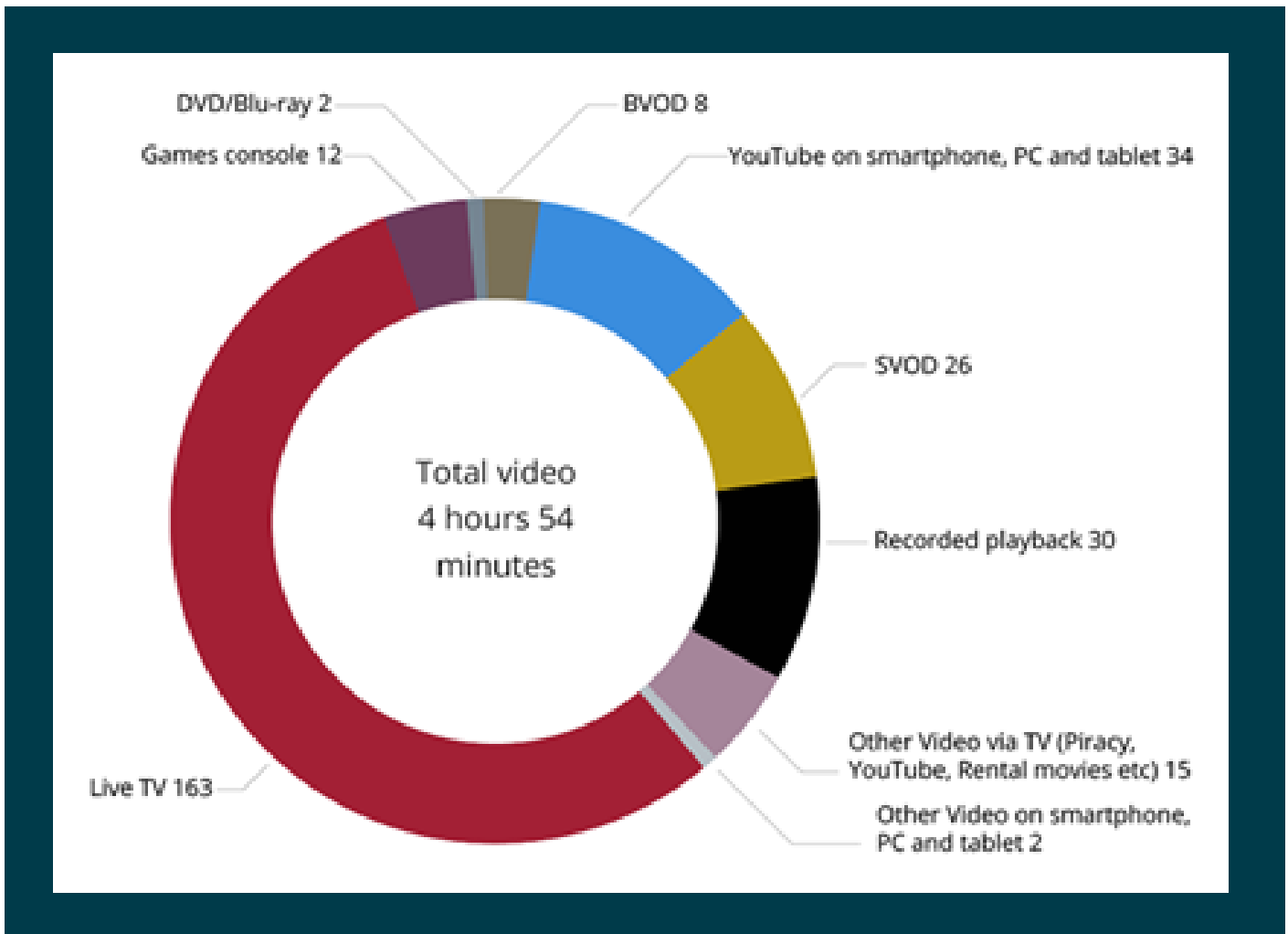
Alongside regulating TV, radio and video-on-demand sectors in the UK, under section 264 of the Communications Act 2003, Ofcom also has a duty to review periodically the public service broadcasting (PSB) system. The most recent PSB Review was published in February 2020 and covered the period 2014 to 2018. It found; 'There continues to be limited provision of children's programmes, arts, formal education, religion and ethics on the PSB channels', but that this is supplemented by non-PSB channels of varying quality.<sup>354</sup> The broadcasting sector faces similarly profound changes as the press. All five main channels have lost viewing reach since 2010 as a result of viewers switching to on-demand services, social media and Youtube. Ofcom's annual report found that 'The popularity of SVoD [Subscription Video on Demand] as well as other online services, especially YouTube, has resulted in an increasingly fragmented market, as audiences have more choice than ever in what they watch'.<sup>355</sup>

<sup>352</sup> Campion, M.J. 2005. Look Who's Talking Cultural Diversity, Public Service Broadcasting and the National Conversation. Nuffield College Oxford. [Online]. October 2005. [Accessed 04.08.2020]. Available from: <http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/guardian/lookwhostalking.pdf>.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid. p94.

<sup>354</sup> Ofcom. 2020. Small Screen: Big Debate – a five-year review of Public Service Broadcasting (2014-18). [Online]. 27 February 2020. [Accessed 29.08.2020]. Available from [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/192100/psb-five-year-review.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/192100/psb-five-year-review.pdf). p18.

<sup>355</sup> Ofcom. 2019. Media Nations: UK 2019. 7 August 2019. [Online]. [Accessed 05.09.2020]. Available from: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/160714/media-nations-2019-uk-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/160714/media-nations-2019-uk-report.pdf). p30.



Source: Public Service Broadcasting – as vital as ever<sup>356</sup>

While the vast majority of PSB religious programming is now done by the BBC, the growth of paid content, most notably on Sky, has created new spaces for religious programming aimed at religious communities. This provides more choice for those audiences who can afford it and allows different and new stories to be told. Foreign language channels can be accessed from across the world and several focus explicitly on religion. Carl Brettle, described the positive benefits of these changes; '20 Years ago there were no Christian Digital Audio Stations and no Christian Satellite TV stations. There are now 16 Sky Channels with a specific Christian focus, 1 main Freeview TV Channel, three large Christian Radio (UCB, Premier, TWR), 20+ local or internet-based Christian broadcasters.'<sup>357</sup> He estimated that Christian media represents about 3% of the media outlets in the UK. In many ways, this is a positive development as it provides access to a much broader range of content than was possible just two decades ago.

Sunny Hundal also pointed to this increasing diversity, while warning of the need for content to be properly regulated as multiple new foreign language programmes are made available. Ofcom's rulings show robust responses when they have seen signs of discrimination. In 2015, an Urdu-language channel was fined £75,000 for broadcasting comments of an antisemitic nature.<sup>358</sup> However, we share his concern that there is a little understanding of this rapidly emerging market.

The increasing quantity of programmes increases choice but it also fragments audiences. Broadcasting historically held a unifying role that would allow people to share a common narrative through what they watched. With the rise in subscription television and more recently online streaming, this is no longer the case. Good mainstream religious programming, and a wider approach which requires religious literacy in all areas of output, is vital.

<sup>356</sup> Select Committee on Communications and Digital. 2019. Public service broadcasting: as vital as ever. [Online]. 5 November 2019. [Accessed 16.08.2020]. Available from: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201919/ldselect/ldcomuni/16/1602.htm>

<sup>357</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Carl Brettle, [24/06/2020].

<sup>358</sup> Ofcom. 2016. Sanction 104 (16) Mohiuddin Digital Television Limited. [Online]. 20 December 2016. [Accessed 21.08.2020]. Available from: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0022/96124/Noor-TV.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/96124/Noor-TV.pdf)

A House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital investigated the state of public service broadcasting in 2019.<sup>359</sup> Despite criticisms of the PSB's content provision for young people and minority ethnic audiences, the report concluded that public service broadcasting remains vital to British society and culture. 'Public service broadcasting remains essential to the UK media and losing it would leave UK society and democracy worse off. Public service broadcasting can bring the nation together in a way in which other media cannot and can "raise the level" of quality, as well as ensuring continued investment in original UK content across a range of programming'.<sup>360</sup>

There is also some evidence to suggest that providing good public service broadcasting about religion can prevent viewers from seeking content elsewhere from less regulated channels. Elizabeth Oldfield pointed to a Theos study in 2010 which found that 'having a national broadcaster with a statutory requirement to provide religious programming alongside much, much tighter broadcast licence legislation environment has really kept down the more kind of extreme proliferation of religious-based media that, for example, you're seeing in the US'.<sup>361</sup>

Dr Noonan was clear that the greatest current threat to religious programming is a possible reduction of funding of the BBC. This would have a damaging impact on religious literacy in the UK, not least because regulatory changes in the last two decades have left them as the only public sector broadcaster for whom religion is a major focus. There is now growing hostility to the publicly funded model of the BBC and the licence fee. This January, it announced a cut of 450 jobs from BBC News; a similar number were announced in June from its regional TV news and current affairs, local radio and online news.

### In focus: Local and regional broadcasting

Much like local press journalism, regional broadcasting has an important role to play in representing everyday belief. It has a capacity to introduce new perspectives at the same time as creating a common narrative. It is also an area where religious programming continues to be valued and prioritised. As the submission from the Methodist Church noted, 'on BBC Local radio stations, Sunday breakfast programmes are faith/ethics-based and many of the Sunday breakfast programme presenters are people of faith. This is a particular help in understanding the subject and giving credibility to their work. It doesn't make them probe any less, but enables them to root a story more authentically than presenters who have no knowledge and tend to rely on questions written by someone else, which then aren't followed up or challenged'.<sup>362</sup> When prioritised, good local religious programming can be engaging, interrogative and enjoyable.

Over the course of the pandemic, the BBC has used local radio to provide services and speakers from various faiths as part of its "Make a Difference" campaign. In the "Keeping Faith" series, local radio stations host short clips including 'Sikh reflection: Mohini Sawhney talks about how her Sikh faith has helped her during the pandemic' and 'Jewish reflection: Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen is helping her community cope with a second lockdown'. This series demonstrates many of the important qualities of public service broadcasting: it develops a sense of community; it is available to anyone; it is produced to high quality; and it shows different religions in a nuanced, contemplative way. Although other religionspecific radio stations could provide more religious content, "Keeping Faith" speaks inclusively to multiple different communities.

These services constitute a central plank in the promotion of religious literacy by the BBC. However, as Professor Stoller notes, 'BBC local radio, still a fertile source, is under increasing budgetary pressures'.<sup>363</sup> The ongoing review of non-payment of the BBC licence fee further jeopardises its long-term future. Without commenting on that review, we would argue that protection of the BBC's funding is essential for the future of religious programming in the UK.

<sup>359</sup> Select Committee on Communications and Digital. 2019. Public service broadcasting: as vital as ever. [Online]. 5 November 2019. [Accessed 16.08.2020]. Available from: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201919/ldselect/ldcomuni/16/1602.htm>

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Oral evidence to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Elizabeth Oldfield, Theos, [18/05/2020]. The report mentioned was Walton, A., Hatcher, A., Spencer, N. 2013. Is there a 'Religious Right' Emerging in Britain?. Theos. [Online]. [Accessed 23.08.2020]. Available from: [https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Reports/IS%20THERE%20A%20RELIGIOUS%20RIGHT%20\(NEW\).pdf](https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Reports/IS%20THERE%20A%20RELIGIOUS%20RIGHT%20(NEW).pdf)

<sup>362</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Methodist Church in Britain, [29/04/2020]

<sup>363</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Tony Stoller, Bournemouth University, [27/04/2020]

More broadly, it is important to foster a wider environment which encourages and rewards programmes which deal sensitively with religion. The latter has been done in large part by the Sandford St Martin Awards, an annual award which celebrates the best of religion and ethics broadcasting. Religion specific awards have also emerged, with the Muslims News Awards featuring a prize for 'excellence in media'.<sup>364</sup> There is a more complicated debate around how to encourage better representation more generally in the face of SVoD services. The need to 'migrate some of the expectations of public service [broadcasting] onto online platforms'<sup>365</sup> is a simple and significant step. A submission from Channel 4 also emphasised that 'the current prominence regime plays a vital role in supporting public service broadcasting – but the current rules have not kept pace with technological and market developments'.<sup>366</sup> Unless public service content – be that religion, history or science – is given prominence online it will not compete with 'trending' or new content.

There was also support for a stronger enabling structure which would work to foster, champion and encourage religious programming. Professor Stoller argued for the creation of an Advisory Council on Religious Broadcasting (ACRB). This would follow the broad outline of the Central Religious Advisory Committee which advised broadcasters for around 80 years, 'updated to suit modern circumstances. The committee would include broadcasters, members of faith communities and experts with sufficient knowledge and experience to help guide religious broadcasting'.<sup>367</sup> The ACRB – as recommended by Prof. Stoller – would not have an executive function, and it would have no binding authority or control over broadcaster output. It would be 'the muchmissed "big beast" within the ecology of religious broadcasting, and would be an effective and proportionate mechanism for promoting religious literacy'.<sup>368</sup>

Another step would be to alter the charter of public service broadcasters. This argument was made by both Professor Stoller and the Sandford St Martin Trust. Professor Stoller described how this could be achieved in the case of the BBC, 'the six current Public Purposes required of the BBC as part of its Charter obligations should be expanded to include the promotion of religious literacy. Such a duty could either be expressed as the seventh Purpose, or be included within Purpose One "...to help people understand and engage with the world around them" and/or within Purpose Four, "to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions"'.<sup>369</sup> The Sandford St Martin Trust expanded on this to suggest a change in 'the remits or public purposes of all PSBs. We suggest that this could be drafted as follows: "Promoting Religious Literacy: consumers and users can rely on the PSBs to reflect the many religious communities that exist in the UK with the aim of building a better understanding of the beliefs people hold both between those communities and by UK audiences as a whole".<sup>370</sup> The APPG believes that this would be a positive step which would recognise the importance of religion and belief in the world today and help foster a more religiously literate broadcasting environment by placing this aim at the core of PSBs' purposes.

## PROPOSED ACTION

Parliament should pass legislation to expand the prominence regime so that PSB content is prominently displayed whatever method viewers use to access content.

## RECOMMENDATION

The remit of public service broadcasters should be redrafted to include the purpose of promoting religious literacy.

<sup>364</sup> Muslim News. 2019. Winners of The Muslim News Awards for Excellence 2019. [Online]. 26 April 2019. [Accessed 17/9/2020]. Available from: <http://muslimnews.co.uk/newspaper/home-news/winners-muslim-news-awards-excellence-2019/>

<sup>365</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Dr Catriona Noonan, [20/04/2020]

<sup>366</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Channel 4, [09/07/2020]

<sup>367</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Professor Tony Stoller, Bournemouth University, [27/04/2020]

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by the Sandford St Martin Trust, [24/04/2020]



## CONCLUSION

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Religion is here to stay. It is deeply woven into this country's way of life both in the past and the present and it continues to act as a source of guidance and teaching to a large majority of the world's inhabitants. A media that fails to recognise that will increasingly be a media that fails to represent our world accurately.

Throughout this report, we have attempted to assess the causes, themes and trends of religious illiteracy and make a series of recommendations which we hope would cultivate a more religiously literate media landscape. Tying them together is a call on print and broadcast media to recognise the many and complex ways in which religion intersects with every part of our society.

We are clear that this is a two-way street. Just as journalists need to engage more with difficult-to-reach faith communities and work harder to recognise and describe the subtleties of religion as it is lived today, so religious groups need to be more open, responsive and understanding of the pressures placed on journalists.

A lack of religious literacy training for journalists may have made some sense twenty years ago; most newspapers still had internal specialists who would either be writing the piece or available to provide guidance on navigating the nuances of stories about religion. However, as religious correspondents have been cut from newsrooms, there has been no corresponding realisation that knowledge is being lost which needs to be either retained or newly acquired somehow. We have reached a stage where there is neither standardised training nor internal specialisation. The underlying assumption appears to be that specialisation is no longer required. We strongly believe that not to be the case. Religious literacy training should be a part of journalism qualifications and it should be incorporated into Continued Professional Development training.

*A good religion-media relationship is not simply one that the religious half is happy with; our narratives going public; our stories being told; our image being polished. At least as important is the media's role in exposing when those values and beliefs are not being practised, despite being preached. It is, rather, a plea to overcome a "them and us" divide, in which there are one group of people – implicitly secular, rational, normal – who are curious about another – religious, faith-based, slightly eccentric. One group of people who inhabit a world of evidence, reason and facts and another who don't or won't, or who add something superfluous to the same world to make it more palatable. Rather, we are the same people inhabiting the same world, with the same palate of cognitive, moral, emotional and spiritual capacities; it's just we do so in different ways'.*

Nick Spencer, Senior Fellow, Theos<sup>371</sup>

More generally, it is clear that people who ascribe to a particular religion are currently significantly underrepresented in the media. Given around half of this country affiliates with a faith, it is worrying that the proportion of journalists identifying with a religion is nearer a third. Newspapers and broadcasters urgently need to explore why this is the case and take steps to ensure that there are pathways for journalists of faith to enter the media industry and that the culture they enter into is an accepting and respectful one. In order to ensure that this happens, there needs to be publicly available data on religious belief in both print and broadcast media. Diversity and inclusion strategies must also be full spectrum,

<sup>371</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on Religion in the Media by Nick Spencer, Theos, [14/05/2020]

incorporating religion and belief within its ambition to improve diverse representation in the sectors. We heard how print media is facing dramatic changes, in the face of which there is a clear need to protect and support public interest journalism, particularly in local news. At the same time, national organisations need to work to ensure that they have sufficient internal specialisation to write accurately on religion and that they make full use of educational resources, community links and religious literacy training. There are now several excellent initiatives supported by faith communities with the explicit purpose of providing training and faith community links to journalists. While recognising that IPSO has changed the culture of news organisations, we believe that it can go further to prevent discrimination faced by religious groups while still protecting freedom of speech.

Broadcasting has also undergone drastic change in recent years. However, public service broadcasting continues to be the main source of quality religious broadcasting and it needs to be protected. At the same time, broadcasters need to ensure that all output works to improve religious literacy, whether that be through drama, documentaries or the news.

Religion is not “back” – it never really left. Religious belief is and will remain an important part of the UK and a growing part of international life and politics. We would widen this to say that religion and belief has always been vital to the political and cultural life of this country and is a growing part of international life and politics. Religion does not need special treatment but we all deserve a media which recognises this reality and has the confidence to report on, interrogate, question and discuss it. We hope that this report, with its recommendations and proposed actions, will help to foster a more informed, religiously literate conversation about religion and belief and go some way towards achieving that end.

## DEFINITION

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### Religious literacy

Religious literacy involves a broad, balanced knowledge of religions in the world today including a basic understanding of their histories, central beliefs, and practices, and the many ways in which religion intersects with wider society and influences everyday life. It also describes the ability to engage successfully with religious ideas and navigate the cultural codes which define both particular religions and the wider conceptual categories of religion and belief.

In practice, we think that religious literacy also incorporates respect for religion and belief as a valid source of guidance and knowledge to the majority of the world's inhabitants.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### General

Journalists and programme-makers should aim to explore the 'lived experience' of religion as well as its doctrinal, ritual and ceremonial elements.

Newspapers and broadcasters should audit and publish full accounts of their religion and belief workforce statistics to provide a better sense of who is working in the industry so that disparities can be addressed.

### Education

Religious literacy training should be formally incorporated into professional media qualifications and journalists' continuing professional development.

### Press

Newspapers should take greater care with the pictures and headlines they choose, recognising that this is all the majority of viewers will see.

Independent regulation should be looked at again by policymakers because there remain significant issues around access to regulatory redress. In particular, groups should be able to make complaints on the grounds of discrimination.

### Broadcasting

The current religious programming hours required of the BBC should be protected in future reviews.

The remit of public service broadcasters should be redrafted to include the purpose of promoting religious literacy and all public service broadcasters should explore how they can use the full width of their output to increase religious literacy.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This inquiry has been unlike any other we have undertaken as parliamentarians in recent times. The Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing national lockdown in March considerably altered the way in which we would ordinarily have gone about this inquiry. It is a huge credit to all our Officers who have shown the unremitting flexibility needed to pursue this work with care and diligence. Particular thanks are due to Baroness Butler-Sloss, The Rt Revd Nicholas Baines, Bishop of Leeds, Lisa Cameron MP, Baron Parekh, Afzal Khan MP, Tim Farron MP, Martin Vickers MP, Baroness Hussein-Ece, Alex Sobel MP, Stephen Timms MP and Baroness Uddin, whose commitment never waned and who engaged with every aspect of this inquiry from start to finish.

As with our members, participants in this inquiry have faced an altered environment. All our oral evidence sessions were held online and we sincerely thank all of those individuals, organisations, journalists and editors who contributed their time and expertise.

Without written evidence submissions, this inquiry would have been much the poorer and to all those who responded to our call for evidence, we express our fulsome gratitude.

Special thanks are reserved for our indefatigable researcher, Joshua Ames Blackaby. This inquiry would not have succeeded without your enormous effort and hard work over many months. The Christian Muslim Forum has been an incredibly useful source of support and guidance throughout this inquiry.

Last, but not least, a tremendous note of thanks to our funders, Safera Foundation and Penny Appeal. This work has been enabled by your generous support and commitment to a fair and equal society where people of faith and no-faith can live together in solidarity. Thank you.

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group

### CALL FOR WRITTEN EVIDENCE:

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Inquiry into Religious Literacy in Print and Broadcast Media: Call for Written Evidence

#### Scope of inquiry

The APPG recognises that religion continues to play a crucial role in public life. Traditional religious adherence is declining in the UK and new forms of spirituality are becoming increasingly prominent. The APPG believes that it is essential that the media provides a balanced portrayal of faith groups and an accurate reflection of the diversity of religious belief and practice in the UK. While journalists must be free to report accurately on matters relating to faith without fear or censure, the APPG emphasises that where nuanced representations of faith groups can promote mutual understanding and social harmony, reductive, distorted or misleading depictions can provoke or aggravate social tensions.

Religious literacy can play a key role in ensuring religion and belief receives balanced coverage in all forms of media. However, while it is widely agreed that religious literacy involves both a level of competence and knowledge when discussing specific religious matters and a wider sensitivity to the nuances of faith and the complicated ways in which belief systems relate to society more generally, the term itself is contested. The APPG is undertaking this inquiry to examine how different groups, such as faith communities and media professionals, understand religious literacy and what steps can be taken to cultivate a media environment which is religiously literate.

This is particularly important because the media landscape is rapidly changing and there are many factors which influence religious literacy. This inquiry will focus specifically on print and broadcast media and aim to explore good practice and learn about potential areas for improvement and change. The inquiry aims to improve policymakers understanding of:

- How different groups understand the phrase 'religious literacy', with particular reference to the media
- What role higher education plays in fostering religious literacy which continues to improve through a journalist's career (eg through CPD programmes)

- How public policy decisions and initiatives by media organisations have affected religious literacy
- What steps (either by central government, universities, the BBC, media organisations - publishers and broadcasters, regulators such as Ofcom and IPSO, or other agencies) could improve religious literacy in print and broadcast media.

#### Terms of reference

The APPG invites responses to answer any or all of the following questions:

1. What do you understand by the term 'religious literacy'?
2. What effect does a lack of religious literacy have on broadcast and/or print media?
3. When, where and how is religious literacy learnt?
4. What effect does religious illiteracy have on decisions journalists make when assigning, researching, and reporting news stories?
5. What methods can be used by journalists to engage with faith groups sensitively? Please illustrate your answers where possible.
6. What steps should be taken to better equip journalists when engaging with issues relating to faith?
7. Over the last decade, has religious literacy in the media improved, remained the same or ~ deteriorated? If it has changed for the better or worse, please explain how?
8. What steps can a) universities, b) journalists, c) publishers, d) broadcasters and e) regulators take to improve religious literacy in media?
9. What public policy changes could improve religious literacy in the media?



When submitting a response, please ensure: You specify which of the questions above you are addressing;

You make clear whether you are referring to print media and/or broadcasting. If your answers relate to a particular organisation or publisher (e.g. Ofcom), please specify

- Your submission is no more than 3,000 words in length;
- You state clearly who the submission is from, i.e. whether you are writing in a personal capacity or on behalf of an organisation;
- You include a brief description of yourself/organisation you are writing on behalf of;
- You state clearly if you wish for your submission to be confidential. If this is not indicated, the APPG reserves the right to make explicit reference to your submission in its report and online;
- You email your submission in Word or Pdf format to [appg.contact@gmail.com](mailto:appg.contact@gmail.com);
- If you have any concerns or would like further information, please contact us at [appg.contact@gmail.com](mailto:appg.contact@gmail.com)

The strength of our report depends on the breadth and quality of submissions. For those unfamiliar with the process, please get in touch if you would like any guidance. If for any reason you think that you will be unable to respond in the requested formats, please let us know.

## Appendix 2:

# ORAL EVIDENCE SESSIONS

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### Evidence Session 1:

#### Panel one

Professor Tony McEnery, Distinguished Professor of English Language and Linguistics, Lancaster University  
Professor Elizabeth Poole, Professor of Media and Communications, Keele University  
Dr Keith Kahn-Harris, Senior Lecturer at Leo Baeck College, Fellow of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research

#### Panel two

Dr Michael Munnik, Lecturer in Social Science Theories and Methods, Cardiff University  
Dr Jasjit Singh, Research Fellow in the School of Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science, University of Leeds  
Dr Salman Al-Azami, Senior Lecturer in English Language, Liverpool Hope University

#### Panel three

Professor Charlie Beckett, Professor of Practice, Director of Polis and the Polis/LSE Journalism AI project, Department of Media and Communications, LSE  
Dr Zahera Harb, Senior Lecturer in International Journalism at City, University of London  
Professor Brian Cathcart, Professor of Journalism, Kingston University

### Evidence Session 2:

#### Panel one

John Bingham, Head of Media, Church of England  
Alexander DesForges, Director of News, Catholic Bishops' Conference England & Wales  
Dr Harriet Crabtree, Executive Director, Interfaith Network

#### Panel two

Anwar Akhtar, Director of Samosa Media  
Anjum Peerbacos and Heena Khaled, Advancing Voices of Women Against Islamophobia (AVOW)  
Jasveer Singh, Sikh Press Association

#### Panel three

Daniel Sugarman, Board of Deputies of British Jews  
Trupti Patel, Hindu Forum of Britain  
Bishop David Walker

### Evidence Session 3:

#### Panel one

Ruth Peacock, Launch Director, Religion Media Centre  
Rizwana Hamid, Director, Centre for Media Monitoring

#### Panel two

Lord Faulks, Chairman, IPSO  
Ian Murray, Executive Director, Society of Editors  
Imam Qari Asim, Deputy Chair, Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group

#### Panel three

The Reverend Canon James Walters, Director, LSE Faith Centre  
Elizabeth Oldfield, Director, Theos  
Nick Spencer, Senior Fellow, Theos  
Bishop of Ripon, Chair, Sandford St Martin Trust

## **Evidence Session 4:**

### **Panel one**

Will Gore, Head of Partnerships & Projects at the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ)  
Dr Paul Lashmar, Head of the Department of Journalism, City, University of London  
Professor Martin Conboy, Professor of Journalism History, The University of Sheffield

### **Panel two**

Anna McNamee, Executive Director, Sandford St Martin Trust  
Dr Tony Stoller, previously Chief Executive of the Radio Authority, the regulator for all non-BBC radio,  
now visiting professor, Bournemouth University  
Dr Catriona Noonan, Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication, Cardiff University

### **Panel three**

Ed Proctor, Chief Executive Officer, IMPRESS  
Dr John Steel, Senior Lecturer in Journalism and Political Communication, University of Sheffield  
Dr Edward Kessler, Founder Director, Woolf Institute

## **Evidence Session 5:**

### **Panel one**

Gary Jones, Editor of the Daily Express  
Tim Stanley, The Telegraph

### **Panel two**

Professor Chris Frost, NUJ, Chair of Ethics Council  
Karyn Fleeting, Head of Audience Acquisition and Engagement, Reach Plc  
Luke Jacobs, Brands Editor, Kent Live, Reach Plc

### **Panel three**

Ruth Gledhill, Multi-media editor of The Tablet, previously Religion Affairs Correspondent at The Times  
Andrew Brown, Freelance journalist, previously editor of The Guardian Comment is Free (CiF) Belief section  
Peter Osborne, Freelance journalist, previously Daily Telegraph Chief Political Commentator

## **Evidence Session 6:**

### **Panel one**

Sunny Hundal, Journalist and Blogger  
Michael Wakelin, Formerly Head of Religion and Ethics at the BBC, now the Executive Producer at  
TBI Media and a religion and media Consultant  
Carl Brettle, Christian Ministry and United Christian Broadcasters

### **Panel two**

Deborah Williams, Creative Diversity Network  
Amy Turnton, Project Diamond  
Josie Dobrin, Creative Access

## **Evidence Session 7:**

### **Panel one**

Kevin Bakhurst, Group Director, Content and Media Policy  
Vikki Cook, Director of Content Media Policy and Head of Ofcom's Diversity and Inclusion Programme  
Alison Marsden, Director, Content Standards, Licensing & Enforcement  
Munir Rafiq, Principal, Content and Media Policy, Content Standards

### **Panel two**

Fatima Salaria, Head of Specialist Factual, C4  
Saba Zaman, Radio Producer, CTVC  
Rosie Dawson, ex-BBC and now freelance journalist and Associate Research Fellow of  
the William Temple Foundation

## Appendix 3:

### SUBMISSIONS AND RESPONSES:

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#### **Academics:**

Alwaleed Centre – University of Edinburgh  
Dr Andrew Rodgers, University of Roehampton  
Dr Catriona Noonan, Cardiff University  
Professor Chris Frost, Liverpool John Moores University (also Ethics Chair, NUJ)  
Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences (CASS) – Lancaster University  
Centre for Peace, Trust and Social Relations – University of Coventry  
Professor Eileen Barker, LSE  
Professor Elizabeth Poole, Keele University  
Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal, University of Birmingham  
Dr Jasjit Singh, University of Leeds  
Dr Keith Kahn-Harris, Birkbeck College  
Dr Laurens de Rooij, University of Chester  
Dr Lois Lee, University of Kent  
Dr Michael Munnik, University of Cardiff  
Paul Smalley, Edge Hill  
Professor Peter Hopkins, Newcastle University, in collaboration with  
Dr Robin Finlay, Dr Kawtar Najib, Dr Katherine Botterill and Dr Gurchathen Sanghera  
Religious Education Department – Open University  
Dr Salman Al-Azami, Liverpool Hope University  
Professor Tony Stoller, Bournemouth  
Dr Zahera Harb, City, University of London

#### **Campaign Organisations:**

Hacked Off  
Media Diversity Institute  
Faith in Media

#### **Educators/ Knowledge Transmission/ Think Tanks**

Religion Media Centre  
Culham St Gabriels  
Inform  
Sandford St Martin Trust

#### **Faith Groups/ Community Organisations:**

AVOW  
Christopher Landau  
Media Bishops  
Bahá'í Community – Office of Public Affairs  
Baptist Union  
Board of Deputies of British Jews  
Church of England Communications Team  
Church of Latter-Day Saints  
Hindu Forum of Britain  
MEND  
Methodist Church  
National Secular Society  
Sikh PA  
Reform Judaism  
Centre for Media Monitoring

#### **Journalists:**

Andrew Brown  
Daniel Mumby  
Keith Morris  
Kristine Pommert  
Michael Wakelin  
Rachael Nichol  
Sophia Smith Galer  
Anonymous (Reach Plc)  
Catherine Pepinster  
Rosie Dawson

#### **Responses:**

#### **Broadcasters:**

Channel 4  
ITV  
Sky (pending)  
BBC (pending)

#### **Regulators:**

Ofcom (private)  
IPSO

#### **Educators & Campaigners:**

Dr Paul Lashmar  
NCTJ  
Society of Editors

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