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Faith in View: Religion and Spirituality in Factual British Television 2000-2009.

Ruth Anna Deller

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the nature of, and developments in, the coverage of religion and spirituality in factual British television programming 2000-2009, focusing on mainstream terrestrial networks (BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Five) with a public service remit. The study employs a mixed-method approach with an emphasis on discourse. Working within a broadly Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, it explores discourses around religion/spirituality, identity and nationality across a range of environments – from the programmes themselves to audience discussion (in focus groups, questionnaires, forum and Twitter discussions, YouTube comments and blogs) and industry accounts of production (in policies, guidelines, publicity and interviews with several of those involved at different stages of the production process).

The theoretical context of this study includes debates over the 'secularisation thesis', the rise of 'fundamentalism', the individualisation of religion and the apparent interest in 'spirituality' as opposed to 'religion', the role of public service broadcasting, issues of media representation of minorities, and developments within British factual television genres.

The study concludes that, despite public service commitments, there is a lack of diversity in the portrayal of religion and spirituality within mainstream factual British television, with Christianity, Islam and Atheism dominating coverage. All faiths are represented by a limited repertoire of signifiers. Audiences, both those who have been researched for this study and those who feature in research by the broadcasters and Ofcom, often complain about what they perceive as 'misrepresentation', whilst at

the same time discussing 'other' people in stereotypical terms. Within all of the

discursive contexts studied, there is a construction of Britain as a liberal, tolerant,

moderate place, where spiritual/religious belief is acceptable as long as it operates

within particular parameters. When beliefs and practices do not conform to these

standards, they are exoticised, ridiculed or presented as dangerous, and often linked

to other nations, thus emphasising how they are not a British way of expressing one's

spirituality.

However, I argue that the problematic nature of these constructions is in part a result

of the complex interaction between audiences, programme makers, policy, academic

discourse and media texts. Each area of discourse informs the other, replicating and

reinforcing notions of Britishness, religion and spirituality across multiple contexts.

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<u>Chapter One: Introduction</u>

Thesis aims and key questions

This thesis explores the representation of religion and spirituality on mainstream

factual British television in the decade 2000-2009 across a range of genres shown on

the British channels with a public service remit (BBC One, Two, Three/Choice,

Four/Knowledge, ITV1, Channel 4, Five[1]): approximately 250 programmes. I will be

analysing not only the discourses present within the programmes, but the accounts of

those involved in production, industry documentation/policies and responses from

audiences. My work takes a broadly Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, whilst

also drawing on thematic, semiotic and narrative analysis in a manner similar to Toolan

(2001), Poole (2002), Richardson (2004).

The central question this thesis attempts to answer is: 'How are religion and spirituality

constructed in the discourses of television programmes, industry professionals and

audiences?' Within this wider question I will be looking at secondary questions: 'What

themes, representations and positions can be identified'?, 'How can television

representations of religion and spirituality and discussions around these programmes

be understood in relation to wider discourses about the nature of spirituality and

religion within Britain'? and 'How do these discourses construct a sense of 'self' and

'others''?

Defining Religion/Spirituality

The terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' are not clearly defined (see Lynch 2005, Durkheim

1912, Heelas et al 1998, Gilbert 1980), and there have been many attempts to define

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[1] Variously rebranded throughout its lifetime as Channel 5, Channel Five, 5 and Five. I will be using Five, the station's name from 2002-11, for ease.

them (see Chapter Two). For the purposes of my study, 'religious' means relating to organised and established religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, whilst the term 'spiritual' encompasses both practices, discourses and behaviours relating to the major religions and those involving anything outside of the 'natural' realm, including the supernatural, the afterlife, horoscopes, crystals, Reiki and New Age philosophies.

Why study this topic?

My interest in this area developed from an observation in the mid-2000s that religion/spirituality were becoming more visible in mainstream television outside of the traditional slots for religious programming, with series such as *The Monastery* (BBC Two, 2005) and *God is Black* (Channel 4, 2004) garnering much media attention. I was interested in why these programmes were being made, what they said about religion and spirituality and how they related to wider issues of public service, diversity, multiculturalism and Britain's own relationship with religion/spirituality.

Within Sociology, whilst there has been much written about the religious profile of Britain and debates over secularisation, 're-enchantment', multiculturalism and religious 'fundamentalisms' (see Chapter Two), these discussions have rarely explored media portrayals of British religious/spiritual practice. In addition, despite Media Studies' concern with the representation of minority groups, there has been very little on religious groups (Hoover 2003: 11), aside from the small amount of literature on Islam. There is also a deficit of work on recent British factual television, other than work on reality/lifestyle programming.

There have been few studies that have attempted to combine textual analysis with audience studies and industry research. I have included all of these in order to provide

the most detailed and wide-ranging overview possible of religion/spirituality in the factual television landscape in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Although in some chapters (most notably Chapter Four), some historical context is given in order to understand key developments, there is not room within the scope of this thesis to discuss fully the historical context of the decade studied by exploring previous and subsequent decades in any detail.

Context

<u>A very British form of spirituality?</u>

It is difficult to find accurate data on the role of religion and spirituality within the lives of British people. The most often cited data comes from the 2000 Census, where just over 77% of people claimed to have a religion (71% were 'Christian') (National Statistics 2004). However, several other surveys exist, such as a 2004 BBC/Ipsos Mori poll showing 21% of Britons claiming to regularly attend religious worship and 67% claiming a belief in a god or higher power (BBC/ICM 2004), and a 2006 *Guardian*/ICM poll that suggests 63% of the population are not religious, as opposed to 33% who are (Glover and Topping 2006).

Research from sociologists, theologians and religious studies experts reveals a range of different positions about what the spiritual landscape of Britain looks like: Steve Bruce (1995, 1996, 2002) and Callum Brown (1996) support the secularisation thesis, which is the notion, common in post-enlightenment thinking, that as societies become industrialised, the interest in religion/spirituality declines (see pp. 28-33). Heelas and Woodhead (1995) argue there is a spiritual milieu in which people experiment with a range of spiritual practices; and others, like Grace Davie, describe a 'believing without

belonging' (1990) or 'vicarious religion' (2001, 2006). This is the 'notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing' (Davie 2007: 8).

'Doing God': religion/spirituality in the public sphere

Within the decade studied, religion was high on the political and news agenda (Nicholson 2007, Stolow 2005): in apocalyptic discourses about the year 2000; high-profile terrorist attacks, most notably on September 11 2001 (9/11) and July 7 2005 (7/7); and the death of Pope John Paul II and the succession of Pope Benedict XVI.

Within a British context, despite Tony Blair's Director of Communications and Strategy Alistair Campbell's protestations that they didn't 'do God' (Brown 2003), the New Labour government under Blair was linked with a range of faith-based initiatives from faith and 'academy' schools to interfaith 'think-tanks', whilst Labour's Jack Straw[2] commented against Muslim women 'veiling' (Bartlett 2006). Archbishop of Canterbury (2003-present) Rowan Williams made the news for his views on a range of subjects, from Walt Disney to the Iraq war to Sharia law (BBC News 2008, Brunt 2011), and the Anglican Church[3] in Britain (and worldwide) was involved in debates over the roles of female and gay clergy, whilst Catholicism repeatedly made the news in Britain over child abuse cases and arguments over gay adoption through Catholic agencies. Religious protests were newsworthy both in the UK and around the world. High-profile examples included Muslim protests against the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed in Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* in 2005-2006,

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[2] Home Secretary (1997-2001), Foreign Secretary (2001-2006), and Leader of the House of Commons (2006-2007).
[3] And to a lesser extent, the Catholic Church.

Sikh protests against the play *Behzti* (2004) and Christian objections to *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (2005-2007) (See also Chapters Two, Five, Seven).

Outside of the political arena, issues of religion and spirituality were very visible within popular culture. Books with a religious or spiritual theme such as *The Secret* (Byrne 2006), *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Warren 2002), and *The Shack* (Young 2007) were globally successful, whilst in Britain, books categorised as 'Mind, Body, Spirit' grew in popularity (Puttick 2005) and Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006) and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) were high-profile best-sellers. British television dramas such as *The Second Coming* (ITV1, 2003), *Britz* (Channel 4, 2007), *Life on Mars/Ashes to Ashes* (BBC One, 2006-10), *Apparitions* (BBC One, 2008) *Torchwood* (BBC One/Two/Three, 2006-present) and *Doctor Who* (BBC One, 2005-present) (see Deller 2010, Purser-Hallard 2005) also drew heavily upon religious/spiritual metaphor, whilst the spirituality of many celebrities, including Tom Cruise, Madonna, Richard Gere and Britney Spears became a regular feature of headlines and gossip columns.

Religious organisations such as the Alpha course and the Churches Advertising Network[4] advertised on television, radio, cinema, buses and billboards across the UK, and retailers and advertisers drew upon spiritual and religious iconography and terminology, particularly with regards to lifestyle, health and home products (Crumm 2005, Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Hoover 2006, Clark 2007, Knott 2010).

As religion/spirituality increased in visibility, so too did Atheism and Humanism, with books and articles by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett gaining much attention. Responding to the visibility of religion and spirituality in the

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[4] Whose high-profile campaigns, including depicting Christ as Che Guevara (1999, 2005) garnered much media attention.

marketplace, Atheist and Humanist groups launched a number of initiatives such as the 'There's probably no God…' bus advertising campaign (2008-2009) and book *The Atheists' Guide to Christmas* (2009). There was growing public and academic interest in religion and the internet (Dawson and Cowan 2004, Linderman and Lövheim 2003, Campbell 2003/2010), and academic research explored the intersections between religion/spirituality, society and culture, most visibly through the joint AHRC/ESRC 'Religion and Society' programme.

Back to reality: factual television developments

As I explain in Chapter Four, public service broadcasting went through several changes in the decade. The Independent Television Commission (ITC) was replaced by broadcasting regulator Ofcom in 2003, and the rise of digital television and online video and television services increased competition for ratings and advertising revenue. A number of public service reviews meant shifts in the responsibilities of broadcasters, particularly those of ITV and Five. Personnel at the networks also changed several times, with a number of different people taking responsibility for 'religion' at the channels (pp. 118-122), although much programming about religion/spirituality was made outside of the remits of dedicated staff/departments (see Chapter Four).

Factual television also went through a number of changes. In 2000, factual television was dominated by docusoaps and by documentaries which, to the contemporary eye, appear sedate. Programmes such as *Witness*' 'Going Straight' (Channel 4, 2000) were punctuated with silence and a lack of pre- and post-credits trailers/recaps. By 2009, trailers and recaps were commonplace across factual genres, as was heavy use of voiceover and music. Whilst the idea of televised 'reality' was not new at the start of

the decade, with genres such as fly-on-the-wall documentaries, video diaries and

docusoaps well-established in the television schedules, the arrival at the end of the

1990s of lifestyle experiment *The 1900 House* (Channel 4, 1999), and larger-scale

projects *Castaway 2000* (BBC One) and *Big Brother* (Channel 4) in 2000, signalled a

shift in factual programming that would continue throughout the decade and into the

next. Combining some of the 'makeover' elements of the lifestyle television popular in

the 1980s and 1990s with techniques from video diaries, group tasks and fly-on-the

wall footage (see Hill 2005, Macdonald 2003, Dover and Hill 2007, Couldry 2009),

programmes that became known as 'reality television' became a prominent feature in

the schedules of all the PSB channels studied except BBC Four/Knowledge. Reality

programmes involved 'ordinary' people[5] in a range of contrived situations, and the

genre's emphasis on experimentation, transformation and 'journeys' would become a

dominant mode of factual programming that, by the middle of the decade, had

expanded to incorporate religion (see Chapter Six). Reality television's influence could

be felt across factual television, with the blending of 'reality' and 'lifestyle' in formats

such as *How to Look Good Naked* (Channel 4, 2006-present) and *Masterchef Goes

Large*[6] (BBC One/Two, 2005-present), and with traditional travel programmes such as

Holiday (BBC One, 1969-2007) and *Wish You Were Here?* (ITV1, 1974-2003) being

replaced by programmes focusing on a (usually lone) presenter's experiences in

another country, often combining travelogue with another genre, such as history, art

or cookery. In Chapter Six I show how programmes about religion/spirituality combine

elements of lifestyle, travel, history and arts content with a 'reality' influenced

emphasis on experimentation and journeying.

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[5] And, from *Celebrity Big Brother* (2001) onwards, celebrities.
[6] Formerly, and latterly, *Masterchef.*

Thesis approach and structure

Chapter Two, the Literature Review, summarises the range of literature used in the study. This chapter is broken into the four key areas of theoretical concern that underpin this thesis. It begins by exploring sociological debates about religion/spirituality, including difficulties in defining the terms, debates over the 'secularisation thesis', studies of religion/spirituality in Britain, the relationship between religion/spirituality and world events, postmodernity and the 'quest for meaning', individualisation and religious identity, and the apparent rise in spirituality, NRMS and fundamentalisms. The second section looks at ethnicity, nationality and identity, exploring 'othering' and Orientalism, Britishness and postcolonial identity and multiculturalism. The third section covers the relevant themes within Media Studies research: representation, moral panics, audience studies and factual media developments. The final section looks at literature on religion/spirituality and the media, including the visibility of religion/spirituality in the media, the relationship between media and religious/spiritual practice, existing studies of religion/spirituality and the media, and public service broadcasting and religion/spirituality.

Chapter Three is the Methodology chapter, which outlines the methodological approach and research strategy adopted. The main focus of my research is to explore 'discourses' about religion/spirituality, Britishness and the media, and my analysis adopts a broadly Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, drawing upon Foucauldian notions of discursive power and using semiotics, thematic analysis and narrative analysis as tools.

Research was conducted in a number of ways. A wide range of programmes were studied (see Appendix Two) and a sample chosen to analyse in detail to provide as broad a range of examples as possible[7], covering a range of themes, genres, and years. Industry documentation such as policies, guidelines and programme reviews was analysed, and audience research conducted by Ofcom and broadcasters used as part of the literature (see Chapters Two, Four and Seven).

Interviews were sought with a wide range of media practitioners and programme participants and were conducted with Michael Wakelin of the BBC; Aaqil Ahmed of Channel 4; presenters Robert Beckford and Mark Dowd; producer/director Dimitri Collingridge; Managing Director of independent production company Hardcash, David Henshaw; mentor in *Make Me a Christian* (Channel 4, 2008) Revd. Joanna Jepson; a participant in *The Convent* (BBC Two, 2006); and four members of the family featured in *Deborah 13: Servant of God* (BBC Three, 2009).

Audience research was conducted through analysis of online discussion and through a series of focus groups, held both online and off (see Chapters Three and Seven and Appendices Six, Eight and Nine). Online discussion occurred in different environments, from forums (both specialist and more general), to blogs, to video sharing sites such as YouTube and social networking sites such as Twitter (further details of these environments can be found in Chapter Three and Appendices Six and Nine). Over 1000 individuals participated in these different environments, and around 200 are referenced directly in this thesis. Chapter Three details the rationale behind all of these methodological choices.

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[7] Although the majority of programmes studied are from Channel 4 and the BBC. See Chapters Three and Four for a more detailed explanation of this.

Chapter Four is concerned with the media industry and looks at the context in which programmes were made. It details developments within broadcasting 2000-2009, policies and guidelines PSBs worked to, issues of diversity and representation, the content, format and genre of 'religious' broadcasting, the processes of production, and the way those working in television discuss their programmes, audiences, other networks and values.

Chapters Five and Six focus on the programmes themselves. Each comprises analyses of several key programmes from across the decade, from a range of channels and themes. Chapter Five looks at 'The Threat' of religion/spirituality. It predominantly features documentaries, and is broken down into two key sections: religion/spirituality as a threat to British values, and as a threat to the 'vulnerable'. Chapter Six looks at 'The Journey' and details four main kinds of 'journeys': to 'Other' cultures, into the past, into the self, and around Britain. It covers programmes from a number of different factual genres, although most are heavily influenced by 'reality'.

Chapter Seven looks at the way audiences respond to these texts and is divided into three sections: 'Ourselves', 'Others' and 'Dialogue between Ourselves and Others'. In the first two sections I show how different audiences respond to portrayals of groups or beliefs they identify with and how they respond to the portrayals of 'others'. The third section explores discourse between different groups, including members of different faith groups, different nationalities, and discussion between 'audiences' and those involved in the production process.

 Chapter Eight provides the conclusion to the thesis, summarising the findings presented, suggesting directions for future research and explaining the contribution I believe this study makes.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review is divided into four main sections, covering the range of

theoretical concerns that this study draws upon. The first looks at definitions of

religion and spirituality, the 'secularisation thesis', the apparent rise of New Religious

Movements (NRMs), fundamentalisms and alternative spiritualities, and the changing

nature of belief in Britain and the West. The second section deals with questions of

ethnic and national identity, exploring the ideas of 'othering'[1] and 'melancholia' in

terms of the relationship between the West and the former colonial countries. The

third section looks at relevant media theory on representation, particularly regarding

ethnicity, nationality and identity; audience studies; moral panics, particularly

regarding children; and studies of factual television. The fourth section explores

literature on the relationship between the media and religion; studies of media

portrayals of religion/spirituality and of religious/spiritual audiences and the media.

Religion and Spirituality

Defining religon/spirituality

There are many definitions of religion and spirituality (Zinnbauer et al 1997, Lynch

2005, Heelas et al 1998, Gilbert 1980, Lincoln 2003), partly because there are

difficulties in deciding whether to define religion using a substantive approach

(including core elements: belief in deities/y, priest/shaman etc, rituals, traditions,

sacred space) or a functionalist approach (where religion performs functions for

people: social, existential or hermeneutical/ transcendent) (Lynch, 2005: 27-28).

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[1] Throughout this study, I use the term 'othering' to describe any occasion where a particular belief,
practice or group is positioned as being 'different' from the authorial voice of any discursive account.

Durkheim defined religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church' (1912: 46). He differentiated religion from 'magic', superstitious and ritualistic practices, now often classed as 'spiritual', with religion having a 'church', or community, at the centre. For Geertz, on the other hand, 'a religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' (1973: 90-91).

Gilbert's definition of religion is broader and could encompass many systems, including traditional or normative religious communities: 'any system of values, beliefs, norms, and related symbols and rituals, arising from attempts by individuals and social groups to effect certain ends, whether in this world or in any future world, by means wholly or partially supernatural... supernatural phenomena are manifestations of some agency above the forces of nature; they lie outside the ordinary or naturally predictable operation of cause and effect' (1980: 5). Bocock simply defines religion as 'a complex mixture of beliefs, values, symbols and rituals' (1985: 207).

There have been fewer attempts to clearly define the term 'spirituality', partly because it is used in so many different ways to encompass a diverse range of thoughts, emotions, experiences and practices (Tacey 2004: 38, Spencer 2005: 12). For Eckersley (2000), 'Spirituality is a deeply intuitive sense of relatedness or interconnectedness to the world and the universe in which we live', while Kale offers 'the engagement to

explore—and deeply and meaningfully connect one's inner self—to the known world and Beyond' (2004: 93).

Often 'spirituality' is defined in the way it differs from 'religion'. According to Drane:

> 'religion' tends to be used to describe some externally imposed world view and set of practices, requiring conformity on the part of those who engage in it, backed up by narrow-minded attitudes… enforced by hierarchical structures that are riddled with hypocrisy and self-serving…'Spirituality' has emerged as the preferred term to describe the opposite of these things… to be considered 'spiritual' an idea or attitude needs to come across as promoting wholeness and healing – of ourselves, of society, and ultimately of the entire cosmos (2005: 10).

Crumm notes that it is 'more than a lilting synonym for religion… [it] has come to signify quest, assertion, choice and experimentation – usually focused on an inner search for solace' (2005: 248). However, Carrette and King argue that 'There are perhaps few words in the modern English language as vague and woolly as the notion of 'spirituality'. In a consumer society it can mean anything you want, as long as it sells' (2005: 30).

There are also conflicting opinions on what constitutes a religious or spiritual act, practice or item (Lynch 2005, Stolow 2005). Durkheim distinguishes between things that are sacred and profane: 'Sacred things are those things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which such prohibitions apply and which must keep their distance from what is sacred', and religious beliefs and rituals are those constructed in relation to humans' relationship with sacred things (1912: 40. See also Goethals 1994). Lambert considers the term 'religious' to pertain to 'any

practice or belief which refers to a superempirical reality, i.e. a reality radically exceeding the objective limits of nature and man, provided that there is a symbolic relationship between man and this reality'[2] (1999: 304).

The secularisation thesis

Probably the most high profile topic debated in the sociology of religion is the secularisation thesis. The thesis' central claim is that as societies become more advanced, so religion declines (see Wilson 1966, Bruce 1995/2001b/2002, Brown 2001, Voas and Crockett 2005). Halman and Draulans (2006: 264-5) highlight the way that theorists draw on different rationales to prove that a society is secular – whether citing declining church attendance figures, levels of belief in God, or a decline in state/institutional religion.

Although the most common version of the thesis aligns declining religion to technological progress, there are different perspectives on why and how that happens. According to some, because science provides explanations for the world previously accounted for by religious belief, this leads to 'disenchantment' (Weber 1918) and a lack of need for belief (Wilson 1982). For others a key factor is that globalisation increases awareness of multiple perspectives on faith and belief and so the idea that there is one 'true' faith (usually the faith we were brought up in because of our country of birth) is brought into question (see Berger 1967, Kose 1999).

For Berger, pluralism of available belief systems offers a serious challenge to religious dominance; multiple competing truth claims cannot all be true and religion becomes one of many competing options for people to believe in (1967: 137-138), thus the

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[2] Although he includes elements such as mediumship and tarot reading within this categorization, he does not count astrology, and describes it as a parareligious belief.

validity of existing belief systems is questioned, and ultimately leads to secularisation (Davie 2007: 53). Pluralisation of choice often leads to personalisation, individualisation and privatisation of religious belief. The argument is that as we become more secular, religion moves to the personal level (Luckmann 1967, Berger 1967). Brown (2001) and Gilbert (1980) argue that the scientific and cultural changes of the 1960s were also a catalyst, particularly in Britain, for religious decline, as people chose to take advantage of new freedoms and as new developments in leisure meant the churches had competition for people's attention.

One of the key problems with the secularisation thesis is that it is almost exclusively used to discuss Christian countries in the West, although Steve Bruce does suggest the theory may also apply to countries where other faiths are dominant. Though it is implicit in many conceptions of secularisation that it is a universal principle, it is very rarely discussed by authors who do not come from a Western secular or Christian perspective[3]. The thesis has been challenged in recent years, with some questioning whether there was ever a 'golden age' of religion to begin with and how far past dominance of religion was to do with expectations of State and/or culture rather than genuine belief (Aldridge 2000: 2-3, Halman and Draulans 2006: 265). The argument here is that secularisation as a process is exaggerated, because people were not as religious as first presumed.

A common criticism of secularisation is that the thesis may be applicable to Western Europe (and to a lesser extent Australia and Canada), with exceptions such as Italy and Ireland (Mitchell 2004, Berger et al 2008) even within that region, but it doesn't hold true for the rest of the world, particularly the USA (Davie 2000/2007, Berger et al

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[3] Kossman and Kapur's (1999) study of secularisation and the rise of the Hindu Right in India, and Bhargava's discussion of Indian secularisation (2009) being two notable exceptions here.

2008). For some time it was assumed that America was exception to the rule, and that as other parts of the world developed, they would follow the model seen in Western Europe. However, the prevalence of religion in other countries as they have developed has led to speculation over whether it is Western Europe, rather than the USA, which is the exception, and whether secularisation is a phenomenon concentrated in a small part of the world – and even then, one which is being called into question. Martin (2005) argues that we need to look to the rest of the world to understand how important religion still is in a global context. Huntington argues that Muslim, Sinic, Japanese and Buddhist countries have actively rejected Western values, including, it is implied, secularisation (1996: 102).

Hunt argues that secularisation as a process may well prove universal, but it is difficult to predict this:

> It may well be that the relentless process of assimilation and secularization will erode the religious life of many of these minorities or at least blunt the more fundamentalist and militant inclinations of a few. Much will depend on that which cannot easily be discerned: political events elsewhere in the world. Globally we are clearly in a new era of religion... Once [sociology] was assured of the inevitable decline of religion. This conjecture is now far from convincing. (2002: 214. See also: Dignance 2006: 37, Hefner 1998, Nicholson 2007).

Some argue that although traditional models of religion have declined, individuals' desires to believe in something remain. The most famous (and often misinterpreted) example of this is Grace Davie's idea of believing without belonging (1994). Davie's research showed that although church attendance figures are in decline in Western Europe, people may still express a belief in something, from traditional Christian

doctrine to a vague notion that there is 'something out there'. Berger, along with

Davie and Fokas (2008) argues that there is an element of 'belonging without

believing' whereby people still rely on the state churches to be there when needed

(e.g. funerals, weddings and state occasions), regardless of whether they believe the

message of Christianity. However, Voas and Crockett argue that while there may be

elements of 'believing without belonging' and 'belonging without believing' in Western

Europe, the overall picture is still one of decline (2005).

Increasingly, however, several writers argue that there is a global resurgence of

religion, terming this, amongst other things, 're-enchantment' (Berger 1969), 'revival'

(Huntington 1996), 'desecularisation' (Berger 1999) and 'the return of the religious'

(deVries 2001: 3). As with the secularisation thesis, there are several suggestions as to

why this may be taking place. For Casanova, events such as the Iranian revolution and

the American Protestant Evangelical movement's response to abortion showed that

religions were becoming more public: 'We are witnessing the 'deprivatization' of

religion in the modern world... religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to

accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories

of secularization had reserved for them' (1994: 5). He concedes that this

deprivatisation is not of religion as a whole, but of specific groups and movements in

certain places:

> It is not religion in the abstract which is returning, nor is it returning
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> everywhere. At most, the crisis of secularity can serve as a common
>
> conditioning factor that allows certain religious traditions, which have not yet
>
> been weakened excessively by processes of secularization, to respond in
>
> certain ways (Casanova 1994: 227. See also Wilson 1999: ix).

Lambert (1999: 314), Murdock (1997), Martin-Barbero (1997: 103-104) and Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 6-7, 430-431), argue that one of the key factors in the re-emergence of people's interest in religion and spirituality is their dissatisfaction with science and modernity and their ability to provide answers to some of life's more difficult questions. As Stark and Bainbridge put it, 'In the future, as in the past, religion will be shaped by secular forces but not destroyed. There will always be a need for gods and for the general compensators which only they can offer' (1985: 527).

My thesis will examine how programmes present the notions of 'secularisation' and 're-enchantment', particularly in relation to the way they construct a sense of Britain's status as a secular country.

Secularisation and Britain

Within Britain, there is some evidence for secularisation in the form of church attendance figures (see Bradley 2007, Davie 1999, Gill 2002). However, there are also factors that indicate things are not so simple, such as the number of people citing belief in God in surveys (most notably the 2001 census), the role of religion in key national events (MacLaren 2004, Billings 2004, Bradley 2007), the public profile of religious figures such as the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi, and the number of immigrants whose commitment to religion is still a defining marker of their cultural identity. Abercrombie and Warde state that:

> Religion in Britain is a paradox. On the one hand, formal religion appears to be
>
> in decline... On the other hand, there is considerable religious activity. Certain
>
> faiths, chiefly non-Christian or evangelical Christian ones, are growing. The
>
> clergy, whether Anglican or Roman Catholic, are listened to and their
>
> pronouncements can generate considerable controversy… Further, while

people are not publicly religious, they continue to have religious beliefs (2000: 321-322).

Walter discusses the public mourning for Princess Diana and argues that this demonstrates an underlying sense of something religious/spiritual, even if it isn't expressed in strongly Christian terms:

> Confident hopes of an afterlife written in a supermarket, or irreligious sentimentalities written in a cathedral make for a complicated picture. What we might be witnessing here may be less a secularization than a de-Christianization, and, in particular, a de-churchification, of contemporary Britain (1999: 38).

Drane agrees with this assessment: '… belief is being reconfigured in new ways, and the growth of new spirituality is part of that (2005: 16. See also Richmond 2005: 8, Bradley 2007: 11-18). Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 140-141) predict religion will continue to decline, but believe some interest in the holistic/spiritual will grow.

Although Christianity is (largely) in decline in Britain, the picture is less clear when it comes to other religions. Bruce believes the secularisation thesis will also apply here, predicting Judaism will die out (1995: 75-76) and claiming that:

> Members of ethnic-minority religions need to revalue and redefine their faith in novel and difficult circumstances. We might expect that, as they become better integrated with the Britain that envelops them, their religious commitment will gradually decline, and there are signs of that, but simple assimilation is not inevitable and it is not the most likely outcome (1995: 89).

However, he also argues that mainstream culture should accept minorities. He argues that, 'we allow access for promoting religious beliefs and values only to those groups which have accepted that religion should be confined to the private sphere' (1995: 92). Gillespie (1995), Smith (2004), Bradley (2007) and Gledhill (2008) argue that religious identity remains important for members of ethnic minorities within Britain. Counter to the argument that minority religions within Britain will naturally become more secular, Kose (1999) argues that many native British converts to Islam see Christianity as being too modernised and seek a belief system with strong, clear values.

The role of religion/spirituality in Britain and its relationship to British identity will be a recurring theme in the following chapters.

Religion/spirituality and world events

The so-called re-emergence of religion within the public sphere has sometimes been seen as a response to world events, such as the Salman Rushdie affair in 1989 (Beyer 1994: 1-6, Davie 1999, Khan 2000), Princess Diana's death in 1997, the September 11 attacks in 2001, and in 2005, the death of the Pope (Davie 2006b) and the London bombings (Brewer 2007). Even the most vocal proponent of the secularisation thesis, Steve Bruce, concedes that 'The world looks very different at the start of the twenty-first century. Partly because of events and partly because of a change in perspective, religion is back on the agenda of the political commentator' (2003: 1-2).

The death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997, with its subsequent displays of public emotion, has been seen by many as significant in terms of the spiritual/religious life of Britain. Grace Davie argues that Diana's death and the mourning that followed, along with the public displays of grief after significant tragedies such as the Hillsborough tragedy in 1989 and the Soham murders in 2002, reveal something about Britain's

spirituality that had been otherwise hidden. She is particularly interested in the way that such public mourning incorporates a range of different religious/spiritual iconography[4]:

> The churches became an important, though not the only, gathering point for a whole range of individual gestures of mourning in which Christian and non-Christian symbols became inextricably mixed, both materially (candles, playing cards and Madonnas) and theologically (life after death was strongly affirmed, but with no notion of judgement) (2007: 127. See also: Davie 2000: 117-9, Davie 2006b, Walter 1999: 38, Woodhead 1999: 99).

Likewise, Richards et al claim that the response to Diana's death provoked a sense of reflection and spirituality:

> After she died, Diana's life, and her image, are seen to have stood for something that had been lacking: nationalism, communal spirit, generosity, love, emotionalism, even religious feeling and Christian values… Even the Church of England acknowledged that Diana seemed to encapsulate or galvanise a sense of spiritual feeling' (Richards et al 1999: 2. See also: Heelas 1999: 99, 112-113, O'Sullivan 1997, Woodhead 1999: 19, Hill 1998: xiv, Bradley 2007: 60-61, Rayment-Pickard 2007).

Where Diana's death is seen as impacting the public spirituality of Britain, the terrorist attacks on September 11 2001 (9/11) have been seen by many as a catalyst for public discussion of religion on a global scale. Carey argues this was a significant moment whereby 'religion, media, and politics dramatically merged, not only in carnage, but in

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[4] Although West (2004) and Wilson (2001) disagree with Davie and argues that such public grief is not genuine sorrow over the events being mourned, but a reflection of people feeling sorry for themselves.

remembrance, mourning and the search for mutual understanding and tolerance'
(2002: 3. See also: Gill 2002: vii, Stolow 2005, Orsi 2005: 6-7, Nicholson 2007).

Some (mostly Christian) writers argue that events like 9/11 and the tsunami in 2004
have caused people to be increasingly fearful of the world (Drane 2005: 12), or that
9/11 led more people to attend church the following Christmas (Richmond 2005: 10).
Titus Hjelm suggests that the attacks led to an increase in religion being seen as a
potential cause of conflict and pain: 'the *source* of social problems' (2006: 63. See also
Nicholson 2007: 68, Van Ginneken 2007, Tacey 2004: 5).

For Brewer, in the British case particularly, it was the bombings in London on July 7
2005 that were a significant catalyst in discussion of religion: 'The 7/7 bombings in
London in 2005 have led to an increase in the importance sociologists (and policy-
makers) attach to the meaning of religion among those who believe in a way that
supports the argument about the sociological significance of religion as a social process
beyond the numbers of its adherents' (2007: 10). As we will see in later chapters, the
7/7 bombings are a key component of television portrayal of problematic religion in
the form of the image of the Tavistock Square bus.

Postmodernity and the quest for 'meaning'

A number of theorists argue that late modernity or postmodernity has caused changes
in the nature of belief and practice, either as a reaction to, or a product of,
enlightenment/secularisation. There is a persistent argument that modernity has left
people with unanswered questions about meaning and purpose and that they are
seeking answers to these in searching for the spiritual. This argument is typified by
Kinvall:

Forces of globalization in the forms of marketization, privatization, structural adjustment policies and changing political structures have resulted in a decreased role of the state. This, in turn, has facilitated rapid change and social transformation and has, as a consequence, increased dislocation and uncertainty for many people in the world. A common reaction to such dislocation is to seek reaffirmation of one's self-identity by drawing closer to any collective that is able to reduce uncertainty and anxiety (2002: 800. See also: Tacey 2004, Marsh 2007, Richards 2003).

This idea is echoed in Yvonne Richmond's survey work (Spencer 2005, Croft et al 2005)[5], Wade Clark Roof's interviews (1999) and in Dallen and Olsen's (2006) claim that this searching is a motivating factor in people taking pilgrimages or other 'spiritual' holidays.

Some claim this search for 'meaning' is taking place outside of traditional religions and may include involvement in 'alternative' spiritualities and new religious movements, but that this meaning may be sought in other fields such as media, entertainment and consumer goods (Rothenbuler 2006, Cobb 2005: 7, Heelas and Woodhead 2005). However, Gordon Lynch cautions against putting too much emphasis on the notion of people being 'spiritually' invested in popular culture and consumer goods. While many researchers have compared football, nightclubbing and other communal activities to religious experiences, his own research amongst clubbers suggests that they do not use spiritual language to describe their experiences, although he conceded it was difficult to discern whether this is because their experiences did not have an aspect of

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[5] Although it should be mentioned that this work was conducted for a Christian group.

the transcendent or because they did not have the religious/spiritual vocabulary to describe them thus (2005: 281).

Individualisation and Religious Identity

There has been much discussion about the privatisation and individualisation of religious/spiritual belief and practice, particularly in the West, and this is in turn seen as a cause of secularisation and a searching for new forms of religious expression.

Roof argues that religion has moved from being communal to personal, and even in mainstream religion there is a new emphasis on the personal 'journey' or 'walk'; 'words like *preference* and *opinion* came to be commonplace… the traditional doctrine of God was becoming less a shared reality and more a matter about which individuals made their own judgements' (1999: 65. See also: Halman and Draulans 2006: 265, Heelas and Woodhead 2001: 62, Linderman 1997: 270). This idea of personal religion has been seen as a postmodern idea, whereby people combine elements of different belief systems in order to construct their own spirituality. For Beckford, this is characterised in four ways:

1) Refusal to see positivistic, rationalistic criteria as sole or exclusive standard of worthwhile knowledge

2) Willingness to combine symbols from different codes and frameworks

3) Celebration of playfulness, irony, fragmentation, superficiality

4) Willingness to abandon search for overarching narratives

(1992: 11-27. Cited in Heelas et al 1998: 4)

For Bauman (1998), this postmodern take on spirituality is evidence of 'consumer-oriented society' in which individuals are constantly seeking thrills, experiences and sensations (See also: Olsen and Timothy 2006: 3, Hunt 2002, Davie 1994/2007,

Johnston 2005), whilst King argues that postmodernism can 'be seen positively as a challenging task, an opportunity, even a gift, for religion in the modern world. The postmodern view of the self raises fundamental questions about the nature of personal identity' (1998: 7).

Puttnam (2000) argues that the rise of individualism has led to a decline in social and civic engagement, including a decline in communal religious practice, while Hoover argues that the move from communal to personal religion changes the religious experience, so that it 'is effectively integrated into the practices of the self that typify the media age. Communal involvement and loyalty are still possible, and still facts of contemporary life, but they are no longer necessary elements of religious experience or expression' (1997: 294. See also: Santana and Gregory 2008: 5, Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 62). Smith claims the individualisation of religion applies predominantly to white Western society and is not necessarily the case amongst other minority groups and diaspora communities where religious affiliation is often a much stronger part of identity: 'where ascribed identities, economic and social exclusion, and traditional social and kinship obligations continue to have more force than in white mainstream society' (2004: 190-191).

In Gillespie's surveys with ethnic minority youth in Southall, 75% of respondents defined culture in relation to religion and even more 'named a religious festival or ritual as a marker of cultural distinction'. She concluded that for these youth, 'Religion is the cornerstone of ethnic identity' (1995: 30). Bradley (2007) and Gledhill (2008) also see religion as a key marker of identity for Muslim, Sikh and Hindu youth in Britain. However, Gillespie acknowledges that the differences within as well as

between religions and the emergence of the category 'British Asian' may lead to other identifications becoming more important in the future (1995: 33).

For Fukuyama, the search for religious identity is a contributing factor in the emergence of militant Islamic movements and he argues that: 'Those ideologies can answer the question of "Who am I?" posed by a young Muslim in Holland or France: you are a member of a global umma defined by adherence to a universal Islamic doctrine that has been stripped of all of its local customs, saints, traditions and the like' (2007).

In this study, we will see that identity is often an important factor in how both those involved in making programmes (whether as presenters, producers or participants) and those in the audience communicate, how they position themselves and in how they interpret and understand television discourses.

Spirituality

Spirituality is a term that is becoming increasingly popular within both academic and media discourses, though there is no clear agreement on what this term means. Lynch (2007: 66-69) says it can encompass a wide range of perspectives including an emphasis on self, seeking to embrace challenges of life, uniting aspects of different philosophies and religions, and seeking a just society. However, it is a term which is increasingly seen as important in dialogue about our relationship (particularly in the West) to belief.

According to Heelas and Woodhead:

Survey after survey shows that increasing numbers of people now prefer to call themselves 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'. Terms like spirituality, holism,

New Age, mind-body-spirit, yoga, feng-shui, chi and chakra have become more common in the general culture than traditional Christian vocabulary… Christianity has a new competitor in the 'spiritual marketplace (2005: 1. See also Roof 1999, Collins 2000, Drane 2005, Spencer 2005, Richmond 2005: 8, Clark 2003).

As far back as Abercrombie et al's research in Britain in the early 1970s, respondents expressed beliefs in ways that did not fit the paradigms of existing religions (Abercrombie et al 1970. See also: Gilbert 1980: 4-5). Tacey sees this emergence of spirituality as a 'revolution' that challenges traditional religious norms and 'involves a democratisation of the spirit. It is about individuals taking authority into their own hands and refusing to be told what to think or believe… The spirituality revolution is also about finding the sacred everywhere, and not just where religious traditions have asked us to find it' (2004: 4).

However, Lynch cautions against making firm judgements about spirituality until more detailed and extensive research has been conducted. He argues that there is little empirical evidence for a rise in spirituality outside of the confines of mainstream religions and, indeed, that the rise of the emphasis on spirituality within these religions is often neglected in studies (2007: 24-25). Although his own research discusses the ways in which 'progressive' forms of religion and spirituality are developing, he is cautious as to how influential these are likely to become (ibid: 161-171).

For King, interest in a broad spirituality is made possible because of secularisation and is 'very much a hallmark of the postmodern consciousness… only possible in an open, secular society in search of meaning and integration, of greater cohesion and new

identity' (1998: 96). Sardar, however, argues this idea of postmodern choice is largely

a Western construct (1998: 271).

Crumm (2005: 250-4) describes how many products and services are being sold with

the emphasis on them performing some sort of spiritual function (such as meditation

mats, candles, spas and even Starbucks coffee). Carrette and King claim that 'the shift

in interest from 'traditional religion' to 'private spirituality' has overwhelmingly been

presented to us as *consumer-oriented*, that is as reflecting the concerns of the modern,

'liberated' individual to free themselves from the traditional constraints of religion,

dogma and ecclesiastical forms of thought-control' (2005: 27). In this way aspects of

religions/belief systems such as Buddhism and Taoism have been appropriated for

commercial/personal gain, with no mention of the aspects of those systems that

emphasise suffering or empathy with the world. Cynicism about the use of spirituality

in marketing is shared by Johnson (2006), Bruce (2005: 120-125), Richards (2003),

Fraser (2008) and Starkey (1997). This relationship between spirituality, consumerism

and lifestyle will be explored throughout the thesis.

New religious movements

One development that is often discussed as a change within Western religion in the

past forty or fifty years is the emergence of 'New Religious Movements' (NRMS). This

is often used, somewhat problematically (Dawson 1998), as a blanket term covering

New Age spiritualities, Wicca, cults and alternative movements within mainstream

religions. There have been several studies (including Partridge (2005), Stark and

Bainbridge (1985), Wilson and Cresswell (1999) and Dawson (1998)) looking at the

nature of these movements around the world and suggesting people's motivations for

joining them.

For Heelas, the emergence of New Age belief is the development of what he terms 'self-spirituality', with counter-cultural aspects that cater 'for those who believe that modernity is in crisis… They [counter-culturalists] are profoundly dissatisfied with mainstream values and identities' (1996: 138). He argues that there are four general accounts of why people embrace New Age beliefs and practices:

1) People play multiple roles in life and so they are searching for their 'true, essential nature'.

2) Consumer culture enhances expectations, gives us advice on how to change for the better, feeds discontent and encourages us to try out things…

3) Christianity fails 'to cater for people's religious requirements'.

4) During periods of rapid cultural change [such as the 1960s], 'non-conventional forms of religiosity' become more popular. (ibid)

For Bryan Wilson, NRMs are a response to societal changes and are as much a product of secularisation as they are a sign of spiritual need:

They incorporate many of the assumptions and facilities encouraged in the increasingly rationalised secular sphere… new religions do evidently indicate a continuing interest in, perhaps need for, spiritual solace and reassurance on the part of many individuals, but, in the West at least, they are also very much the creations of a secularized society (1988: 965).

Fundamentalisms

The emergence of vocal fundamentalist strands within major world religions (see Kepel 1994, Martin 1999) is seen by some as a reaction against modernity and secularisation as people seek clear moral values and belief systems to help them negotiate the world, and for others as religious groups reacting against people who perceive them as

insignificant. Murdock is largely in favour of the first position: 'It is more useful to see them as a response to the crisis of late modernity that speaks to a range of anxieties through the rhetorics and rituals of faith' (1997: 98). Lyon agrees: 'Fundamentalism completes postmodern quests for specialist guidance and counselling. A new, authoritative, alternative rationality offers certainties that are in such short supply in postmodern times' (2000: 95. See also Yuval-Davis 1992, Wenzel 2009, Shupe 2009). Hoover and Kaneva are supportive of the second position, calling such movements 'resistant' and arguing that their resurgence may, in part, be a reaction against their construction within media and public discourse (2009). As I demonstrate in Chapters Five and Six, fundamentalisms are a key part of television discourse about religion, with fundamentalist strands of Muslim and Christian faith particularly prominent.

Throughout this study I explore how the themes addressed in this section: secularisation, NRMS and new spiritualities, identity, fundamentalism and the impact of world events are circulated in audience, television and industry discourses about religion/spirituality.

Ethnicity, nationality and identity

In this section, I look at the way Western and British identities depend on the construction of a sense of 'self' and 'others'. I draw upon the work of Edward Said and Paul Gilroy, as well as developments and debates around notions of 'multiculturalism'.

<u>'Othering' and Orientalism</u>

One of the key concerns of post-colonialist scholars is the notion of 'othering' discourses, often serving to reinforce power relations between dominant (usually

Western) and subordinate, or subaltern 'others', usually those in former colonial

countries. Van Dijk argues that discourses of 'othering' predominantly construct

'them' as a 'threat' to us:

> "We" write and talk about "them", especially when "their" presence has
>
> become socially salient or otherwise "interesting"… The rhetorically populist
>
> point in all these discourses always is the persuasive construction of a threat…
>
> to our norms, values, principles or religion… Cultural differences between "us"
>
> and "them" are thus exaggerated, and differences within our group and their
>
> group are ignored… Our own group, culture, and civilization are idealized and
>
> uncritically presented as the great example (1997: 40, 62).

The argument that 'our' culture is 'superior' and more tolerant than 'theirs' is a

continuing presence in television discourses around Britain and its 'Others' and in

audience discussion about 'us' and 'them' as we see in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

The notions of Western, or British, 'liberalism' and 'tolerance' are central to the

discourses of audiences, programmes and industry alike, as we see in Chapters Four-

Seven. Brown argues that post-9/11, 'tolerance' has become a key word within

discussions about multiculturalism and international relations, with Western

superiority reiterated through its commitment to 'tolerance' and constructed

discursively as a marker of difference between 'them' and 'us':

> Only recently has tolerance become an emblem of Western civilization, an
>
> emblem that identifies the West exclusively with modernity, and with liberal
>
> democracy in particular, while also disavowing the West's savagely intolerant
>
> history… the identification of liberal democracies with tolerance and of
>
> nonliberal regimes with fundamentalism discursively articulates the global

moral superiority of the West… Tolerance is generally conferred by those who
do not require it on those who do… However, the matter is rarely phrased this
way. Rather power discursively disappears when a hegemonic population
tolerates a marked or minoritized one…. tolerance discourse articulates normal
and deviant subjects, cultures, religions and regimes… it produces and
regulates identity (Brown 2006: 6-7, 32, 37, 186, 204).

Said has argued that the West, or Occident (primarily Western Europe), has
characterised the 'Orient', and Islam in particular, as something different, and inferior
to itself. Orientalist discourses, circulated through the media, academia and literature
were concerned with 'reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness'
(Said 1978/1995: 7. See also: Richardson 2004: 5, Abbas 2001, Yilmaz 2007). Western
anxieties about, and fascination with, Islam and its people (or the 'Orient') can be
traced back to the Crusades (Macdonald 2003: 154). Representations of the 'Orient' in
Western culture have positioned it at times as exotic, sensual, barbaric and
unenlightened (Said 1978/1005, Richardson 2004). In the last two centuries, Western
debate and discourse around the 'Orient' and Islam has largely been circulated through
the media.

Critics argue that the concept is too simplistic and ignores problems within the Islamic
world, not just now but throughout history. They argue that it generalises the Western
response to Islam, and that it is overly quick to criticise what is good about Western
values (Irwin 2007, Lull 2007: 150, Warraq 2007, Gandhi 1998).

Some note that Islam is not the only 'enemy' portrayed within the media and that
America has also been portrayed (particularly within Western Europe) as a threatening
force: 'People everywhere love, hate, and love to hate the United States of America.

No doubt, the United States has become the foremost symbol of Western culture - an idealized, if resented, "other"' (Lull 2007: 139. See also: Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009: 11) - an idea we see replicated in television discourse.

Britishness and postcolonial identity

The notion of a 'British' identity is problematic. John Walton argues that this is, in part, due to the complicated but overlapping relationships between Great Britain, the United Kingdom, the British Isles and the national and regional/local identities within Britain (2004: 1-2). He claims that 'the English tend to deploy 'English' and 'British' interchangeably, as if there were no difference', whilst the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish, along with those from minority ethnic groups, perceive their relationship as 'British' to be more complicated. Issues such as devolution, globalisation and mutliculturalism have only complicated this notion of British identity further (Cook 2004, Leese 2006). We see in television discourse a Britishness that is largely English (and Southern English at that). For the most part, I will use 'British' to mean identifying or originating from the British Isles - and when it is used in the discourse of others (whether in programmes, documentation or the accounts of individuals) I will use it as they did, whilst recognising that all these constructions of 'Britishness' are inherently flawed.

Walton argues that British identity, and in particular, English identity, is also complicated by its relationship with 'Empire' (2004: 3). For Paul Gilroy, the end of the British Empire caused a sense of what he terms 'melancholia' in which the nation is unable to face the loss of its colonialist power, and is conflicted between trying to deny or forget its past and feeling uncomfortable with its multicultural present and its shifting place in the world:

> The life of the nation has been dominated by an inability even to face, never
>
> mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that
>
> followed the end of the empire… Once the history of the empire became a
>
> source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity, its complexities and ambiguities
>
> were readily set aside… melancholic Britain can concede that it does not like
>
> blacks and wants to get rid of them but then becomes uncomfortable because
>
> it does not like the things it learns about itself when it gives vent to feelings of
>
> hostility and hatred (2004a: 90, 104-105. See also Kahn 2001).

Both Gilroy and Spencer (2006) argue this melancholia is typified by responses to

immigration, such as the (then) Labour government's conflict over both wanting to

'celebrate' multiculturalism and deny it through citizenship ceremonies and other

processes of 'assimilation'. However, Gilroy says this 'fear' is not restricted to 'blacks'

or other non-white/non-Western cultures, but extends to a fear of Britain becoming

too like Australia or America (2004a: 115). As we see in Chapters Five and Six,

television discourses replicate this problematic, 'melancholic' relationship with the

past. There is a tension evident within the programmes (replicated in industry and

audience discourse) about having a 'Britishness' which celebrates diversity whilst at

the same time problematises it. One thematic concern is the influence of

multiculturalism on national identity and religious/spiritual practice.

Multiculturalism

For some groups, ethnicity[6] (particularly in relation to religion) is seen as a key marker

of identity (see Gillespie 1995). Barker and Galasinski argue that ethnicity is a

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[6] I am aware that 'ethnicity' is a contested term, but I use it within this study to mean a racial, national
or cultural identity.

significant way that the 'the centre and the margin' are constructed, and that 'representation' is a key element of this construction:

> Ethnicity is a relational concept concerned with categories of self-identification and social ascription… it signals relations of marginality, of the centre and the periphery, in the context of changing historical forms and circumstances. Here, the centre and the margin are to be grasped through the politics of representation (2001: 123).

Many nations are now ethnically and culturally diverse with a multiplicity of religious voices. Sardar sees this as a uniquely postmodern opportunity: 'whereas modernity suppressed non-western cultures, postmodernity seeks to represent 'Other' cultures and give their voices an opportunity to be heard' (1992: 123) and others, such as Bradley (2007), argue that this can lead to a richer, more diverse culture within a nation.

However, there are problems associated with multiculturalism. Huntington (1996: 318-319), Davie (1999: 73), McGhee (2008) and Casanova (2009) discuss the tensions that arise when societies have to negotiate between universalism and diversity. Kahn highlights this tension when he claims ''universalism' is not, and never can be as inclusive as it pretends to be… universalism always has its others and this is unavoidable' (see also Miles 1989, Riggins 2007). Leese (2006) and Parekh (2002) identify the conflicts of identity that have arisen within Britain as a result of multiculturalism; often conflated by news stories emphasising supposed tension between members of different ethnic groups (van Dijk 1997). In the decade studied, this problematising of multiculturalism has often focused on Islam.

Taylor cites debates over traditions like the headscarf leading to discussions over assimilation versus maintaining cultural identity: 'Multiculturalism has become a suspect term in much of Europe today. People say things like 'I used to be for openness and toleration of difference, but now I see where it is leading'… This is all about Islam' (Taylor 2009: xiii). Khan suggests that:

> Muslims are viewed with suspicion and are considered by many to be the enemy within. This does not create a favourable environment for any form of integration, nor does it provide a platform for dialogue. The 'spectre' of 'Islamic fundamentalism' has come to be seen in Britain as a particularly sinister new sect of Islam totally committed to the destabilization and destruction of everything western (2000: 36. See also Cesari 2005).

This suspicion can be found in much media discourse about Islam, including television discourse, which I will return to later in this chapter.

Media Studies

In this section, I look at media theories that inform this study. I begin by looking at the notion of 'representation', particularly of ethnicity. I then explore the notion of moral panics, the different ways audiences have been conceived by media researchers, and studies of factual media.

<u>Representation</u>

Media Studies has a long-standing concern with the representation of different groups, particularly minority groups, in media texts. Media discourse has often been identified as 'othering' and marginalising minority voices (Coleman and Ross 2010), and research

has been seen as providing an enlightening or challenging function. Within this section, I will focus on studies of the representation of race, ethnicity and religion .

Gillespie argues that 'Media and cultural consumption - the production, 'reading' and use of representations - play a key role in constructing and defining, contesting and reconstituting national, 'ethnic' and other cultural identities' (Gillespie, 1995: 11). The work of theorists like Hall (1981), Ferguson (1998) and Mercer (1994) has highlighted problematic media representations of race and ethnicity, which are often framed in terms 'of the dominant looking at the subordinate: how *they* are different from us rather than how *we* are different from them… whiteness is taken as the profoundly unproblematic norm against which all "others" are measured' (Ross 1996: 4. See also: Pilkington 2003).

Van Dijk considers this process of 'othering' as taking place whenever white privileged groups are able to control dominant discourses due to their access to processes of production and circulation (1997: 33). He argues that discourses of resentment to immigration are circulated through the media and may reinforce political doctrine. He claims such discourses include: 'Positive self-presentation… Negative Other-presentation… Denial of racism… Apparent sympathy' (ibid: 36-39).

Media representations of race are often seen as drawing on Orientalist/colonialist values, presenting non-white 'others' as somehow inferior. This may occur through 'overt' racism, or, more likely, 'inferential' racism (Hall 1981). This is where difference, suspicion or deviance is implied, rather than explicitly stated. Inferential racism is frequently constructed as 'common sense' or 'neutral' discourse, but Freeth notes that 'there's nothing 'neutral', 'balanced' or 'objective' about the way TV portrays black

people. It's a highly structured image and results from conscious selections by the people who make the programmes' (1982: 25).

Stereotyping also forms a key part of media representation of ethnicity. Hall (1981) and Miles (1989) argue that the physicality of black people and Africans forms a particular part of such representations. Scholars identify a number of ways that Muslims are stereotyped, which we will return to later, and their ethnicity plays a part in these stereotypes.

<u>Moral panics</u>

Although 'moral panic' is a contested term (Allan 2003: ix), it is most commonly used within academic literature to discuss instances in which media and public discourse around a topic becomes highly inflammatory and positions something or someone as a key 'threat' to 'normative' culture and values. Many television programmes on religion/spirituality work to create a sense of a 'threat', to either our national culture/values or 'vulnerable' individuals, particularly children or the sick/depressed (see Chapter Five). Cohen argues that moral panics can be characterised by media stereotyping and demonisation of the 'threatening' group, and rearticulation of the 'threat' by prominent social figures or groups (1973).

Several authors, including Jenkins (1992), Macdonald (2003) and Critcher (2003) identify children as being one of the 'vulnerable' groups deemed to be at risk within 'moral panics', with panics arising around the effects of violent media, paedophilia and other forms of child abuse. Higgonet (1998) argues that the Western conception of childhood is of a time of innocence, but that this is a comparatively recent phenomenon. In moral panic discourse, children are seen to be passive, lacking in

agency (Barker and Petley 1997, Critcher 2003, Macdonald 2003: 128) and therefore

vulnerable to abuse or suggestion. Adult encounters with children are viewed through

the lens of suspicion (Higgonet 1998), with paedophilia in particular depicted as the

ultimate evil (Critcher 2003: 114). In Chapter Five, I explore how children and

'vulnerable adults' are presented as being at risk from dangerous forms of

religion/spirituality.

<u>Audience studies</u>

The notion of 'the audience' is contested and highly problematic (Ang 1991, Ross and

Nightingale 2003, Alasuutari 1999). Bird (2003: 3) notes that because 'the media' are

so varied, diffuse, and encountered in many ways, it is difficult often to define who an

'audience' for any given text might be.

Whilst early audience research was concerned with the 'effect' the media might have

on the audience (see Gauntlett 1998), and later research moved into a 'uses and

gratifications' (Blumler and Katz 1974) paradigm, exploring the purposes of media

usage for audiences, more recent studies have acknowledged that the relationship

between 'texts' and 'audiences' is complicated by a range of external factors; political,

demographic, cultural and experiential. Stuart Hall's (1973) argument that texts are

'encoded' with preferred, or dominant readings, but that audiences may, because of

these external factors, 'decode' them from a range of subject-positions (dominant-

hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional) became one of the most influential models in

the field of cultural studies, influencing, in particular, those studies often referred to as

'reception studies' (including Morley and Brunsdon 1978, Morley 1980, Hobson 1982,

Radway 1987). This particular paradigm of audience studies attempted to combine

textual analysis with audience research, often through focus groups, to explore the

different reading positions audiences of different class, ethnic or gender groups might take in relation to texts (See also Chapters Three and Seven). However, often these studies found that Hall's model was not always straightforwardly applicable.

Barker, Brooks and Cannon argue that this may be because people do not always have beliefs and ideas that can be neatly categorised, and that they may hold instead a number of conflicting, perhaps contradictory, perspectives:

> Ordinarily, people do not have fully articulated beliefs, or utterly self-consistent bodies of ideas… individuals use concepts which they do not originate - they borrow ideas from the social sphere… They acknowledge constraints and opportunities which are presented to them by their society… people themselves acknowledge that they are not the ideal-typical embodiments of a view or position that they hold to (1998: 128).

My own research is largely influenced by work within the reception studies tradition, given its concerns with the representations of different groups, particularly the way minority and majority groups are portrayed, and the way audiences might accept, reject or negotiate a programme's narrative. However, like Barker, Brooks and Cannon, I find that audiences cannot always be neatly categorised into taking up one of three subject positions in response to a text. Despite this, I consider Hall's model still broadly useful for my own research (see Chapters Three and Seven).

In more recent years, audience research has begun to focus on notions of 'interactivity' between media 'audiences' and producers. These range from studies of audience productivity and creativity to those looking at the relationships between media producers and audiences (see Jenkins 1992, 2006a/b, Bruns 2008, Tulloch 2000). Within my study, the relationship between audiences, texts and institutions is

important, with focus groups, blogs, Twitter and official forums acting as spaces for discussion and apparent interactivity (see Chapter Seven).

Several writers explore the responses of minority audiences to media. Gillespie (1995) looks at the role media[7] play in identity and group formation for minority ethnic youth, whilst Bird explores the way minority groups (in her case American Indians) often feel marginalised and stereotyped by mainstream media:

> Their scenarios spoke vividly about how it feels to be an outsider… they are acutely aware of… stereotypes, and reject them angrily, in a way that speaks volumes about being marginalized in a world of alien media imagery… like many other minorities, [they] do not see themselves, except as expressed through a cultural script they do not recognize, and which they reject with both humour and anger (2003: 116-7).

This depiction of minority audiences responding to representations with a mixture of humour and anger echoes Riggins' observations of the interactions between minority and majority groups:

> The discourses of identity articulated by majority populations are likely to be univocal and monologic because it is already relatively easy for dominant groups to express and confirm their shared identity publicly. By comparison, the discourses of identity articulated by members of subordinate minorities tend to be contradictory, complex, and ironic... [using] humour and satire (1997: 6).

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[7] Which may be mainstream, as in the case of *Neighbours* being a key text for group discussion amongst minority youth in her study.

The responses of religious/ethnic minority and majority audiences to representations of religion and spirituality in existing audience research are articulated in very similar ways, and will be considered in the thesis, particularly Chapter Seven.

<u>Factual media</u>

Factual media is seen as a key site for the representation of difference, where 'we are invited to understand the truth of the other' (Hawkins 2001: 420), although Beattie claims that documentaries, whatever format they take, are usually structured around an argument, and do not necessarily take a neutral standpoint on that argument, particularly when it comes to notions of race and nationality. Echoing the sentiments of Said, Beattie claims that:

> The tradition of the ethnographic film[8], like ethnography itself, is deeply imbued with the 'us' and 'them' - self and Other - dichotomy and its attendant differential relations of power… the ethnographic film has been constructed as a representational practice in which the culture of the non-Westernized 'Other' has been treated as a form of scientific datum subject to the objectifying methods of Western ethnographic science (2004: 45-46. See also Kilborn and Izod 1997).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the nature of factual programming changed with formats including the docusoap, the makeover show, and the 'reality' show rising to prominence and influencing other aspects of factual television (Hill 2005), so that the boundaries between documentary, lifestyle, reality, 'docusoap', and ethnographic films became blurred in pursuit of what some dub 'infotainment', presentations of informative material using techniques drawn from entertainment genres (see Corner

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[8] Most factual television purports to be, to at least some extent, ethnographic.

2005, Ellis 2005, Hill 2009). Although classifying genres within factual television is problematic, two broad categories, documentary and reality/lifestyle, can be identified within the literature.

Documentary

Corner argues that documentaries can have multiple functions and, due to the range of formats and discourses present, can either open up areas of discussion or close them down (2002: 267). Whilst documentaries are often presented as a form of realism, Kilborn and Izod argue that they can never be truly objective, even if that appears to be their aim: 'Documentaries can never be any more than a representation or an interpretation of events and issues in the real world… documentaries can never attain the level of objectivity to which they sometimes aspire' (1997: 5). This is something I draw upon in my own analysis of the 'neutral' or objective form of documentaries, often as part of public service requirements (see Chapter Four), and their tendency to present a dominant reading (Hall 1973) of a situation, person or practice that belies a particular ideological standpoint (see Chapter Five).

Kilborn and Izod argue that documentaries offer viewers a subjective viewing perspective that is presented as objective:

> Viewers will typically be offered a subjective position which invites them (like the film maker) to keep a certain distance from the programme's content. Indeed, with certain films the viewer is explicitly given the role of observer… A stance is thereby prepared for viewers which mimics that of the filmmaker… [documentaries] conceal the ideologies which they embody… by making the values they embrace appear to be inherent characteristics of the people and objects in front of the lens, as if they had no subject… Only when values held by

the viewer differ from those inherent within the programme do they become obvious (1997: 40-43).

As we see in Chapter Seven, audiences frequently adopt this 'subjective position' (much like Hall's 'dominant-hegemonic'), unless their values differ 'from those inherent within the programme' (op. cit)

Ashuri (2005, 2009) argues that nationhood is often a key component of the address and construction of documentary. In his study of documentaries on the Fifty Years War, co-produced by British, American and Middle Eastern companies, but broadcast in different versions in each country, he notes the role nationality plays in framing the documentary discourse:

> Television is… a significant site of a nation's culture. More specifically, television documentary… has been an essential construct through which recognisable symbolic forms, narratives and languages – in short, cultural representations that make up the achievements of national identity – have been beamed toward the public… each producer opted for a different 'language'' (2005: 423-4, 433).

He discusses the way each nation sets up discourses of itself and 'others' within the documentary. For example, he claims the British production puts Britain at the centre of events, whilst the Middle East production presents Britain as aggressors, and the US production distances Britain from the coverage (ibid: 434-438). I will examine the role that nationhood plays in the television discourse, and particularly the centrality of Britishness to the discussion and presentation of religion and spirituality in public service broadcasting (see Chapters Five and Six).

Ruby (2005) argues that documentary as a format has moved to being more self-reflexive than simply about 'others', and I explore how some programmes combine a level of self-reflexivity with 'othering' practices (see also: Urry 2002).

Reality and lifestyle

'Reality' television, which dominated schedules in the 2000s, can be perceived as operating within the broad field of 'documentary' but is difficult to define (Hill 2005: 172), as it can incorporate aspects of 'docusoap', 'game show', 'makeover' and 'fly-on-the-wall' programming. Couldry (2009: 47) argues that reality is, in fact, becoming a meta-genre with many genres taking aspects from it.

The crux of many reality programmes is the notion of 'transformation' – participants are expected to undergo some form of this (Hill 2005, Hawkins 2001, Braitch 2007), whether of their appearance, their homes and gardens (as in the case of makeover shows such as *What Not to Wear*), or of their personality and beliefs (as in the case of reality 'game' shows such as *Big Brother* or lifestyle 'swap' shows such as *Wife Swap*). Dover and Hill (2007) argue that the mid 2000s was the peak period of reality programmes where personal or lifestyle makeovers formed a key part of the narrative and, indeed, the turn of reality/lifestyle programmes towards religion/spirituality occurred in the middle of the decade, although this trend continued until 2009 (see Chapter Six).

Redden notes that in reality/lifestyle genres, this makeover function serves a quasi-moral function:

> Makeovers enjoin people to use their capacity to choose to become individuals whose route to the good life is to be found in evermore individuated consumption… the makeover reifies personal lifestyle to the extent that it

becomes the moral framework for an individualised vision of wellbeing (2007: 164. See also: Bennett 2011: 32).

This point is particularly interesting given the relationship between morality, ethics, religion and lifestyle evident in those programmes using religion as 'life experiment' (see Chapter Six).

Within most lifestyle/reality programmes, including those featured in this study, there are 'experts', 'mentors' or 'guides' to help participants in their 'journey'. Within television narratives, participant sessions with these guides are combined with video diaries to provide environments for change, often preceded by some form of confession: of past events; of personal failings; or of need for change (see Braitch 2007, Morreale 2007). In this way, they draw on the therapeutic tradition within factual television that Shattuc (1997) identifies as occurring within talk shows. Drawing on Foucault's (1976) discussion of confession and the notion of an interlocutor, Shattuc argues that such programming encourages confession to a host, expert or audience who act as interlocutors to receive it, and that, as in traditional Christian discourse, the confession made within factual television is designed to prompt a change in the individual's life or behaviour (1997: 177-178).

Dover and Hill (2007: 25) note that British reality/lifestyle television, broadcast frequently on the main public service channels (particularly BBC Two, BBC Three and Channel Four) often has public service values of informing, entertaining and educating woven throughout its narratives, whilst Hawkins argues that, in both more traditional documentary formats and 'reality' formats, there has been an increased emphasis on ethics and questions of morality:

Ethics have become entertainment… there is the emergence of a whole range of new formats, from docusoaps to reality TV to tabloid talk, where everyday ethical dilemmas are very often the source of conflict and content. Growing amounts of television programming now involve examinations of ways to live: information about the care and management of the self, explorations of the tensions between collective versus self-interest (2001: 412-413. See also: Stivers 2000, Beattie 2004: 125, Braitch 2007, Morreale 2007, Redden 2007).

This notion of managing not only the self, but also 'its relation to others' is one that recurs within factual programming of the 1990s and 2000s (and the 2010s so far), from *Big Brother* (see Couldry 2002, Brenton and Cohen, 2003: 51) to *The Monastery* (Buxton 2009).

Lifestyle 'swap' programmes such as *Wife Swap* and *Living With the Enemy* offer what appear to be insights into other people's lifestyles, though often these insights are framed via conflict and prejudice for entertainment purposes:

The principal aim of the series, of course, is to generate the requisite amount of dramatic entertainment. Thus, while some of the programmes in the series may have given insight into the values and belief systems of particular social groups, they have also provided a platform for those with a penchant in indulging in amateur dramatics (Kilborn 2003: 164-5. See also Kilborn 1994, Hill 2005).

The role of conflict and the choice of 'characters' within reality/lifestyle programmes will be explored further in Chapter Six.

Religion/spirituality and the media

The media representation of religion/spirituality is something that, until recently, had been largely ignored by media theorists, sociologists and theologians (Horsfield 2004: 3, Stolow 2005: 122). This lack of research is said to be because the notion of secularisation renders religion and spirituality unimportant (Clark and Hoover 1997: 16, Lyon 2000) and because religion and spirituality involve internal beliefs and supernatural experiences which are difficult for the media (and academics) to understand or categorise:

> Religion… has been thought of as something that is at the same time inherently controversial and of fading importance and interest (owing to the widespread acceptance of the notion of secularization). Religion defies normal canons of journalistic objectivity, is hard to "source" and is expressed socially and culturally in a dizzying array of forms, movements, interests and publics (Hoover, 2006: 49).

Within this section, I explore literature that looks at the relationship between media and religion/spirituality, the way religion/spirituality is represented in the media, the relationship between public service broadcasting and religion/spirituality and existing audience research in this area.

Visibility of religion/spirituality

In the 1990s, several writers, including Dean (1997), Bruce (1995/1996) and McDonnell (1993) noted that religion was being marginalised by broadcasters. Eric Shegog (1993) claimed that 'broadcasting is undermining the possibility of any religious values and beliefs being regarded as true and so subtly reducing religious faith to a matter of private taste and emotional inclination' (1993: 93).

Bruce highlighted how the decline in output and the increase in broadcasters reduced the audience for religious programming[9]: 'the audience for religious programming has declined from three-quarters of the number of viewers of the most popular secular programmes to under a quarter' (1996: 34. See also Bruce 1995: 57).

As religion was seen to be a diminishing area of concern for the media, and for television in particular, it was often overlooked as an area worthy of academic study, and whilst gender, class, sexuality and race (which is often linked to religion) were deemed areas of concern for academics interested in representations and identities, religion was frequently ignored. As Hoover puts it, 'earlier paradigms in media studies were deeply rooted in the view that religion was a residual and fading feature of the social landscape, worthy of study in only the most cursory way' (2003: 11).

However, in the last decade, several commentators noticed a change in media output about religion and spirituality: 'I have been wondering lately whether God has got himself a Max Clifford style press agent. Certainly the number of mentions he gets in the media has increased dramatically' (Nicholson 2007: 63). Stolow describes how 'media channels have been flooded on an unprecedented scale with images and stories about the fervently held beliefs and implacable habits of 'religious folk' around the world' (2005: 119). He attributes this to September 11th, as do Marsden and Savigny:

> Whether the world has changed or not [since 9/11], media coverage of the
>
> world has. In contemporary society, what we now witness is media coverage
>
> and a political discourse which conflates the existence and the threat of conflict

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[9] Although it is worth remembering that the proliferation of broadcasters and channels in the past three decades has led to declining ratings all round.

with non-Judeo Christian religions; a mediated political discourse involved in the construction of particular kind of religious enemy (2009: 1).

Garnett et al describe how this apparent renewed interest in religion is not simply limited to one form of media but has become increasingly visible throughout popular culture:

Issues of religious faith and identity seem to dominate our newspapers, and television programmes on monasticism, spirituality and religious history continue to capture a large viewing audience. Christian voices are prominent among those agitating for debt-forgiveness and protesting against military conflict. Speculations about Christianity, not least those inspired by the Da Vinci Code, excite the popular imagination. Cutting edge contemporary theatre has identified the intersections between faith, reason and religion in multi-ethnic societies… books on the intersections of the world religions can be found on bestseller lists (2006: 1).

Journalists, media producers and academics are realising that if the media are a place in which meaning, community and identity can be reflected, discussed and even created (see Martin-Barbero 1997: 111, Gillespie 1995: 11, Hoover 2003: 10, Mitchell and Marriage 2003: 1), then the relationship between the media and religious or spiritual meaning, community, and identity is worthy of study. As White says:

The media... are a site for the dialogue of the sacred and the secular in three areas: (a) the search for ultimate, consistent patterns of mythic meaning and the integration of the "unexplainable" into the commonsense cultural consensus; (b) the search for perfect community and the confrontation of community with the power structure of social practice; and (c) the search for

authent personal identity and the resolution of the conflicts between

personal and social identities (1997: 47. See also Hoover 2006: 39, Buxton

2009).

Hoover notes that this increased visibility of religion extends to the notion of the

'spiritual' and may appear in guises that we do not immediately recognise as religious:

'Religion and spirituality seem ever more obvious in popular music, television, film and

in books. Media figures have become publicly identified with religious and spiritual

ideas of various kinds. Religion seems increasingly 'on the agenda' in public culture,

though it is often in varieties and forms that seem to defy the label' (2006: 19. See

also: Clark 2007: xi).

Religious/Spiritual practice and media

Hoover identifies the ways in which both religion and media are invested in the

transformation of "the self" and that therefore there is an inevitable convergence

between their interests, which was particularly emergent in the early 2000s:

> The realms of both "religion" and "the media" are themselves transforming and
>
> being transformed. Religion today is much more a public, commodified,
>
> therapeutic, and personalized set of practices than it has been in the past. At
>
> the same time, the media… are collectively coming to constitute a realm where
>
> important projects of "the self" take place… religion and media are increasingly
>
> converging (2002: 2. See also Hoover 2007, Knott et al 2010).

Badaracco (2005: 2) recognises that there is an important, but complex, relationship

between the two areas, and that often it can be difficult to separate them, particularly

as religions increasingly use media forms to communicate, and media producers

increasingly use religious imagery and themes whilst Couldry (2002, 2003) has

explored the relationship between media 'rituals' and their religious counterparts. Goethals draws explicit parallels between the way media and religion operate:

Traditional religion gave believers fundamental information about themselves and their world… A symbolic world gave significance to personal experience, the community, and the universe. Rituals and myths identified friends, foes, and a communal destiny.

In today's secular, technological, and pluralistic era… the mass media attempt to portray significant events and provide information which enables us to understand ourselves in this complex society (1994: 19).

Dayan and Katz see this coming together of media and religion in the iconography and language of televised media 'events' such as Royal Weddings and Olympic ceremonies:

1. *Media events mark holidays of the civil religion* on the secular calendar, and perform some of the same functions as religious holidays. Indeed, religion is often involved in these civic ceremonies… The church lends aura to the state, and is given a part to play in the great events.

2. *Media events blur the boundary between the sacred and the profane*…

3. *Media events blur the limits between religions*…

4. *Media events sharpen religious hierarchies and personalize power*….

5… *media events may publicize tension and struggles within the church*… (1992: 207-209).

Former BBC head of religion Alan Bookbinder describes religion at the BBC as having just the functions Dayan and Katz describe:

What does this public space look like? Well, it takes different forms for different occasions. Sometimes it's a Cathedral. Think of the great national

events of celebration and commemoration. Big religious occasions - times

when the nation gathers to share sorrows and joys. Many people attend in

person, but many more experience it through our live coverage (2003).

For Lynch, the relationship between religion and the media is as important to explore

and analyse as the relationship between the media and other markers of identity such

as race or gender:

> Analyzing how religion is represented in contemporary media is not therefore
>
> simply a case of describing these representations. Rather it involves asking
>
> what these representations may tell us about wider biases, values and concerns
>
> in contemporary society, what interests these representations might serve and
>
> how these representations may be helpful or damaging to particular groups or
>
> individuals (2005: 24).

Davie agrees, arguing that media portrayals will inevitably affect the way we perceive

religion:

> Media portrayals of religion undoubtedly have some sort of relationship to the
>
> social reality that they try to depict… the media undoubtedly fashion the
>
> images that many of us have of religion. Such images are curiously diverse and
>
> may become more so. But equally there may well be limits to what a British
>
> audience will tolerate (1994: 113).

I will return to the idea that 'there may be limits to what a British audience will

tolerate' in terms of religious diversity in Chapters Four-Seven.

Horsfield suggests that the media do not merely represent religions, they are the primary source from which many of us learn about them, including those who belong to religious groups:

> The media as the agents of convergence present a significant alternative source of religious information, sentiment, ethical guidance, ritual, and community, not only for the broader population, but also for those who are members of religious institutions. Religious organizations may no longer be the main source of religious information, truth, or practice, even for their own members (1997: 178).

Existing analyses of religion/spirituality and media

Many studies of religion and the media have concentrated on the religious audience (predominantly in America) and the way they interpret media texts through their religious identity and integrate it into their everyday lives (e.g. Clark 2003, Lövheim 2004, Campbell 2009). Several studies have been concerned with religious media itself; particularly 'televangelism' and religious websites (e.g. Bunt 2003, Dawson and Cowan 2004, Horsfield 2003, Ferré 2003).

There are some studies of representations of religion in the mainstream media, such as a growing body of work exploring religious/spiritual themes in film (e.g. Mitchell and Brent Plate 2007, Martin and Ostwalt 1995), the work of Abbas (2001), Poole (2002/2006) and Richardson (2004/2006) on newspaper representations of Islam and Knott's quantitative analysis of media coverage of religion.

In 1984, Knott studied newspaper and television coverage of religion during a two-week period and discovered that much was excluded from media discourses of religion. No references to religious texts except for The Bible or Qur'an were found,

atheism was largely ignored, as were 'supernatural beings such as elves, gnomes and pixies' (Knott, 1984: 12). Overall, the portrayal of religion reinforced stereotypes and it was also presented predominantly as a minority interest, with science being seen as 'the arbiter of truth' (Knott 1984: 65), with non-religious output portraying religion as 'peripheral to our everyday concerns' (op. cit.). Knott, along with Poole and Taira, repeated this study to note the differences twenty-five years later. Their early findings show the continuing presence of Christianity and Islam in media portrayals of religion, alongside a rise in the portrayal of Atheism (see also: Watts 2005). They also note a rise in the presence of imagery and language associated with religion, particularly within advertising (Knott et al 2010).

This observation is echoed by Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 70) who note an increase in articles on alternative therapy, holistic medicine and mind/body/spirit themes within newspapers and magazines and Stolow (2005: 122-3), Einstein (2007), Hoover (2007) and Clark (2007) who all see the relationship between religion, media and the marketplace as burgeoning, with 'secular' products adopting 'spiritual' vernacular in their promotion and 'spiritual' products and personalities[10] entering the 'secular' marketplace (see also Hoover 2007). Richards (2003), Crumm (2005), Carrette and King (2005) and Buxton (2009) also argue that spiritual concepts have increasingly become used to market products and services and spiritual experiences and images have been resold as commodities (see Chapter Five).

Orientalism and media portryals of Islam

A number of studies of religion in the media, particularly of Islam, have focused on issues of representation, often drawing upon Said's notion of Orientalism (1978/1995).

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[10] Such as Rick Warren, Christian minister and author of best-selling (in the US) book *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002).

In the last two centuries, Western debate and discourse around the 'Orient' and Islam has largely been circulated through the media. Said, and others (including Poole 2002/2006, Richardson 2004/2005/2006, Karim 2003, Macdonald 2003/2011, Beattie 2004, Cesari 2005) argue that the Western media perpetuate the notion of Islam as something 'other' to the West, and often perpetuate Islamophobic discourses: 'malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West' (Said 1997: xii). Macdonald attributes the rise of media representations of Islam as a threatening 'other' to the West to the collapse of communism and the need for a new symbolic enemy (2003: 154. See also Karim 2003a, Ramji 2006, Abdallah 2005), whilst Abbas argues that Islam is 'othered' in the media because it is seen as a threat to Western ideals and lifestyles:

> Throughout the history of Western European contact with Muslims, it has been
> convenient for the established powers to smear Islam and Muslims in the worst
> possible light... The central feature…. is the representation of the other in a
> negative manner to aggrandise established powers and legitimise existing
> systems of domination and subordination (2001: 249. See also Poole 2002).

Abbas (2001), Poole (2002/2006), Richardson (2004/2006) and Marsden and Savigny (2009) have all analysed newspaper coverage of Islam. Their research indicated that the religion is predominantly seen as a threat to Western values, particularly in relation to human rights issues, terrorism and the treatment of women and children. They found that with stories connected to terrorism, traditional Islamic imagery such as mosques, Islamic dress and the crescent were often used as illustrations, further 'orientalising' the religion as something alien and barbaric (see also Karim 1997). The notion of an Islamic villain or threat is often reiterated in news media, with reports of

terrorist activities including terms such as "Muslim cleric", "Islamic fundamentalist" and "Muslim militants" (Karim 2002: 109).

In Chapter Five I explore the way television constructs particular streams of Islam as problematic, conflating Islamic dress, mosques and prayers with inflammatory preaching and violent acts.

Problematic religion/spirituality in the media

It is not only Islam that is portrayed as problematic, however. Hjelm notes that 'The developments after September 11 have shown that the so-called world religions are also increasingly regarded as the *source* of social problems' (2006: 63) and he explores moral panics about issues such as Muslim women wearing headscarves and 'Satanist' sects. Such portrayals significantly problematise religion to the point of calling some religious practices into question. News media help classify religion as 'good' or 'bad': 'At a time when most walks of life are saturated with mass-mediated information, the news media play a crucial role in differentiating between good and bad religion, and, consequently, in drawing the boundaries of religious pluralism' (ibid: 74).

Religious belief is, according to Brown, tolerated only when it is a private matter, rather than one which has a bearing on public discourse, values or practice:

> Tolerance of diverse beliefs in a community becomes possible to the extent
> that those beliefs are phrased as having no public importance; as being
> constitutive of a private individual whose private beliefs and commitments
> have minimal bearing on the structure and pursuits of political, social or
> economic life (2006: 32).

Riggins notes that 'Most religions may be "misunderstood" by people committed to secularism' (1997: 24) and several authors argue that both majority and minority faiths are marginalised, stereotyped and misrepresented. Wodak (1997: 74) argues that Jews are stereotyped as being dishonest, dishonourable and tricky or through notions of an 'international Jewish conspiracy', whilst Barker claims that NRMs are often depicted negatively through their discursive construction as cults, or as 'social problems' (see also Jenkins 1992, Critcher 2003, Hjelm 2011):

> From an anti-cultist perspective, the reason why the NRMs are considered a social problem is, quite simply, because the movements are a social problem: their beliefs and practices are perceived as anti-social and a danger to individuals and to society. From another perspective (especially that of the NRMS themselves), it has been argued that, left to their own devices, the movements would not pose any kind of real threat: it is purely the way they are portrayed by their opponents that results in their being perceived as a social problem... one of the most common and effective means by which an NRM is depicted as a social problem is simply through the term "cult". There are, however, many other ways that language can convey a negative image... particularly the use of the passive tense (Barker 2011: 199, 206).

Schaefer's analysis of a 1992 *Heart of the Matter* programme about American evangelist Maurice Cerullo provides a good illustration of religion as problematic. She describes how the programme compares Cerullo's rallies to those of Hitler and uses language such as 'manipulation', 'lies', and 'abuse' in its opening monologue, even before identifying Cerullo by name: 'a vivid, highly negative impression had already been constructed and reinforced visually and verbally, augmented further by the

footage that followed' (2002: 41). She goes on to discuss the way that presenter Joan Bakewell addressed viewers about the 'problematic reality' viewers had seen and how her framing of questions using words such as 'razzmatazz' and 'show' clearly positioned the viewer:

> As [the] BBC's institutional voice, her calm demeanour stood in stark relief against the previous footage—the familiar voice of 'reason' and 'rationality' versus the 'hysteria' and 'irrationality'... Cerullo's views, and those of his UK supporters, were discredited by means of presentation: camera techniques, soundtrack, commentary of institutional and obtained (i.e. interviewees') voices, and the story's narrative structure (ibid: 42).

Watts claims that Catholicism is also stigmatised within (British) media portrayals:

> More often than not the British media prefer to peddle a stereotypical, cynical and biased version of Catholicism... The British media, with its evangelical secularism, tends to strip out Catholicism's spiritual and theological roots, which define it, and reduce it to an archaic organisation whose message is no abortion, no contraception, no sex outside marriage, no homosexual sex, no divorce and no euthanasia (2005: 32-33. See also: McDonnell 2003).

McDonnell argues that part of the reason for the problematic portrayals of religion within the media might be that:

> Religion does not fit easily into the dominant worldview of most contemporary broadcasters who are often ill prepared to deal with religion... broadcasters face a real challenge in accommodating those religious views which challenge or confront dominant pluralist or secular assumptions. The religious claim to truth, especially to an exclusive truth, is difficult to assimilate in a media system

that has elevated professional tolerance and impartiality above nearly every other virtue (1993: 92. See also Chapter Four).

It is difficult for broadcasters to portray religion in the way its adherents might wish; views compete not only with one another but also with secular, pluralist worldviews. Even when depictions of belief are more positive, there is still a component of 'othering' present. Riggins argues that portrayals of non-Western religious beliefs form a key part of travel discourses, dating from the colonial era to the present. One travel writer he studies:

> Relates to Hinduism solely as an external observer… The author was not concerned about discovering the wisdom she might have acquired from a guru; instead, she presents him indirectly as a rather ridiculous figure… a Hindu worldview is dismissed when the whole adventure of kayaking down the Ganges is reduced to a series of challenges that glorify the Self (1997: 25).

This relationship between self-improvement, religion and tourism also forms a key part of some television programmes in my study (see Chapter Six).

<u>Public service broadcasting and religion/spirituality</u>

The broadcasters studied within this thesis all have public service obligations, meaning that there are certain requirements when it comes to their presentation of religion (see Chapter Four). One significant aspect of public service broadcasting is its commitment to represent diversity. According to Born (2005), 'The BBC claims that it 'is committed to reflecting the diversity of the UK audience in its workforce, as well as in its output on TV, on radio and online. It aims to reflect the population of modern Britain - through gender, age, ethnicity and cultural diversity, disability, faith and social background, and sexual orientation' (BBC 2007b). The Broadcasting Research Unit

(1985) identified the following as key features of public service broadcasting: 'geographic universality, catering for all interests and tastes, catering for minorities, concern for national identity and community, detachment from vested interests and government'.

The Department of National Heritage states that public service broadcasting 'should reflect the national interests and cultural traditions of their audiences. They can create a sense of community' (1992). This is seen as particularly important with regards to representing minority interests and traditions (BBC 2007b. See also: Campion 2006). A 2001 study by the Independent Television Commission found viewers valued public service broadcasting, and saw it as having a wide remit, including 'diversity, high quality, education, innovation, entertainment, information, original productions, pluralism, accessibility, inclusion of minorities and free access' (Sancho/ITC 2001: 19).

Quicke and Quicke's (1992) study of the role of politicians and religious advisory groups in shaping broadcasting policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s highlights how complicated the portrayals of religion on television and radio can be, particularly as channels sought to move away from earlier paradigms, such as Lord Reith's idea that the BBC would promote Christian faith as part of its early remit (Quicke and Quicke 1992: 33). They detail the challenges raised for public service broadcasting in terms of meeting the needs of a religiously diverse (but increasingly irreligious) population whilst maintaining ratings and (in the case of ITV and Channel 4) commercial interest.

Bruce argues that by the 1990s the nature of public service programming about religion had changed:

An increasing proportion of 'religious' programmes are being made by

broadcasters with an interest in religion rather than clergymen with an interest

in broadcasting. And that interest is often academic rather than personal. So

the religion output has come to be more about religion and less religious (Bruce

1995: 57).

A more detailed look at studies of public service broadcasting and religion, particularly

examining the British context, can be found in Chapter Four.

<u>Media adiences and religion/spirituality</u>

Survey research carried out by Ofcom (2004) indicates that viewers placed 'religion'

bottom of their priorities list when given a list of programme categories. However,

further, qualitative, research by the regulatory body (2005a) and by the broadcasters

indicates that this is because the term is often understood to mean traditional

worship, and there is 'a strong interest in programmes... [on] questions of faith, the

manifestation of faith in culture... the role of religion in world politics' (Ofcom 2005a:

2. See also BBC 2005b: 2, 2008: 2).

Channel 4's audience research on race and ethnicity showed that members of minority

ethnic groups often have a different relationship to ethnicity than white Britons. The

latter group find it hard to acknowledge their own 'race' (2007b: 9. See also Dyer

1997) and feel that broadcasters are doing 'a satisfactory job' (BBC 2007b: 9) in

reflecting multicultural Britain whilst other ethnic groups 'feel that the broadcasters'

performance in this area is very poor' (op. cit) and that media portrayals often resort

to stereotyping and tokenism (ibid: 9, 18-21). There were distinctions between

different Asian groups, particularly following September 11 when 'Muslims reported

that they now feel more Muslim, while some Indians were keen to stress that they

now feel more British' (ibid: 11). Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups strongly identified

with Islam and felt 'under attack', including from the media (ibid: 13), whilst Indian

groups wanted to distinguish themselves from Muslims and preferred to be called

'British Asian' (ibid, 12). (See also: Gillespie 1995, Bradley 2007, Modood 2007, Gledhill

2008).

Industry research throughout the decade (including Ofcom 2004, Ofcom 2005a, Ofcom

2008, BBC 2005a/b, Channel 4 2007b) repeatedly shows dissatisfaction from members

of religious and minority ethnic groups about their depiction on the public service

channels[11]. For example, the BBC Annual Report from 2000-2001 states that 'people

expressed disappointment in the BBC's coverage of the experiences and contribution

of minority ethnic communities… They were critical, for example, of the portrayal of

Islam and Muslim communities' (BBC 2001: 34). Criticisms about lack of, or inaccurate,

representation from different faith communities are made in each annual report

except 07-08 and 08-09. These latter omissions may be to do more with the ending of

the relationship between CRAC, Ofcom and the BBC in 2007 (see Chapter Four) than

any changes in broadcast material.

Conclusion

As I have shown, because of the scope of the research, there are many concerns I draw

upon within my analysis and discussion. In Chapters Four-Seven, programmes,

audience discussion and interview materials will be analysed to ascertain what they

might reveal about attitudes towards the themes brought up in the first section of this

chapter, such as the debates over secularisation and the alleged rise in NRMs, chapter,

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[11] Although my thesis is concerned with mainstream factual programming, these criticisms extended to all genres, including comedy, drama and news.

such as the debates over secularisation and the alleged rise in NRMS, fundamentalisms and alternative spiritualties. Media Studies' concerns over representation will be a key part of the study as I look at the way religious/spiritual beliefs and practices and national identity are portrayed, the reasons for this, and the responses of audiences to these, whilst the audience research draws heavily on both the 'reception studies' tradition and notions of 'interactivity' (see Chapter Three).

In the next chapter, I explain my methodological standpoint and the processes I used in my research and analysis.

<u>Chapter Three: Methodology</u>

Introduction

In this chapter I explain the rationale behind my research strategy, the methodological context within which I am working, the specific research methods and practices employed, and the processes of selecting and analysing my data. The first section describes my methodological and analytical strategy, whilst the second explains the processes and methods used in my research.

I am aware of the complicated relationship any researcher has with their material and what my own experiences of Britishness, religion, politics and audiencehood might bring to my understanding of the research material. In addition to this, many writers (including Fine et al 2003, Gergen and Gergen 2003, Lincoln and Denzin 2003) acknowledge that qualitative researchers have a tendency to 'other' their research subjects and claim we cannot ignore the researcher's own background in relation to their subject (Ladson-Billings 2003: 413, Lincoln and Denzin 2003: 615, Fairclough 1992a: 35). Denzin argues more explicitly that 'the Other's presence is directly connected to the writer's self-presence in the text' (2009: 92). I believe this 'othering' is unavoidable in a study such as mine where I deal with a large range of discursive accounts from those who are, in various ways, whether by belief system, ethnicity, gender, role or nationality, 'other' to me.

My own understanding and analysis will, of course, be influenced in some ways by my own experiences of religion/spirituality and those of friends and family, by my liberal/left politics and by my education and training within Media and Communication Studies. The latter means that I consider the communicative acts studied 'texts' and 'discourses' and see them as worthy of analysis and exploration in ways that might be

different to participants with different political views or academic /professional experience. Politically, I am concerned with different groups of people being able to have a 'voice' and this inevitably influences the ways I analyse the material and the themes I am interested in. Because of this, and because of the wide-ranging scope of my study, I have attempted to use a range of methods in order to provide as rounded an account as possible.

I have predominantly used qualitative research methods throughout my study. Denzin and Lincoln argue that 'Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices… turn the world into a series of representations' (2000: 3). Given that my concerns are with the *nature* of representation of religion and spirituality over and above the *quantity* of such representations, and with the meanings different people take from these representations (Ritchie and Lewis 2003: 3), a largely qualitative approach seems the most appropriate.

Qualitative research often lends itself to a multi-method approach (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 2, Brewer and Hunter 1989). Because of the range of contexts I have chosen to work in, I have attempted to use different approaches to gather understandings of as many aspects of the production, circulation, and 'reception' of these television programmes as possible, through analysing programmes and industry documentation, interviewing programme makers and participants, and conducting audience research.

Although quantitative research could provide me with an understanding of numbers of occurrences of particular themes, words, imagery or individuals and could also show comparisons between these occurrences across different platforms, texts and environments, I believed it would have been too time-consuming and difficult to

conduct a meaningful quantitative analysis alongside the qualitative analysis, particularly given the breadth of contexts I was analysing, so quantitative methods were excluded.

I am broadly working within a Cultural Studies framework, with a particular interest in notions of 'discourse'. Given the wide scope of this study, 'discourse' is a key unifying concept, as it covers not only the programmes' content, but discussions about and accounts of these programmes from those involved in the production process and different audiences, and the discursive parameters governing production in terms of guidelines and PSB 'values'.

Methodological and analytical strategy

My work explores a range of discourses about religion, spirituality and nationality and considers the contexts in which these are constructed, circulated and understood. In this section, I explain the different ways 'discourse' has been conceived of by researchers, the relevance of 'discourse' to my own research, the rationale behind adopting a broadly CDA approach, and how my analysis will be conducted.

<u>Discourse – conceptions and understandings</u>

Discourse is a term with a range of meanings and applications (Mills 1997, Macdonald 2003, Fairclough 2010, van Dijk 2010). Michel Foucault described discourse as operating in three key ways: 'sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements' (1972: 80)[1].

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[1] Although Foucault wasn't always consistent in his own use of the term 'discourse' (Mills 2003, Graham 2008).

Many Cultural Studies theorists have used this three-fold approach to aid their understanding of discourse as operating in relation to the general construction of language and knowledge, to groups of utterances used within particular environments and within different expressions of regulatory frameworks of knowledge (see Mills 1997, Barker and Galasinski 2001).

My own analysis shares this approach, with particular 'utterances' being analysed throughout at the textual level, within particular environments/genres (such as online Christian forums or reality television), and within wider social constructs (for example, constructs of 'public service' or of 'deviance'). After all, mediated presentations of religion and spirituality do not occur in a vacuum but rather are part of wider discourses within academia, religious movements, policy and other media as well as within the accounts of individuals and groups. Of course, even the accounts of individuals are constructed and represent their selected account, their perceptions of 'truth' and what they are willing to reveal.

For Foucault, discourse operates to position individuals and groups within societies, usually with the function of perpetuating existing models of power (1976), a notion that many since have incorporated into their own analyses:

> Among critical discourse theorists such as Foucault, the term 'discourse' refers not to language or social interaction but to relatively well-bounded areas of social knowledge… According to this new position, in any given historical period we can write, speak or think about a given social object or practice… only in specific ways and not others. '*A* discourse' would then be *whatever* constrains – but also enables – writing, speaking and thinking within such specific historical limits… if discourses don't merely represent 'the real', and if in fact

they are part of its production, then which discourse is 'best' can't be decided by comparing it with any real object. The real object simply isn't available *for* comparison outside its discursive construction (McHoul and Grace 1993: 31, 35).

Discursive power works through constraining what can and cannot be articulated in any given context and becomes part of reality, to the extent that we cannot conceive of a notion of 'the real' outside of discursive practice. In analysing discourses:

One sees the loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice. These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects… [revealing this indicates] a task that consists of not – of no longer – treating discourses as groups of signs… but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Of course discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things (Foucault 1972: 48-49. See also: Macdonald 2003: 11, 17).

Discursive practice works beyond simply being groups of words, or signs: it is a system of ordering practices that constructs our ways of understanding that reality. For example, Foucault considers both 'punishment' and 'confession' as 'rituals of discourse' (1976: 58). The confession, he argues, operates as 'one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth… it is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface'

(Foucault 1976: 58-60). He considers 'crime', 'law' and 'punishment' as discursively constructed and circulated in much the same way (1975/1977: 110-115).

Drawing on the understanding of power operating through discursive practice, Cultural Studies, Anthropology and other disciplines have long been concerned with how different groups are given voice, silenced or 'othered' (e.g. Said 1997, Hall 1981, van Dijk 1997: 31, Wodak 1997), and how these groups make sense of, or interpret, these constructions (see also Chapters Two and Seven). These concerns are particularly central to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a method often closely related to Cultural Studies (Blommaert 2005).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Broadly speaking, my work uses a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, although I use the term tentatively for reasons I will explain later. CDA, according to Norman Fairclough, attempts to:

> Systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between a) discursive practices, events and texts, and b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power (1995a: 132)

Drawing on Foucauldian ideas about the relationship between discourse, power and society (Jäger and Maier 2010), CDA is concerned with analysing discourse in terms of its social, cultural and ideological contexts, although not all CDA practitioners take a Foucauldian approach, with some operating more at a primarily linguistic level (see Graham 2008, Wodak and Meyer, 2010, Meyer 2001).

CDA aims to look at power relations and ideologies reproduced within texts (see Cameron 2001: 124, Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258), and is clearly relevant for the analysis of programmes about religion and spirituality, particularly given the contexts of Public Service remits and industry guidelines that inform production processes (Hill 2007, Malik 2011. See also Chapter Four). CDA is largely concerned with power relations, or 'asymmetrical encounters' (see Locke 2004, Wodak and Meyer 2001, Weiss and Wodak 2003). It has often been used in the analysis of institutional and mediated discourse, in order to examine the power relations in place and the ideologies that are reproduced. Much CDA draws on Foucault's discussion of discursive 'truth' as held by those seen to be 'experts' and legitimised/supported through institutions (1972, 1976, Mills 2003: 58), and is particularly concerned with the way different groups are marginalised or excluded through discourse.

This has clear relevance to my study, given the different groups who are (or are not) represented in media discourses, the responses of these groups to those representations, and the contexts in which these representations and responses occur. For example, academics, politicians and high-status religious leaders within particular faith groups and denominations are given agency as 'talking heads' and 'experts', whilst 'ordinary' people remain the subject of programmes rather than holding an 'expert' or 'authoritative' position. Furthermore, particular groups (e.g. Christians, Muslims, Atheists) are highly visible within the media industry, within television discourse and within audience discussion (and dominate the audience research conducted by Ofcom and broadcasters), whilst others (e.g. Sikhs, Buddhists, New Age adherents) are not. Responses occur in a range of contexts (some that I am able to trace, others, such as watching at home 'live', I am not) but in 'officially' sanctioned

environments such as blogs and forums run by the major broadcasters, it is only those with 'expert' status or employed by the broadcasters who are allowed to write blogs or moderate discussions.

For many CDA practitioners, as with many Cultural Studies theorists, there is a clear socio-political agenda to their work, with a particular concern for those they see as being 'dominated' by the powerful. As Fairclough and Wodak state, 'what is distinctive about CDA is both that it intervenes on the side of dominated and oppressed groups and against dominating groups, and that it openly declares the emancipatory interests that motivate it' (1997: 258); although it is not always clear *how* CDA intervenes beyond highlighting problematic discursive power.

As well as exploring individual texts, CDA often takes an intertextual and often multi-method approach (Wodak and Meyer 2010: 2); looking at patterns and ideologies across different texts and discourses. Given the intertextual nature of my research, CDA offers a way of analysing texts (from television programmes to audience discussions to interview transcripts) in conjunction with one another to highlight common themes and concerns. For example, I attempt to situate my analysis of programmes with an analysis of the contexts of their production and 'reception', such as in the case of the relationship between religion/spirituality and 'vulnerable' people. Programmes position religion/spirituality as a threat to these groups, yet this construction is in part a requirement of broadcasting guidelines, and also replicates wider social discourses present in audience discussions (see Chapters Two, Four, Five, Seven, Eight).

However, whilst my research concerns largely mirror those of Foucauldian-inspired approaches to CDA, I situate my work within this paradigm with caution. One of the

main problems with CDA is that it is used and understood in many different ways, to the extent that it can become confusing to determine precisely what it is (Wodak and Meyer 2010: 2-3)[2]. Furthermore, its uses vary from those who see it primarily as concerned with the analysis of language (albeit language 'in context') such as Lorenzo-Dus (2009) to those who consider other signs, such as visual and audio signs, to be a key part of discourse (Macdonald 2003, Schroder et al 2003). Fairclough himself conducts more linguistically-based analysis, although he acknowledges the role other communicative forms play in the construction of discourse (2001, 2010).

Critics of CDA, including Jones and Collins (2006, Jones 2007) argue that interpreting events, actions and processes purely through the prism of discourse is problematic: particularly when this 'discourse' is primarily conceived of linguistically, as it excludes other kinds of 'human acts' (Jones 2007) and pays little attention to the different competencies and expectations 'readers' bring to different kinds of discourses.

In practice, CDA is often not as rounded as its proponents claim. As with most textual analysis methods, instead of exploring the motivations of speakers and hearers (or writers and readers) alongside analysis of the discourse itself, CDA tends to focus on the analyst's interpretation of the texts and their contexts. As Widdowson says:

> [In CDA] there is the insistence that you cannot read significance straight off
> from the text, but that it is a matter of relating texts to their conditions of
> consumption and production. But that is not what they do…Their [producers']
> intentions are vicariously inferred from the analysis itself, by reference to what
> the analyst assumes in advance to be the writer's ideological position… [and

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[2] Although Fairclough, one of the key proponents of CDA, argues that to 'qualify' as CDA, analysis should look at a three-dimensional framework (1995a: 2) of texts themselves, discourse practices and sociocultural practices, with a particular agenda to address 'social wrongs' (2010: 10-11).

the readers'] understanding is assigned to them by proxy' (1998. See also Riggins 1997: 3).

These limitations have influenced my decision to seek the 'voices' of audiences and those involved in the production processes alongside my own voice. I consider their accounts 'texts' just as the programmes are, and attempt to consider the contexts they work in from a number of perspectives. Although it is impossible to entirely safeguard against my own account (itself a discursive act) being a product of my interpretation, by using material from a wide range of programmes, audience discussion environments, interview accounts and industry documents, I will be attempting to explore possible interpretations other than my own, such as the accounts of those involved in production and those of audiences from a range of backgrounds.

Whilst I recognise the problems with CDA, however, I do share its desire to consider texts, the discursive practices that shape them and the contexts in which they occur, as well as its concern with 'oppressed groups'. In this study, I argue that certain groups and individuals have their voices and opinions prioritised over others.

I share with Barker and Galasinski (2001) and Schroder et al (2003) an inclusive approach to CDA as a method of qualitative textual analysis, combining elements of narrative analysis, semiotics, and linguistics. This approach understands discourse as 'a practice not just of representing the world but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning' (Fairclough 1992a: 64. See also Riddings 1997, Van Dijk 1997, Barker and Galasinski 2001) and has influenced the work of many Cultural Studies scholars. A broadly CDA approach has often been employed within cultural and media studies analyses (e.g. Richardson 2004, Brunt 2011), where media

discourse has been analysed to reveal underlying political/social themes and power relations, even if this analysis has not always been explicitly framed as 'CDA'.

Within this CDA approach, I will be employing a combination of thematic, semiotic and narrative analysis in a manner similar to Poole's (2002) study of Islam in news coverage, Morey's (2011) analysis of drama *Yasmin*, Toolan's (2001) analyses of children's narratives and news stories, and Taylor and Ussher's (2001) analysis of the discourses of S&M.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke, provides a 'flexible and useful research tool… [for] identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (2006: 78-9). Although they acknowledge that it is a method which has been poorly defined, their interpretation of how it can be used echoes the intentions of CDA theorists: they argue that by identifying patterns and themes within data, we can 'identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations - or ideologies - that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data' (2006: 84).

In practice, thematic analysis works by identifying key themes in the work which then enable categorisation or coding of data (Robson 2011: 474). It can be applied across a range of data contexts (Cronin 2008, Rapley 2011, Silverman 2011a) and used in conjunction with other qualitative methods, although on its own it can be seen as rather limited (Braun and Clarke 2006, Robson 2011: 477), not least because it often ignores the context of the material being analysed (Silverman 2011a: 219).

In this study I identify several key themes that emerge across all discursive environments, including Britishness and national identity, concern for the vulnerable, notions of tolerance and moderation, the 'journey' and acceptable vs unacceptable forms of religion/spirituality. The identification of themes helps organise the material and provides a context within which to conduct more detailed analysis using other qualitative methods.

Semiotics

The study of semiotics largely grew out of a structuralist approach, and is centred on the analysis and understanding of communicative acts, or 'signs'. It has been a very influential model for media analysis (e.g. Geraghty 2005, Williamson 1978). Saussure (1974) argued that such signs comprised of two elements, a signifier (the communicative components) and a signified (the concept referred to by the signifiers). In television programmes, signifiers include elements such as framing, close-ups, camera angles, sound effects, costume, lighting, make-up, metalanguage, word choice and word emphasis (see Hansen et al, 1998). The employment of different signifiers helps to create and anchor certain signified readings.

Peirce (1940/1965) argued that the relationship between signifier and signified can be categorised in one of three ways: iconic signs (where the signifier resembles the signified), indexical signs (where there is some relationship between signifier and signified) and symbolic signs (where the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary). For example, in programmes about religion, Islam is commonly represented by the indices of crescents, men at prayer and hijabs, niqabs and Burkhas, whilst Christianity is indexed by crosses and churches, with raised hands and closed eyes signifying Pentecostal, evangelical or charismatic Christianity, and priests in clerical

outfits and stone churches in the countryside representing traditional British Anglicanism (see Chapters Five and Six). These constructions thus circulate particular accounts of these faith groups. These sets of signifiers are also frequently associated with political/ideological practices, such as the connections made between people worshipping with open hands and closed eyes, and discussion of anti-abortion or anti-homosexual politics. Whilst this outward expression of spirituality may have little or no connection with these political beliefs, television discourse frequently conflates the two to create a symbolic link.

Drawing on the work of Saussure and Peirce, later theorists attempted to contextualise the construction of signs and their meanings to a greater degree. Roland Barthes (1957) was concerned with signs having meanings on two levels, those of denotation (the more literal or 'surface' meanings) and connotation (implied or associated meanings). Building on this idea, he explored the way that signs shape particular meanings in different contexts and cultures. He termed this 'myth', a process whereby 'the context and history of the signs are narrowed down and contained so that only a few features of their context and history have a signifying function' (Bignell 2002: 22).

For example, one common 'myth' drawn upon in programmes about religion/spirituality is that of September 11 2001. The mediated 'myth' incorporates images of planes flying into buildings and dust-covered survivors, the notions of Islamic jihad and heroic firefighters, and the phrases 'war on terror' and '9/11'. The process of myth creation means that a particular assembly of signs and meanings is presented as a 'natural' explanation of 'what actually happened' although there will be many aspects that are excluded from this myth.

The concepts of connotation and myth are often linked to notions of ideology, as in Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model. A semiotic approach can help us understand not just the notion *that* these processes of 'encoding' and 'decoding' take place, but *how* these processes happen. It does this through examining and deconstructing the different signs in messages and different possible interpretations of these signs.

One of the main criticisms of semiotics is its tendency to 'focus on isolated signs devoid of context' (Cobley 1996: 8). Cobley argues that this decontextualising of signs 'meant that meaning was not necessarily viewed as a dynamic force, unfolding throughout the whole of discourse, nor was it viewed as something that might change depending on the identity of the user or enunciation of that discourse' (1996: 8-9). However, my aim is similar to the aims of other CDA practitioners, to use semiotic analysis as one tool within a wider framework.

<u>Narrative</u>

Whilst a semiotic approach can help in understanding the 'codes' used within a text to create thematic associations, narrative analysis can help understand how the structures and roles within texts construct meaning, as we can see in the work of Modleski (1984), Braitch (2007), Berger (1997) and Toolan (2001).

All programmes have a narrative structure, with a clear trajectory (Toolan 2001: 4). Many programmes, regardless of genre, employ the traditional narrative formula that Todorov (1973) identifies of equilibrium - disequilibrium - new/restored equilibrium. The way this narrative pattern unfolds might be through a range of different events, and certain genres have very specific kinds of disequilibrium and equilibrium. For example, in reality television programmes about religion/spirituality, disequilibrium takes the forms of arguments within a group and rebellion whilst new equilibrium is

accomplished through the subject's final transformation into a 'better' version of oneself (see Morreale 2007).

Several theorists developed models to explain narrative roles and functions, and I have drawn on these where appropriate. For example, Vladimir Propp's (1928/1975) account of character types has been used in order to highlight where particular individuals, groups or belief systems are playing specific roles within a narrative, such as 'hero', 'villain' or 'dispatcher' whilst Levi-Strauss's (1966) notion of 'binary oppositions' is also useful when opposing characteristics or perspectives are used to create tensions and/or sympathies.

Drawing on these early theories, and employing techniques from semiotics, Roland Barthes' (1970) developed a system of narrative codes: the symbolic (thematic); semic (construction of 'character'); referential (drawing on existing cultural knowledge); hermeneutic (enigmas/mysteries narratives set up and attempt to solve) and proaertic (actions that complicate or change events).   Again, the use of these codes in the discursive construction of some narratives forms part of my analysis, such as the role of 'enigmas' in many reality or 'fly on the wall' programmes asking us who will be changed and how, or the referential code requiring existing knowledge of nationhood or faith practices in order to fully understand a programme.

Encoding/decoding and discourse

CDA sees the relationship between discourses and 'truths' as highly problematic, with 'truthfulness' and 'reality' being constructs and representations, which are often polysemic or unstable in their meaning (Riggins 1997: 2, Barker and Galasinski 2001: 1).

For Hall and others (such as Morley and Brunsdon 1980, Radway 1984), however, this polysemy or ambiguity often comes through at the point of 'reception' rather than creation. Influenced by Marxist critiques such as Althusser's (1971) notion of interpellation, Hall's influential 'encoding/decoding' model claims that 'texts[3]' are 'encoded' at the point of production with preferred ideological meanings, and are decoded by audiences through what he identifies as three subject-positions: the dominant-hegemonic; the negotiated; and the oppositional (1973, 1980b: 47-49. See Chapter Two).

Whilst textual analysis is important as a means of understanding the nature of discursive constructions of religion and spirituality, all its forms of textual analysis have limitations. Ultimately, the interpretation of texts is defined by the researcher. Taken alone, such analysis can often make assumptions about the contexts of textual production and reception that may not always be correct (see Collins 1999: 88, Widdowson 1998, Cameron 2001: 127-8) – although in this study, the quantity and variety of texts/discourses studied enables recurring patterns and narratives to emerge in order to give weight to my analysis.

In the next section, I explain the processes and practices used in conducting research and why these were deemed the most appropriate for this study.

Research processes and practices

Because media discourses are not created in isolation from other discourses, I consider it important to also look at the perspectives of audiences and of those involved in different aspects of the production process. Often a weakness of Cultural Studies is its

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[3] In Hall's case, televisual texts/discourses, though his model has subsequently been applied to a range of media and cultural forms.

attention to one of these aspects without considering the other two. Even work within the 'reception studies' paradigm (such as Morley and Brunsdon 1980, Radway 1984, Ang 1985) that attempted to reconcile texts and contexts often excluded the voices of those involved in production. Whilst it is perfectly valid to study only one aspect, I considered this insufficient for my study, partly because there is so little work in this area, and partly because I am looking at a ten year period in which there was significant social change, as well as a range of changes in media practice, and a number of competing claims made about the nature of religion/spirituality. I wanted to explore the complexity of the way discourses are produced within institutional constraints on production (such as Ofcom/ITC guidelines and PSB aims) and examine some of the different contexts of audience 'reception' and 'interaction'.

Given the range of discursive practices around the production and 'reception' of these programmes, I have adopted a multi-method approach, using analysis of a range of programmes and of industry documentation (e.g. policies, reports and promotional material), interviews with practitioners involved at different stages of the production process and participants in some programmes, and focus groups and analysis of online conversations about television programmes to explore audience readings.

In this section I explain the range of research methods I used, why they were chosen, their strengths and limitations, and how I used them. I begin by explaining how I selected a sample of programmes, then discuss the process of industry research, which involved looking at policy documents and interviewing and selecting interview subjects. Finally, I explain the different contexts and strategies for my audience research, which involved focus groups and analysing online discussion.

<u>Programmes: sample selection</u>

Given my concerns are with the range of representations across genres, channels and years within the decade, I attempted to source as wide a range of programmes as possible. Because of the higher volume/range of material produced in the latter half of the decade compared to the earlier half and easier access to these programmes, more of the programmes in my sample came from the years 2005-2009 than from 2000-2004. Likewise, because of the range of programmes shown on the BBC or Channel Four in comparison to ITV and Five (see Chapter Four for an explanation), output from those two broadcasters dominates.

Because of my interest in channels with a public service obligation, I focused on BBC One, Two, Three (formerly BBC Choice) and Four (formerly BBC Knowledge), ITV1, Channel 4 and Five (formerly Channel 5/Channel Five and subsequently 5). Non-PSB digital channels from these broadcasters such as ITV2, More 4 or Five Life (subsequently Fiver and 5*) also showed programmes with a religious/spiritual theme on occasion. These were often repeat showings from the PSB channels, with the exception of programmes such as *Sally Morgan: Star Psychic* and *Ghosthunting with…* on ITV2. Whilst examining the presentation of such shows on a channel primarily devoted to entertainment would have been interesting, it would have stretched the parameters of my study too far, and Annette Hill's (2011) study of the paranormal in media and culture already covers some of these programmes.

My concerns are not with religion/spirituality within its 'traditional' slots, but within mainstream 'factual'[4] programming for adults. Inclusion of 'religious' programming (or,

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[4] I am using 'factual' as a term to denote programme *genre* throughout: I am aware that the construction of such programmes means they are discursive accounts rather than a presentation of 'facts'.

indeed, schools programming) would have provided too much material in an already large study, especially given the weekly episodic nature of many 'religious' programmes such as *Songs of Praise* (BBC 1961-present), *The Heaven and Earth Show* (BBC 1998-2007) and *The Big Questions* (BBC 2007-present). Thus they are excluded from the study, as are worship and religious 'event' programmes such as Christmas services.

Although initially I was interested in a very wide range of programmes within factual television, as I explored programmes, I found that 'Britishness' and its relationship to the religious and spiritual became a recurring theme within programmes. Although I did not initially aim to look at notions of 'Britishness', it became apparent that this was an important discursive strand across programmes and I decided to make it a key theme of the study. This decision helped refine my sample, and programmes that did not have a 'British' angle (either by being 'about' Britain, or by providing a British perspective on another country) were excluded.

In selecting the final sample for inclusion in the thesis, I chose programmes that could broadly be categorised into presenting religion/spirituality either as a 'threat' (Chapter Five) or in terms of a 'journey' (Chapter Six), which I found were the two dominant themes within the material. Chapter Five was structured according to the most common forms of 'threat' presented within programmes, and Chapter Six according to forms of 'journeys' taken.

Beyond this, I attempted to choose a range of examples that covered as wide a spectrum of genres and subjects as possible, albeit within the range offered on television, which prioritises particular subjects and formats over others (see chapters Four, Five and Six). These genres include: 'reality'/lifestyle; documentary (in various

formats from 'current affairs'/'investigative' to 'fly on the wall'/'human interest');
debate; arts; history; travelogue; and science.

Industry Research: Documentary Analysis

Four key types of industry documents are studied: broadcasting policies and guidelines; the annual reports of the major broadcasters; documents detailing audience research from the ITC, Ofcom, Channel 4 and the BBC; and the broadcasters' websites and publicity materials.

Atkinson and Coffey claim that we should be careful to acknowledge the roles documents play in any institution or organisation and treat them as socially constructed representations for specific practices: 'Documents… are produced, shared and used on socially organised ways. They are not... transparent representations of organisational routines, decision-making processes or professional practices. Documents construct particular kinds of representations' (2011: 79). Each form of document in this study has been constructed for particular purposes and this will be taken into account during the analysis. As with all discursive practices, documents 'do not construct systems or domains of documentary reality as individual, separate activities. Documents refer… to other realities and domains. They also refer to other documents' (Atkinson and Coffey 2011: 86). As we have already seen, intertextuality is a key concern of CDA, and so the relationship between documents and the other forms of discourse analysed (such as television programmes and audience accounts) will be discussed.

Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with a range of people involved in different aspects of the production process in order to understand their motivations for

decisions made, their intentions in commissioning, making or participating in different programmes, and the responses they had received to their programmes. This approach echoes that of Noonan (2008) and Hill (2011), who also used interviews with media professionals in their own studies. Interviews were chosen for the detailed qualitative data they produce, which 'provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds…' (Miller and Glassner 2011: 133). However, these 'meanings' are, of course, limited by what people are prepared to reveal (and in some cases, their 'approved' comments in the thesis are also a selected version of the interview discourse as personal and professional circumstances meant they felt uncomfortable with parts of their original account).

For industry research, for example, such discussion of personal 'experience' and motivation goes beyond simply exploring the institutional constraints people work in that might be found in policy documents to look at how individuals operate and their own, more detailed and hopefully more diverse, accounts of their practice.

In terms of 'industry' contacts, a range of people from different companies and broadcasters (as well as some freelance individuals) were approached for interview, as well as a number of 'lay' participants from different programmes. Several production companies, including Tiger Aspect, did not respond. David Henshaw, managing director of Hardcash productions (producers of documentaries including *Dispatches'* 'Undercover Mosque' (Channel 4 2006/7) and 'Beneath the Veil' (2001)) and freelance director Dimitri Collingridge (*The Trouble With Atheism* (2006), *The War on Britain's Jews* (2007), *Christianity: A History* (2009)) agreed to give interviews, as did presenters Robert Beckford and Mark Dowd.

Initial interest was shown by Jon Ronson and I met him at a preview screening of his *Revelations* documentary 'How to Find God' (Channel 4 2009) – unfortunately his time commitments due to promoting said documentary and a feature film meant this interview never occurred, although Ronson circulated an exit survey for me about the documentary following its broadcast to his Twitter followers.

All four broadcasters were approached. Aaqil Ahmed of Channel 4 and Michael Wakelin of the BBC agreed to interviews. Five responded to say there was no-one at the station in a position to help, whilst ITV did not respond.

Given that some programmes represent 'real' people's belief and practice, I wanted to interview some of those featured to gain their perspective on this representation. A number of participants contacted showed interest, but not all of this was sustained, and sometimes it proved too difficult to find mutually acceptable dates for interviews. One potential interviewee did not attend our arranged meeting. In the end, I interviewed a female participant from a BBC Two reality show, a family featured in a BBC Three documentary, and a female Anglican vicar who has featured in many programmes about religion, most notably for the purposes of this study, *Make Me a Christian* (Channel 4 2008).

I am aware of the gender imbalance in only speaking to male members of the 'industry' and to mostly female 'participants'. However, interviews arranged with male participants fell through and the one female producer[5] directly approached did not respond. Although there is not scope within this study to explore these issues[6], this gender imbalance will have an impact on the positioning of their voices within this

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[5] Most industry professionals named on production company websites were male, or else production/television companies were sent enquiries to a general email account.

[6] Beyond brief discussion in some of the interviews (see Chapter Four).

study, and in some cases, within the wider contexts of the media industry and religion/spirituality, where there are also gender imbalances, particularly in terms of power.

As Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003) recommend, the pre-interview contact (via email) gave the potential subjects an outline of my research and its aims, and most interviews began with further discussion about this. All participants seemed genuinely interested in the project and its aims. Questions were designed to move from the basic level of how particular projects arose and then to mostly work chronologically through the production process, including the responses made by audiences. However the order and nature of questions sometimes changed according to the direction that conversations took, and issues raised by interviewees that I wanted to explore further, which is an example of the way interviews act as an active joint narrative construction between interviewer and respondent (Holstein and Gubrium 2011: 150-156, Miller and Glassner 2011: 136).

Two participants requested sample questions prior to interview, and based on a recommendation from the ethics committee at my university, the family interviewed (including a teenager) were also sent sample questions to prepare. Interview subjects were given the option to be interviewed in person, over the telephone, or via online messaging services. Two participants (Dimitri Collingridge and David Henshaw) requested telephone interviews, whilst all other participants requested face-to-face meetings. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in a range of environments, from coffee shops to offices to subjects' homes.

Interviews were recorded using dictaphones and transcribed. In two instances, the sound quality was poor and there are gaps in the transcripts where voices were inaudible - however, this was not significant enough to affect the overall outcome.

Whilst interviews allow a level of detail and reflexivity on the part of the subjects that methods such as questionnaires or focus groups may not offer, they are not without their problems. Miller and Glassner (2011) discuss the way that interviewees may choose to present a certain 'version' of themselves for the interviewer, based on previous experiences, their assumptions about the interviewer and their agenda, and the way they would like to be perceived in the finished documents. As they say, 'narratives which emerge in interview contexts are situated in social worlds; they come out of worlds that exist outside of the interview itself' (2011: 137).

This is important to consider when understanding the accounts my subjects give for themselves. Those engaged in work within the media industry are used to presenting positive versions of themselves and their work, and are used to their work being discussed, and often criticised, in public environments, therefore it is natural to expect a level of self-promotion and of justification for editorial choices within their discourse. The participants involved come with the experience of already being edited and represented, both within television programmes and within interviews and articles within the media, and so again a level of self-protection and defensiveness may well be expected, as well as, in some cases, a personal 'agenda' to speak 'the truth' about their experience as opposed to the mediated version. There are several potentially competing discourses, sometimes involving the same individuals within different contexts: the interview discourses; the discourses within programmes; and within other environments, such as those where people involved in production interact with

audiences (see Chapter Seven). I have attempted to encompass as wide a range of these discursive accounts as possible.

Audience research: finding perspectives

Given the range of programming and the span of its broadcast over a decade, any attempt to discover what 'the audience' think of programmes will be limited to a particular section of an audience. As Schroder et al claim, 'audience research can never claim to find out the truth about audience practices and meanings, only partial insights about how audiences use the media in a specific context' (2003: 17). Issues of practicality (in terms of location, time and resources) and availability limit the scope of audience research for any researcher.

Whilst there are differing perspectives on the nature of the relationship between media texts and audiences (see Schroder et al 2003), my own position is that audiences are engaged in a somewhat 'active' process of meaning-making whereby they may take different (often ideological) positions in terms of their understanding and acceptance of a text's message (Hall 1973). In addition, they may well be engaged in interactive dialogue with other audience members and with those involved in the production of texts, particularly via the internet, which is used by media organisations and producers as one form of audience research (Deller 2011, Jenkins 2006a/b, Ross 2008). They may even be those involved in the production process, as producers, reality show 'participants' or documentary 'subjects', and engage in conversation with other, non-participant, members of the audience, dialogue which some of my interview subjects were indeed engaged in (see Chapter Seven). This dialogue is further complicated by the overlapping groups that people may belong to. For example, an Atheist producer may well be engaging in this kind of discussion with both

Atheist and religious members of an audience, so in this case the relationships are not simply producer/audience but also Atheist/Atheist or Atheist/religious.

Nevertheless, in terms of the programmes studied, the audience's ability to 'actively' participate with the text is limited to extra-textual forms such as internet forums, social networking sites and blogs. The programmes themselves, not being broadcast live, do not allow for interaction or audience participation in the manner of, for example, a reality talent show or a daily 'magazine' programme (although even in these formats, the level of 'interaction' is highly structured and limited). Whilst this might not be the case for every media text (see Jenkins 2006a/b), within the PSB context of my study 'interaction' often occurs within institutionally-controlled parameters, such as via official, moderated, websites or through focus groups and surveys organised by broadcasters or bodies such as Ofcom.

In addition, whilst texts may have a degree of polysemy, they still tend to suggest a dominant/preferred reading which, according to Hall, means texts 'have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them' (1980b: 46). Although Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model has been criticised for providing a somewhat simplified account of the processes of textual production and reception (Schroder et al 2003, Morley 1980/1992), its central argument that (often due to constraints placed on the production process through time, resources or guidelines/regulations) texts create particular discursive positions and that audiences may or may not take up these positions is still useful for my own analysis of the relationship between the discourses operating within the contexts of 'production' and 'reception' and, the texts themselves (see also Livingstone 1998, Ang and Hermes 1996).

Audience research: processes

Two key methods of primary audience research were employed in this study; focus groups and analysis of online discussion of programmes. The former was conducted through a series of focus groups in both 'offline' and 'online' environments, and the latter through analysing audience responses to programmes across a range of forums, blogs and social networking sites (most notably Twitter); and video responses and comments on video sharing sites (most notably YouTube). Alongside this, documentation provided by the BBC, Channel Four and Ofcom detailing their own audience research was used.

Online environments are becoming a space where audiences frequently discuss television, news, music, games, film and books. Several researchers, including Nancy Baym (2000), Henry Jenkins (2006a/b) and Sharon Marie Ross (2008) have used online environments as a form of researching media audiences and media 'talk', moving conversations about audience 'reception' more explicitly into the arena of discursive production.

There are several advantages to online research that made it suitable for this study. It allows simple and easy access to audiences, removes the need for travel or phone calls, allows for communication between people who are geographically distant and provides electronic data that can be easily assimilated into the thesis (See Bertrand and Hughes 2005, Denscombe 2003, Mann and Stewart 2003).

For the analysis of media 'talk', a range of sites were chosen for study (see Appendices One, Six and Nine). Message boards provided by ITV, Channel 4 and the BBC[7] all provided a range of audience responses, although ITV's contained few relevant

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[7] Five's website did not offer such a service.

discussions. Unfortunately, Channel 4 removed message boards from its website in

early 2009 without warning. This was during the period of data collection and so

audience responses to many programmes on these boards were lost. The message

boards were replaced by the option for users to comment on programme pages and

blogs instead[8], comments which have also been used in the survey.

General entertainment forums and blogs including *Digital Spy* and *Unreality TV* were

searched for relevant content, as were blogs and forums on websites for major faith

groups, including *Premier* (Christianity), *Ship of Fools* (Chrstianity), *MPAC* (Islam) and

Living Spirits (Spiritualism/alternative spiritualities), as well as sites such as Richard

Dawkins' website and *The Student Room* where several discussions about religion,

belief and television took place (see Appendix Six). Searching for relevant programmes

using Google also yielded several blog and forum responses, many of which provided

leads for discussion on other programmes. Where programmes (or clips of

programmes) featured on video sites such as YouTube, discussion here (in the form of

comments and 'video responses') was also analysed.

In summer 2009, Channel 4 broadcast a series of single religious documentaries,

Revelations. Having noticed that the social networking platform Twitter was being

used by television audiences (Deller 2011, Longridge 2010, Goldman 2011), I decided

to monitor discussion on Twitter for the course of this series. For the eight-week run, I

monitored Twitter from 6.30pm (half an hour before broadcast) until 9.30pm (half an

hour after broadcast on Channel 4+1) to see what discussion was occurring about the

series. I used the key terms 'Revelations', 'C4' and 'Channel 4' weekly, alongside terms

appropriate to that week's episode, including the programme's title and relevant key

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[8] The BBC website also has similar features on some pages, which have been used where relevant.

words. I did check the preceding and following day for tweets on the programmes, but rarely found any relevant tweets outside of the allocated three-hour time frame, as 'liveness' is a key factor in Twitter discussion (see Deller 2011, Goldman 2011).

The first film in the series was journalist and documentary maker Jon Ronson's film about the Alpha course, 'How to Find God'. Ronson is an active Twitter user and blogger with a large online fanbase. During the process of making this film, Ronson tweeted about his experiences on a regular basis, and on the evening of broadcast, he invited his followers to discuss the programme with him as it was shown, and this programme generated a large volume of Twitter traffic. I set up an exit survey for this programme which Ronson circulated[9]. Following this, I invited users who indicated further interest in the research to participate further, and set up a forum (which was barely used) with an associated chat room where I conducted online focus groups following the other episodes in the series.

The majority of online audience responses to all programmes were from British users in the few days following broadcast, particularly those on forums and blogs, or *during* the broadcast in the case of Twitter users. However, some comments (particularly on YouTube) came from international viewers, sometimes following broadcast in their own countries. It was not always possible to discern a user's nationality but where this was relevant and revealed, it is mentioned.

As well as monitoring online discussion, I chose to conduct a series of focus groups in order to source more in-depth data on audience responses. Whilst online discussion environments such as Twitter or forums allow for short reactions, and blogs offer

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[9] Although this survey used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data, I have only used qualitative responses in the thesis in keeping with my overall methodological approach.

longer spaces for individual reflection, the online interaction studied occurs with some level of anonymity (see Jones 2000, Markham and Baym 2009), and users can take time to prepare responses, or even edit them.

Focus groups, alternatively, offer space for more detailed reflection and group discussion, which can often open up responses beyond the immediate: 'In responding to each other, participants reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject of study. The language they use, the emphasis they give and their general framework of understanding is more spontaneously on display' (Finch and Lewis 2003: 171).

Initially, I sought a number of friends and acquaintances to participate in pilot focus groups in order to ascertain how useful the method would be and how they might work. *Facebook* was used to source participants, and four groups were set up, each with four participants[10]. Participants were invited according to their availability and arranged, where possible, in groups where they did not know the other members in order to avoid pre-conceived assumptions about each other's views on the subject (Finch and Lewis 2003: 192, Barbour 2007: 67) and where they had diverse experiences of religion/spirituality.

Fairclough argues that focus group discussion is often thought of as an environment where people bring pre-existing opinions, but this is not the case, as 'things emerge in the course of and through the dialogical interpretation of the participants... It seems generally more plausible to see opinions as 'things' that are communicatively and collectively developed in interaction, rather than pre-existing attributes of individuals which are simply expressed in interaction' (2010: 392), a viewpoint shared by Barbour

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[10] Although one group fell through due to participants' availability, and one of the groups that did occur had only three members due to one participant's illness on the day.

who claims that 'All comments made during focus groups are highly dependent upon context and are contingent upon group members' responses to others' contributions and the dynamics of that particular group' (2007: 31). Therefore, although I anticipated that the experiences and beliefs held by participants outside of the group environment would inform their discourse, it was also informed by the interaction with myself and others within the group. This may have meant people exaggerated or hid certain opinions in order to either 'please' the others in the group or to deliberately provoke discussion (see Barbour 2007: 34, Litosseliti 2003: 20-21).

These initial groups were held at my home. Participants watched two programmes, with a small amount of discussion before the first screening asking whether they had seen these programmes before and ascertaining their expectations of them from being given the title and broadcaster. A short discussion ensued after the first programme, and a longer one after the second, although the dictaphone remained on throughout the screenings in order to pick up ad hoc commentary. Programmes were chosen according to availability, and a relatively diverse range was chosen to replicate the different styles/themes I was interested in studying (see Chapter Seven and Appendix Six).

Attempts were made to set up further focus groups following these pilot studies using acquaintances of those involved and members of the *Sheffield Forum*[11], but it was difficult to find enough interest and it was decided that there was sufficient interesting material from these initial groups and from the other sources of audience discussion not to warrant any further focus groups of this nature.

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[11] A large, Sheffield-based discussion forum, chosen because of the potential ease of arranging groups locally.

As mentioned, the Channel 4 series *Revelations* (2009) prompted me to set up a series of online focus groups following the broadcast of each episode. Whilst such groups lack the non-verbal cues and intimacy of their offline equivalents, the advantages of online focus groups include their practicality for gathering participants who live in different locations and the ease of being able to copy and use data afterwards (Dolowitz et al 2008: 43). Barbour notes that in these environments, the 'facelessness' and sense of anonymity can often lead to a greater degree of openness, but people are also likely to type less than they would say in a face-to-face environment (2007: 150-151).

Participants who discussed the programmes on Twitter were invited to participate in post-show discussion. I set up a forum which had its own embedded chat room and a focus group in the form of live chat occurred for an hour after broadcast each Sunday evening in the embedded chat room. The forum was offered as a space for asynchronous responses for those unable to take part in the synchronous discussion but was barely used. The focus groups operated in a similar way to the face-to-face groups, with me acting as a moderator/facilitator. Interestingly, although several members participated in more than one group, the dynamics of the groups changed every week.

In the offline focus groups, I encouraged users to speculate on the content of the programmes they would be watching beforehand, something that was not possible in the online ones, due to my sourcing of participants during broadcast. In all groups, the discussion was semi-structured. I asked questions about their opinions of specific aspects of the programmes, particularly when conversation dried up, but at other times, allowed the conversation to unfold naturally. I am aware that my questioning,

particularly in the offline groups, was often informed by my own analysis of the programmes in question, and in some instances this meant that discussion within these groups was somewhat different to the discussion in other online environments.

Farquhar and Das (2007) and Finch and Lewis (2003) raise the question of whether to reveal the researcher's own experiences and biases within focus groups. I purposely chose not to be prescriptive about this and where questions arose about my own religious/spiritual affiliations and experiences, these were answered, but where they did not arise, I did not disclose this information. Likewise, when asked, my own opinions of the programmes were sometimes discussed and, of course, the questions asked were, in part, formed by my own understandings and readings of the texts.

In terms of selection of material for the finished thesis, I tried to use comments from users of a range of faith positions and from a wide range of environments to provide as indicative a sample of audience discourse as possible. Appendix Six provides a guide to those quoted in Chapter Seven, the programme they discussed, the environment the discussion occurred in, and their faith position if known.

<u>Ethics</u>

As with all studies, particularly those involving human subjects, there are a range of ethical issues to consider. The welfare of those whose accounts are discussed within my project is important: it is not my intention to do 'harm' of any form to anyone featured (see Neuman 2011: 147, ASA 1999). However, formulating an ethical research strategy is problematic, not least because, as May points out, there is a potential tension between the motivations of those participating in the study, their own contexts (such as limitations placed on them by employers), my own research aims, and the concerns of the institution I work for:

Ethical decisions are not being defined in terms of what is advantageous to the researcher or the project upon which they are working. They are concerned with what is right or just… [however] at the same time the particular interests that govern a research project can influence those decisions that subsequently take place… ethical decisions will depend upon the values of the researchers and their communities and will inform the negotiations which take place (May 2011: 61).

Deciding on an 'ethics procedure' for this research has thus involved negotiations between myself, my participants and my university's ethics committee, as well as considering the guidelines produced by other researchers and relevant organisations such as the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR 2002)[12] and the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA 1999)[13].

As much as possible, those quoted in the study were asked to give their informed consent, a process described by Kvale as:

Informing the research subjects about the overall purpose of the investigation and the main features of the design, as well as of any possible risks and benefits from participation in the research project… obtaining the voluntary participation of the subject, with his or her right to withdraw from the study at any time, thus counteracting undue influence and coercion (1996: 112. See also Legard, Keegan and Ward 2003: 146-7, Neuman 2011: 149).

I recognise that 'informed consent' is a problematic concept given that it cannot always anticipate the future impacts of the work once published and, particularly given

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[12] See http://aoir.org/documents/ethics-guide/ for the AOIR (2002) guidelines.
[13] See http://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.shtml for the ASA (1999) guidelines.

the online context of much of the discourse studied, even 'anonymity' may not be truly anonymous (May 2011: 62-63). I have, however, tried to adopt a strategy that avoids 'harm' for those involved as far as possible by informing participants of the potential places the research may be published and negotiating the terms of use of their material (ASA 1999).

Interview subjects and offline focus group participants were given an explanatory sheet about the study and a consent form (see Appendix Five) to sign asking for their permission to be named (or to suggest a pseudonym) and to permit interview material to be used in the thesis as well as in book chapters, journal articles and conference papers. They were given a period within which it was possible to withdraw from the study. Two subjects requested to see their comments before publication, and one requested edits to their comments and removal of some of the interview data due to a change in their personal circumstances between interview and publication. With the interview with a teenage participant, I requested the presence of her parents at the interview[14]. The ethics committee at my university advised removing the family's surname from the thesis and any subsequent publications (see Appendix Five), and this same practice was extended to the reality television participant.

In both forms of focus group, the aims of the research were explained at the start. Consent for the online members was assumed by their willing participation, whilst face-to-face participants completed consent forms. This latter group also completed small surveys outlining their religious/spiritual affiliations and experiences in order to provide some context for their discussions (see Appendix Six); a similar process was not used for the online groups due to the time-bound nature of the interaction.

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[14] As the whole family had featured in the documentary, they also participated in the interview.

All 'audience' members have been given pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

This is both to preserve them from any potential 'harm' from being 'outed' and

because 'participants are more likely to be honest and complete in their responses if

they are assured that the results will be presented in a manner that preserves

confidentiality' (Dolowitz et al 2008: 78). Although given the public nature of online

discourse, it is not always possible to guarantee anonymity, these participants

generally use an online pseudonym in those environments and have been given

another pseudonym, similar in nature to the original one, to preserve a sense of the

online 'identity' they have created (see Turkle 1997, Marwick and boyd 2011), so it

should not be too easy to trace the comments to their offline identity.

When using material sourced from forums, blogs, video sites and social networking

sites, proceeding in an ethical manner is complicated. As Mann and Stewart state,

'There is little agreement about how to proceed ethically in a virtual arena, and few

research practice conventions are available' (Mann and Stewart 2003: 87). Dolowitz et

al state 'the internet tends to blur the distinction between public and private, making it

difficult sometimes to determine what information should be regarded as 'fair game'

for the researcher and what should not' (Dolowitz et all 2008: 80). This is because of

the possibility that 'anyone' can access these discourses through a search engine or

joining a forum. This point is echoed by Svenigsson and Elm (2009) and Markham

(2011) who highlight that even within different sites there may be aspects of dialogue

and interaction that users perceive as public, and others they consider private.

My main source of reference and guidance was the set of guidelines devised by the

Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR). These state that the more public a forum

is, the less problem there should be with quoting material from it, and if the users

know their comments are being read in a public arena, there is less obligation to gain consent. This is particularly useful for very public spaces such as blogs, YouTube or Twitter, where content is designed to be viewed by many.

However, some forums I explored have statements in their terms and conditions of use stating that content on the site should not be reproduced without permission, and that content written by users (e.g. their comments on the boards) belongs to those users, or to the site itself. In those instances, the owners/administrators of the boards were contacted for consent to quote material when relevant, and individual posters were also contacted where possible. In some cases, for example the former Richard Dawkins forum and the former Channel 4 forums, or where users' accounts were dormant, there was no longer any means of contacting administrators or users, but care was taken, as with all users, to anonymise those whose comments were used. A table showing which online environment each pseudonym is associated with can be found in Appendix Six. Although many people do not obtain consent from message board users for research, because some of the discussions will be about religion and spirituality, and potentially personal, I felt it prudent to gain people's consent to reproduce their comments wherever possible, in order to avoid doing harm or causing anyone distress by publishing their words without permission.

Conclusion

Although I have attempted to research and analyse my material using a range of tools, in order to provide as rich and varied a set of data as possible, it is clear that there are limitations to this, as any, approach.

Critics of CDA claim that its supporters often use textual analysis to reinforce their own assumptions or prejudices, concentrating on texts, or portions of texts, that reinforce the ideological message they wish to find; excluding evidence to the contrary (Collins 1999: 88, Widdowson 1998, Cameron 2001: 127-128) - although I hope the scope of my analysis and the inclusion of tools drawn from semiotics and narrative theory helps to limit this by adopting a number of different methods and looking at a range of discursive features rather than simply focusing on, for example, language.

With regards to the analysis of the discourse of those speaking, whether they are programme-makers, participants or audience members, I am also aware that there may be misunderstandings or misreadings in my interpretation of their comments and that my choice of quotations is not 'neutral'. Nevertheless, I have attempted to include as balanced and indicative a sample of quotes from the different accounts and environments as possible.

Despite the inevitable limitations of my research, by looking for patterns across a wide range of discursive accounts, and by employing a triangulation of methods of research and analysis, I have aimed to provide as representative and wide-ranging an account of programming about religion/spirituality in 2000-2009, and of the social and institutional contexts in which this programming was made and 'received', as possible.

Chapter Four: Industry

Introduction: television for a changing world

This chapter looks at the contexts in which factual programming about religion and spirituality was made in 2000-2009. It considers the changes within the industry over this time, from the differing commitments of each broadcaster to public service, to the shifts in personnel at the networks.

Publicity materials from the broadcasters, such as annual reports, programme reviews and websites are looked at alongside broadcasting guidelines and policies to understand the kinds of discourse around diversity, representation and public service being circulated in, and by, the industry. Alongside this, this chapter features interview discourse from a range of those involved in production: Michael Wakelin, producer and then Head of Religion and Ethics at the BBC; Aaqil Ahmed, then Commissioning Editor for Religion and Multicultural at Channel 4 (now Head of Religion at the BBC); presenters Robert Beckford and Mark Dowd; producer/director Dimitri Collingridge; and managing director of independent production company Hardcash, David Henshaw.

As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, the decade studied was a time of significant public interest in matters of faith, most visibly perhaps in the events of 9/11 and 7/7 (Carey 2002, Drane 2005, Gill 2002, Stolow 2005, Orsi 2005, Nicholson 2007). These two events were cited by many of those I spoke to as providing a catalyst for discussion and an opportunity for new television commissions:

> **Mark Dowd:** You know I started in 2001 and what happens in 2001, 9/11. So there you have a guaranteed five or six years of interest because for that whole

period then, as you know, religion gets treated as a sort of subsection of current affairs. Everything becomes 'is Islam peaceful or not?' and you know we've seen a zillion programmes on variants of that, so the zeitgeist was right, you know?

Robert Beckford: Post 9/11 everything changed. Religion was back in vogue and back in business and you've got to attribute it to that major shift. 7/7 even more so, there's really been changes in the social world that's made religion much more of an issue… we're in a post Christian world so religious meaning is important to people but outside of traditional religious institutions. People are searching… they need to find new ways of doing things… there needs to be something different at work, so a huge shift because of the whole question of terror.

Dowd and Beckford's discourse evokes notions of secularisation, re-enchantment and a renewed interest in 'fundamentalism': similar concerns to the theorists mentioned in Chapter Two.

Given this apparent interest in religious/spiritual matters, this chapter looks at how the PSBs consider matters of faith. It is divided into two key sections. The first looks at the context and background of public service broadcasting in the decade studied, and the second looks more closely at processes of commissioning, production and scheduling.

Public Service Broadcasting: Context and Background

In this section, I explore the contexts of television production in 2000-2009, looking at the public service requirements of the four broadcasters, the guidelines they were

expected to work to when making programmes about religion, and the changes in personnel at the major networks during this period.

Renewed obligations: changes in broadcasting policy

The Broadcasting Act 1990 required 'that a sufficient amount of time be given to religious programmes on Channel 3 and Channel 5'. In the earlier part of the decade, ITV/Channel 3 licensees were required to 'provide an average of at least two hours a week of religious programmes, including acts of worship and a range of other programme types' (ITC 2003: 1), whilst breakfast licensee GMTV was to have a weekly reflection slot and include coverage of religious festivals. Five was required to provide a minimum of an hour a week of religious programming. Although not stipulated in the Broadcasting Act, Channel 4 was expected to include at least one hour a week of prime-time religious programming (ITC 2003: 1), whilst BBC One and Two had a commitment of 112 hours a year between them (BBC 2003).

Over the course of the decade, several changes in broadcasting, and in society, led to changes in the way the channels operated. A growing multi-television market with the launch of Freeview in 2002[1], the merger of the cable networks and subsequent rebranding as Virgin Media in 2006, and the continued presence of Sky led to increased competition for viewers and advertising. The huge growth in internet usage meant the four terrestrial broadcasters faced a range of challenges in order to stay distinctive (and, for the commercial broadcasters, profitable). The global economic recession in the second half of the decade, and increased legislation in advertising[2] all contributed to the pressures the commercial channels faced.

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[1] Replacing the defunct OnDigital/ITVDigital service.
[2] Most notably the regulations on 'junk food' advertising introduced in 2007.

In 2003-2005 and 2007-2009, Ofcom carried out extensive reviews of public service broadcasting. The first discovered that, other than on BBC Two, religious programmes were in decline (Ofcom 2004a: 14). Audiences placed low priority on specialist programmes but expressed the need for minority groups and interests to be reflected in mainstream programming[3] (ibid: 17). Despite less than 10% of respondents stating a high preference for religious programming[4], 44% believed religious programming was an important function of public service broadcasting, and those consulted wanted religious programming to be bolder, more diverse and more visible (ibid: 19).

ITV's response to the first Ofcom review said this about its PSB commitment to religion (see Appendix Ten for a fuller version):

> Religion… will continue to play an important role on the channel but it is right that we review whether the current scenario… is appropriate. We also need to question whether the end of the old box-ticking approach offers us an opportunity to deliver genres such as religion in a more engaging and impactful way. Ofcom's conclusion that viewers prefer to see, in general, minority and specialist interests served via the mainstream may provide this opportunity… no-one is arguing publicly that the way in which religious programming is currently done should be maintained. (ITV 2004)

It is interesting to note here that ITV's statement draws upon discourses of inclusivity and consensus, arguing that 'viewers' would prefer minority interests to be served by 'mainstream' programming (although how this might occur is not made clear) and that 'no-one' would argue for maintaining the status quo. They argue against 'box-ticking' - a feature common to the discourse of several of those interviewed, as I explain later.

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[3] These findings are replicated in several other studies by the industry. See Chapters Two and Seven.
[4] When asked to give their top five preferences (Ofcom, 2004a: 19).

The second phase of the first Ofcom PSB review reinforced the importance of the BBC and Channel 4's public service remits. However, although it concluded that ITV and Five had important roles to play in the delivery of public service broadcasting, these would not necessarily have to be fulfilled through quotas. Most notably, the review proposed:

> ITV1 continue to deliver free-to-air PSB obligations… [with] 'a more flexible approach to content regulation' …which should maintain the public service character of ITV1 in important programming areas such as arts, children's and religion, but in ways which respond to changing public demands and market developments (Ofcom 2004b).

The Second PSB Review considered proposals from ITV to further reduce their public service commitments. It also found 'audiences perceive religious and arts programmes to be of relatively less importance …' (Ofcom 2008: 26). Subsequently, the network began reducing its commitment to these areas. Ofcom issued statements in 2008 and 2010 responding to criticisms about ITV's decision. In 2008(c), they were critical of ITV's plans to reduce its PSB commitments, but in the 2010 statement, they highlighted the fact that such programming was part of ITV's Tier 3 commitments which were 'effectively subject to self-regulation by the commercial PSBs' (Ofcom 2010a). As the next decade started, ITV withdrew from making any commitments to show children's programming on ITV1, and reduced its 'commitment on arts output from 20 hours in 2009 to 12 in 2010…[and] its religious output to one service at Christmas (actual delivery Jan-Oct 2009 was 14 hours)' (Ofcom 2010a). Ofcom concluded that they did 'not consider these adjustments to be significant in terms of the overall character of the channel' (2010a).

<u>Changing faces: personnel and roles</u>

In 2000, Presbyterian minister Ernest Rea held the position of Head of Religion and Ethics at the BBC, resigning at the end of that year[5]. In subsequent interviews, he claimed his resignation was due to the marginalisation of religion at the corporation:

> The people who control the television industry in this country are, for the most part, children of the 1960s and 70s, secular people who accept as a given that the notion of God is a nonsense, and who regard religion as little more than an amusing but outdated phenomenon…television dances to a secular agenda (Petre 2001).

In 2001 Alan Bookbinder was appointed to the role. Bookbinder, who identified as 'an open-hearted agnostic' (Combe 2001), was the first non-Christian to hold this position. His appointment drew criticism from Christian groups (BBC News 2001). Bookbinder said he sought to escape the accusations of religion being marginalised: 'What matters most to them (the faith communities) is that religion is taken seriously… They would rather — and I would rather — have arguments about what we are doing than about the fact that we are not doing anything' (Snoddy 2002). Snoddy points out that Bookbinder was fortunate in the early 2000s as:

> Events helped his cause. The September 11 attacks came six weeks after his appointment — and with them a sense both that religion mattered and that it lay at the heart of a great deal of conflict. Other events, such as the Golden Jubilee and the funeral of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, brought renewed attention to religion (op.cit).

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[5] Although widely reported as having resigned (and confirming this in subsequent interviews), BBC materials described Rea as having 'retired' (see BBC News 2001).

In 2006, Bookbinder was succeeded by Methodist Michael Wakelin, although this appointment received much less coverage than the appointments of either his predecessor or successor. At Channel 4, former BBC producer Aaqil Ahmed was appointed as Commissioning Editor for Religion and Head of Multicultural in 2003. In 2009, BBC Knowledge underwent a restructuring process (Dowell 2009). Wakelin and Ahmed both applied for the new position of Commissioning Editor for Religion and Head of Religion and Ethics, and the role went to Ahmed[6]. Ahmed's appointment to the position at the BBC was met with hostility from Christian groups. *The Daily Telegraph* was particularly critical of Ahmed's appointment (Pitcher 2009a, 2009b). Ahmed was not replaced at Channel 4, with religion and multicultural programming being incorporated into the remit of the Head of Factual (Beckford 2010, Parker 2010)[7].

Regulating religion and spirituality? Broadcasting policy and guidelines

All four public service broadcasters have to adhere to the rules in the Ofcom Broadcasting Code (in 2000-2003, this was the ITC's code). This code forms the basis of the Independent Producer Handbook, produced by Channel 4 and Five (in conjunction with ITV and the BBC) and used by those working in independent production companies; the ITV Producers' Guidelines[8]; and the BBC Producers' Guidelines (2000-2005) and Editorial Guidelines (2005-2010, 2010-present). There were revisions of the ITC/Ofcom Broadcasting Code in 2000, 2005, 2008 and 2009,

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[6] This process occurred during the period of my interviewing both men, although I was unaware of Mr Ahmed's application at the time.
[7] As far as I was able to ascertain, there was no-one at ITV or Five whose specific remit involved religion. However, this may have been because my research was conducted late in the decade when these broadcasters' commitments to religion had already decreased.
[8] I was unable to source detailed guidelines on programme content from ITV, although given both the IPH and BBC Editorial Guidelines are closely based on the Ofcom code, it can be assumed ITV's policy is similar.

although as far as the presentation of religion and spirituality was concerned, there was very little difference between each edition[9].

Section 4 of The Ofcom Broadcasting Code is titled 'Religion', and pertains specifically to 'religious programming', defined as programming which 'deals with matters of religion as the central subject, or as a significant part, of the programme' (Ofcom 2009: 21). It sets out the following key principles:

> To ensure that broadcasters exercise the proper degree of responsibility with respect to the content of programmes which are religious programmes... that religious programmes do not involve any improper exploitation of any susceptibilities of the audience for such a programme... that religious programmes do not involve any abusive treatment of the religious views and beliefs of those belonging to a particular religion or religious denomination.

The discursive emphasis throughout the code is on broadcasters maintaining a sense of 'fairness' and 'properness' and ensuring they do not abuse members of a particular religion or denomination (ibid: rule 4.3). There are rules against religious broadcasting being used to 'recruit' people to a faith (ibid: rules 4.4, 4.5), and programmes that 'contain claims that a living person (or group) has special powers or abilities must treat such claims with due objectivity and must not broadcast such claims when significant numbers of children may be expected to be watching' (Ofcom 2009: 22, rule 4.7) – singling children out as a uniquely 'vulnerable' group (James and James 2004 Buckingham 2000). In section two of the code, entitled 'Harm and Offence', there is a subsection relating to 'Exorcism, the occult and the paranormal'. These rules (2.6-2.8) draw on concerns over potential media 'effects':

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[9] A new set of guidelines was produced in 2010.

Demonstrations of exorcism, the occult, the paranormal, divination, or

practices related to any of these that purport to be real (as opposed to

entertainment) must be treated with due objectivity'. If they are presented 'for

entertainment purposes, this must be made clear to viewers and listeners' and

in both cases 'must not contain life-changing advice[10] directed at individuals'.

(Ofcom 2009: 16-17)

The code states that 'Religious programmes' are exempt from this final rule, although

they must comply with the rules in their own section that prohibit similar content[11].

The guidelines in the Independent Producer Handbook (IPH) give a more detailed

explanation of how the Broadcasting Code applies in practice, explaining that criticising

religion is acceptable if done 'responsibly' through balanced critique, and that a named

religious figure from a particular denomination (such as the Archbishop of Canterbury)

addressing viewers is unlikely to break guidelines about 'recruitment' (2008: 4.98). As

with all minority groups, the guidelines for negative comment on religion in other

media forms are that it is to be 'justifiable editorially and by the context' (2008: 4.45).

Some alternative spiritualities are discursively constructed as problems that must be

investigated (Hjelm 2006/2011, Barker 2011, Jenkins 1992) rather than 'genuine'

expressions of faith. Regarding the section on 'Exorcism, the Occult and the

Paranormal', the IPH explains that (emphasis mine):

When the above practices are **purporting to be real**… in post-watershed

programmes (they could not be shown before), they must be treated with due

objectivity, meaning that programmes should not simply accept at face value

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[10] 'Life changing advice includes direct advice for individuals upon which they could reasonably act or rely about health, finance, employment or relationships'. (Ofcom 2009: 17).
[11] Film, drama and fiction are also generally exempt from this rule.

what is happening as some sort of psychic phenomena but question and explore what alternative explanations might exist (2008: 4.48).

The BBC's Editorial/Producers' Guidelines are couched in discourses of accuracy, impartiality and fairness, with an emphasis on the need to represent diversity. They caution against the use of stereotypes for portraying particular groups, including religious groups (BBC 2005d: 82). They also make specific reference to religious figures and festivals, and there are some interesting discursive differences between the 2000-2005 guidelines and those for 2005-2010 (all emphases mine):

> **Deep offence will also be caused by profane references or disrespect**, whether verbal or visual, **directed at deities**, scriptures, holy days and rituals which are at the heart of various **religions** - for example, the Crucifixion, the Gospels, the Koran and the Jewish Sabbath. **It is against the Muslim religion to represent the Prophet Mohammed in any shape or form**. Language must be used sensitively and accurately and be consistent in our description of different religions. **Use of a term such as "Islamic Fundamentalist" has to pass the test of whether we would talk about Christian or Hindu Fundamentalism.**

> Particular care should be taken with programmes to be broadcast on the principal holy days **of the main religions** to ensure that unnecessary offence is not caused by material that might be more acceptable at other times.

> …Blasphemy is a criminal offence in the UK and advice should be sought, through Heads of Department or Commissioning Executives, from Editorial Policy and lawyers in any instance where the possibility of blasphemy may arise. (BBC 2000: 77)

We will reflect an awareness of the **religious sensitivity** of references to, or uses of, names, images, **the historic deities**, rituals, scriptures and language at the heart of the different **faiths** and ensure that any use of, or verbal or visual reference to them are treated with care and editorially justified...

We will respect the religious sensitivity surrounding the observance of holy days and **the principal festivals of the various faiths** so that unnecessary offence is avoided by material that might be more acceptable at other times. (BBC 2005d: 114)

The 2000-2005 Producers' Guidelines are primarily concerned with 'religions', whilst the 2005-2010 Editorial Guidelines prefer the term 'faiths' and their depiction of 'holy days and principal festivals' appears to be an attempt to be more inclusive of belief systems outside of the major religions. There is also a stronger sense of appeasement of religious communities in the earlier guidelines, with 'deities' in place of 'historical deities' connoting their contemporary relevance, and with specific reference to the depiction of the Prophet Mohammed, absent from the latter guidelines[12]. Other key differences between the two documents are the emphasis on blasphemy laws in the earlier one (the laws were repealed in the UK in 2008), and the caution over terms like 'fundamentalist'. This caution also occurs in the 2000-2005 edition in a chapter on 'Portrayal', which discusses guidelines for portraying different groups of people:

We should try and give a full and fair view of people and culture in the United Kingdom and across the world. BBC programmes and services should reflect and draw on this diversity to reflect life as it is. When portraying social groups,

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[12] The 'Danish cartoons scandal' occurred in 2005, five months after the 2005-2010 guidelines were produced. The BBC made the decision not to show the cartoons in its news bulletins, but they were shown as part of the documentary *Danish Cartoons* in 2007.

stereotypes should be avoided. But we must also beware the danger of

depicting a society that does not exist. The BBC is not in the business of social

engineering. Where prejudice and disadvantage exist we need to report and

reflect them in our programmes. But we should do nothing to perpetuate

them... People from all groups should be represented in the full range of our

programmes. People and countries should not be defined by their religions

unless it is strictly relevant. Particular religious groups or factions should not be

portrayed as speaking for their faith as a whole (BBC 2000: 89-93).

The 2005-2010 edition contains no such chapter and fewer specific guidelines on

representation, although there remains an emphasis throughout on diversity and

sensitivity towards minority groups.

As I have shown in this section, diversity and representation are key concerns for

broadcasting policy. Broadcasting guidelines draw on discourses of media 'effects' in

the way they determine that the portrayal of religion/spirituality should occur within

specific frameworks designed to 'protect' both those who adhere to faiths and those

who might be 'vulnerable' to certain practices. In the next section, I explore the

accounts of those working in the industry regarding these issues.

Representing religion/spirituality: industry perspectives

In this section, I look at what those involved in production say about religion/

spirituality and television, both in documentation produced by broadcasters such as

annual reports and programme reviews and in interview discourse. I begin by

exploring notions of diversity and representation, then look at the way those involved

in production discuss processes of production, commissioning, scheduling, and 'reception'.

Dealing with diversity

As we have seen, one of the most frequently discussed aspects of public service broadcasting is its commitment to diversity (Born 2007, Broadcasting Research Unit 1985, Dept of National Heritage 1992, BBC 2007, Campion 2006, Sancho/ITC 2001). All four broadcasters take pains to express their commitment to diversity in their publicity materials, including their websites and annual reports (see also Appendices Three and Four). Channel 4's 2008 Annual Report is typical of the emphasis broadcasters place on this aspect in their publicity. It states they:

> Showed 232 hours of originated programming covering diversity issues (relating to religion, multiculturalism, disability or sexuality) on the core channel in 2008... Channel 4's commitment to diversity spans the entire schedule, with landmark originated programming in a range of genres including documentaries, religion, drama and current affairs (Channel 4 2008: 44).

However, the claims the broadcasters make for their own diversity were treated with caution by several of my interviewees. Aaqil Ahmed of Channel 4 argued that his output featured an ethnically diverse range of presenters, including Robert Beckford, Rageh Omar and Kwame Kwei Armah, but spoke of the scarcity of female voices on factual television, including his own commissions[13]:

> I just had lunch before I came here with Bettany Hughes the presenter and, you know, history is equally [male-dominated] if not worse. I think a lot of it comes down to who's running these things and we have tried quite a few female

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[13] And disabled people are, as within all factual television, very rarely seen or heard within programming about religion.

presenters and we do use them but we don't use that many… that was why we

tried really hard [to have female voices] on *Christianity: A History* and I wish

we'd had a couple more. If we do, if we ever do a follow-up we will have more

and it's actually quite a difficult thing to pull off.'[14]

Ahmed argued that Channel 4 religion was still diverse in its choice of presenters

overall, at least in comparison to other networks and genres: 'quite frankly my

colleagues in the whole of British broadcasting have failed in comparison'.

Robert Beckford argued that television was still under-representative of different

groups. He criticised the male-dominated culture of factual television and argued this

had limited creative freedom within his programme on the Dark Ages in *Christianity: A*

History:

> The film we made on Bede, in the beginning I said I want to focus on gender,
>
> there's all these powerful women that get ignored in the narrative, I went to
>
> the commissioning editor and said people are going to say you're doing a
>
> masculinist history and it's not what it's about…but when I'm gonna script it in
>
> I'm gonna say that. You know this bloody misogynistic producer didn't wanna
>
> do that[15].

He argued that black voices are also silenced, and the black people that are given voice

are usually celebrities from the worlds of sport or entertainment:

> If I was to be political about it I think it's their way of ticking their minority
>
> ethnic box to a degree, we've got this guy who can do slots, tick boxes, but they

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[14] *Christianity: A History* (2009) had eight presenters, six male and two female. The 2010 follow-up, *The Bible: A History*, had seven presenters, five male and two female (one of whom was Bettany Hughes). It had fewer presenters from ethnic minorities than its predecessor.

[15] In the end, Beckford's closing narration of the film specified the message of tolerance, inclusivity and the fluidity of identity, but gender was not mentioned specifically, nor were women a key component of this film. In the follow-up series, *The Bible: A History* (2010), episode 'The Daughters of Eve' (presented by Bettany Hughes) focused on women in the Bible.

don't move onto the next level which is to say we'll give him a series, because

I'm not a celebrity.

He went on to accuse the BBC of being even more problematic than Channel 4:

You judge them by their fruit, and what have they done for diversity? Lip

service... I wanna campaign for black people not to pay the licence fee 'cos

they're not getting anything from it... and the BBC is institutionally racist, there

are people there who are overt racists.

In both Beckford and Ahmed's discourse, there is an acknowledgement of the lack of

diversity within programming. However, we see them framing themselves as being

committed to diversity, whilst 'others' - producers, The BBC, those making history

programmes - are those who are preventing diversity.

The Ofcom Second Public Service Broadcasting Review concluded that audiences from

minority ethnic groups felt underrepresented by the four PSBs:

Audiences from minority ethnic groups spend less time viewing public service

channels. The main five channels account for 37% share of minority ethnic

viewing in multichannel households against 57% for all audiences. Minority

ethnic audiences are also less satisfied with the five main channels against 74%

for UK adults as a whole (Ofcom 2008: 29. See also Thickett 2008, Hargreave

2002, Grimmond 2008).

When it comes to issues of diversity within religion specifically, I asked both Aaqil

Ahmed and Michael Wakelin about the lack of representation of minority religions.

Both acknowledged it as a problem, yet neither was able to articulate a solution:

Aaqil Ahmed: It's the best question that I always get asked… it's a very hard one to answer… the really harsh person would shrug their shoulders and say so what… We are a public service broadcaster, but ultimately we're a commercial broadcaster… it's gonna have to earn its place in prime time. And if that means we choose the best ideas, irrespective of what those ideas are, then that's what we have to do…

The bigger question from our point of view would be not that we don't do enough in that area, because it's true, I don't think we do enough, but we try… the reality is if we're going to do it in prime time… if you chose to do something really weak at the expense of doing you know, the Muslim funeral parlour film that we did or *The Qur'an* or something simply because you had to tick a box then you're hacking it… there'd simply be no point doing the job.

Michael Wakelin: You don't want to be too tick-boxy about it because that would be limiting creativity. On the other hand you don't want to be missing a big Sikh story or a big Hindu story.

These interview discourses acknowledge a lack of diversity and a commitment to 'pester' people for more diverse stories, yet both justify choices by arguing that to 'tick boxes' might limit creativity or quality. Wakelin's comments, at the end of the decade, are particularly interesting, given that the BBC Annual Reports for most years in the decade acknowledged the corporation's need to increase diversity in its programming, including with regards to religion. The 2000-2001 Annual Report highlights the lack of ethnic diversity at the BBC and public criticism of 'the portrayal of Islam and Muslim communities' (2001: 34) and in the 2001-2002 report, advisory body CRAC's (the Central Religious Advisory Committee):

Most significant programme criticisms concerned portrayal. The lack of

accuracy in representing Buddhism was a recurring theme… It was observed,

too, that coverage following events of 11 September did not include the

situation of the Sikh community, which had suffered from being wrongly

confused with Muslims, and that future plans did not include any reflection of

Sikh interests despite the size of the Sikh community in the UK (2002: 48).

Wakelin argued that a lack of religious diversity on television was not limited to factual

programming and that fiction on the public service channels was also problematic:

The BBC's poor at that, so's ITV… [soaps] don't know how to do religious

storylines without it having some vicar who turns out to be a paedophile… It

staggers me, it really does… it's about confidence in handling these characters,

they don't know what to do with them.

Several of Mark Dowd's programmes, including *God is Green*, *The Fundamentalists* and

Tsunami: Where Was God? attempted to incorporate the perspectives of several

faiths, not simply Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Dowd attributed this to his

willingness to research and so speak to potential participants as one with a level of

knowledge about their faith, though again he spoke against having to make 'box-

ticking' programmes:

There's absolutely no substitute for real preparation. I spent hours…

desperately trying to find books that told me what Buddhism said on evil and

suffering… what Islam really said about the use of violence… when you speak to

people of other religions and they see that you know about their faith, they

engage with you… Comparative faith can be box ticking, it can be this political

correctness, 'oh gosh we have to give equal room to all the faiths' and Aaqil

never went down that route at Channel 4. We only did it when it was, I think, necessary.

Again, Dowd mentions the problem of 'box ticking', discursively constructed within his account, as Wakelin and Ahmed's, as a restrictive concept – diversity is seen as desirable, yet potentially creatively limiting, in all three accounts.

Despite the perception of many theorists and commentators about the rise of 'spirituality' as opposed to 'religion' (see Chapter Two), I had noticed a lack of programming about 'spirituality' outside of the major world faiths across all channels. When I raised this subject Wakelin spoke of the difficulty of finding a story about this:

> We don't do that very much. I don't know why. Maybe it's hard to film – what are we going to see, what's the story? I don't know how you would cover it… [although] I think the believers not belongers are the majority now of people of faith within the country aren't they, a personalised faith?

Both Wakelin and Ahmed cite the notion of people being interested in spirituality outside of an established faith (Davie 2007, Heelas and Woodhead 2005), but Ahmed pointed to Channel 4's short-lived series *Spirituality Shopper* (2003) as an experiment in programming about spirituality[16] that didn't attract high ratings and was subsequently cancelled:

> I wish [that people were interested in 'spirituality']. They keep telling us they are, don't they? The newspapers tell us they are. I don't think it was a poorly made series, thought it was very empowering, and then it just didn't register… that's the one project that I can't understand. It's the one project that I thought would run and run and run, and we really all did.

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[16] Although even in this series, the spiritual practices used were mostly drawn from the major faiths.

Most of those interviewed claimed their audience was a diverse mixture of atheists, religious believers and 'the interested'. They perceived 'religious' programming as having a remit to speak to all of these, but were less interested in programming for a specifically religious audience that excluded everyone else. Despite being keen for programmes to meet the needs of a religious audience, Michael Wakelin did not believe televised worship had a particularly large role to play in this, beyond meeting public service quotas, though he acknowledged it was important for the BBC to provide that service somewhere:

> Televised worship gets very low audience figures... but I think perhaps, and though I say we shouldn't tick boxes, I think you've got to tick that box. On Easter Day, the nation's broadcaster should host a Christian service.

For Wakelin, the BBC's responsibility to its religious audiences was not just about worship or broadcasts from religious leaders. Part of the allocated religious output included programmes to celebrate festival times in the major faiths:

> We have two in holy week for Christianity, two at Ramadan, or one at Ramadan and one for the birth of the Prophet... one at Diwali and we have two Jewish ones, Rosh Hashanah and Passover... I think we need to make more of them, I think we need to get the communities much more bought into them so they're engaged with it, know it's coming and actually all watch it. Then they will feel like we have actually listened to them. The one I'm trying to fight for is the fact that the Diwali one is shared between the Hindus and the Sikhs. I think the Sikhs should have their own one, I think it is iniquitous that they don't.

Whilst there was an acknowledgement of issues of 'diversity' from those involved in production, and an awareness that they are perceived as 'failing' some faith

communities in their current portrayals of religion/spirituality, there was much reluctance to 'tick boxes' and provide programming that is below the creative standards they perceive their output requires. Whilst Wakelin and Ahmed in particular spoke of a desire for more diverse programming, they struggled to know what this should look like in practice.

In the next section, I look at how those involved in television production discuss scheduling, production processes and commissioning.

Programming, priorities and production

Public service broadcasters are aware of their commitments both to provide programming *for* members of religious/spiritual groups and *about* religion/spirituality for those of other faiths and none. This duality of purpose was expressed by Michael Wakelin as being important for the BBC's religious output, and his discourse contains familiar terms to that of policy and of programmes such as 'for everybody' and the idea of a 'journey' :

> I think all programmes should be made for everybody really, I don't think you should target a specific audience, so for example when we do worship we went to Peterborough Cathedral and it looked fantastic, so for the viewer it would be a great ethereal experience whether they were into the religious side of it or not. …. *Around the World*… isn't *about* religion, it *is* religion and he's enjoying it… we're doing this programme on a history of Christianity with Diarmaid [McCullogh], that'll be about religion, but he'll be taking everyone with him on that journey, believer or non-believer.

The BBC's quota for radio output is around four times the amount of that for television. Michael Wakelin argued that this is partly because radio is a much more suitable medium for programming about religion:

> We have 490 hours to produce on radio which is an enormous amount. Religion works really well on radio… radio can clearly cover much more and do it more cheaply. We did try to put *The Moral Maze* on the telly but it didn't work, and I think it's a radio programme and we need to see radio and telly are very different.

He was expressed frustration that in his then role at the BBC he wasn't allowed to develop television programming in the way he would like[17]. He argued that television didn't treat religion as seriously as radio, preferring to problematise it:

> Television treats religion as people saw it back in the 1970s. It's moved on. Religion is as I was saying hugely important in the public sphere, and the BBC hasn't clocked that in terms of television… We don't have current affairs television doing religion… the media tends to treat religion as a problem. It would be like covering football only from the point of view of football hooliganism rather than watching the game.

A lack of enthusiasm for television's portrayal of religious issues was a key theme throughout the interviews. David Henshaw of Hardcash spoke of his dismay at what he perceived to be ITV's lack of commitment to serious factual programming (of any kind), and argued this was indicative of trends across the channels:

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[17] Wakelin's job as Head of Religion and Ethics enabled his department to pitch for, and produce, a small number of specific programmes. The new role Aaqil Ahmed was appointed to in 2009 was to include commissioning and a level of input into the way religion was produced and represented in programmes made by other departments at the BBC.

Current affairs has virtually disappeared, current affairs and serious documentary making has virtually disappeared from ITV so that's why I make programmes for Channel 4 and the BBC, but even on the BBC, the number of slots for this kind of programme are disappearing… That's why I make *Dispatches*, it's one of the few strands left where there's this kind of encouragement to make these kind of films.

Aaqil Ahmed also spoke of what he perceived to be Channel 4's lack of commitment to the subject before he arrived at the channel in 2003. Mark Dowd and Robert Beckford expressed similar sentiments, and all three argued that their contributions had helped to contemporise the channel's treatment of religion:

It's changed radically, because when I came along it was going out on a Saturday night at 5 o clock… The programmes they were making didn't seem to reflect what was going on… a year after 9/11 they were making films about people claiming to be the reincarnation of Christ or Ibizan clubbers for Christ and 9/11 had happened, it was almost as if they hadn't realised that the world had [changed] and religious TV could move on.

So what we did was basically try and make them, [with] religion central to the story… the thing was to make it more relevant which was to do things like *The Cult of the Suicide Bomber* and *Children of Abraham* and *God is Black* and all these kind of far reaching programmes that made it feel religion was at the centre of the whole story, what was going on.

Mark Dowd: 'Queer and Catholic' came out just about two years before the Anglicans started getting completely mad over the whole subject of homosexuality. So it was a lucky break in a way, it just put us on the map.

Robert Beckford: A film like *God is Black*, very controversial at the time now people are saying very prophetic, broke the boundaries. *Who Wrote the Bible*… it's not new in terms of scholarship, it's new in terms of bringing it to public attention.

Discursively, all three present themselves as operating against staid, traditional programming, by presenting programmes that 'break the boundaries'. Aaqil Ahmed also argued that scheduling was key to the way religion developed at Channel 4 during his time:

If your first three or four commissions are the first ever interviews in the world with failed suicide bombers, or a three part series about the dysfunctional relationship between Judaism, Islam and Christianity or the rise of African Christianity and the impact on liberal Anglicanism, these are big subjects that the channel thinks, you know these aren't bad, we'll put them at prime time...

The key to any kind of programming, but especially to religious programming, is to say what's the market and find out what the market wants and then... make it so that it stands out, so in terms of the scheduling we look at it really hard… *Christianity: A History*, there was a big decision to move that to seven o'clock. The biggest decision we ever made was to first of all move everything to eight o'clock on a Monday and that was a big thing because there was no hiding place. And the first thing, *God is Black*, was put out there and it got 400,000 viewers, which is absolutely appalling, but it got critical acclaim and it built Robert Beckford up as a presenter... within a year we were getting over a million and it had worked.

As the decade developed, the slots available for such programming changed, and several programmes were made specifically to fit longer slots, both on the BBC where short, high-impact series or one-off programmes were commissioned around the time of religious festivals, and on Channel 4, where Ahmed noted that **'*The Qur'an…* was in a week of programmes, you had *The Qur'an* on a Monday night at 9 o'clock, two hours and across the week you had *Seven Wonders of the Muslim World*, six ten minute films, leading up to a ninety-minute film special, so if you look at that week it makes it feel like a bit of an event'.

As well as deliberately scheduling programmes about religion in new slots, Ahmed sought to make programmes in new ways and with formats and genres evolving over his six years in the role. He described how they adjusted the format to make things engaging and entertaining (e.g. *Priest Idol*, *Make Me a Muslim*), and more recently, *Seven Wonders of the Muslim World* and *Christianity: A History*, 'which effectively are big, big subjects which play to an audience of educated people who want to know more about [the subjects], or who have a little bit of knowledge and that desire for a lot more knowledge'. Although series like *Make Me a Muslim* could be seen as 'reality TV' (see Chapter Six), Ahmed was keen to distance the Channel 4 religion output from the genre, describing its evolution instead as developing from 'a big mix of current affairs, you know kind of access documentary and the odd-ish kind of feature/reality/factual ent kind of show and now… access documentaries and polemic kind of big thinking'.

Unlike Channel 4, whose religious/spiritual output is mainly distributed on Channel 4 itself (with repeats and occasional films on More4), the BBC's output is spread across

its four adult television channels. Each channel has a slightly different remit for its treatment of religion and spirituality:

> **Michael Wakelin:** BBC One needs to do the big spectacular iconic programming… big high glossy high impact expensive TV. BBC Two has the opportunity to do the touchy feely kind of thing like *Around the World…* and also the historical piece and also I think something a bit more edgy…. on BBC Four we've got the authored, intellectual approach… BBC Three we're not involved with much and we should be[18].

Considering the strengths of the BBC's religious output, Michael Wakelin singled out the series that showed people engaged in spiritual and religious practices first-hand (see also Noonan 2008):

> This [*Around the World in 80 in Faiths*]… fantastically done: *Extreme Pilgrim, Monastery*… First and foremost that's what we've got to do, we've got to see why religion is important to people. It's colourful and exciting, you've got the choreography of the services you've got the spectacle, you've got the immersive, visceral enjoyment of it, that is what should be our absolute priority, say that's what religion is, that's why people enjoy it so much.

When asked about their relationship with other departments at the BBC or Channel 4 who were making or commissioning programmes, Ahmed and Wakelin said that they and their departments may or may not be consulted:

> **Michael Wakelin:** I was [involved] a little bit when they [*Panorama*] did Scientology and I was consulted more by Scientologists who were worried that the BBC would shaft them, which of course they did, but they don't come to us.

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[18] Although there are a number of programmes on BBC Three that have had religious/spiritual themes, these have not necessarily been produced by BBC Religion.

Aaqil Ahmed: I've done some *Dispatches* that are religion based and non-religion based… some people ask your advice et cetera but… I think you have to be quite big and understanding of the fact that some things people find interesting. I mean sometimes things get made, which I wonder, what did you make that for? Not because I would have done but specifically because I wouldn't have done it! But generally it depends on your relationship with the individual commissioners. They often ask you for advice on something because they know that you've got a bit of a knowledge that they might need.

Those involved in the hands-on roles within the production process spoke of the difficulty of having to please a range of 'voices'. Robert Beckford claimed that:

With every film production there are four major voices: commissioning editor, …all commissioning editors are political as far as I can see, they're the most political people in TV… the executive producer… the producer or director to negotiate with… a researcher… and then you've got yourself, so you've got five voices to compete with… the trick is to make sure that your voice is the loudest. How that gets played out in practice varies in each project. With the projects where I bring in funding, I will bring the idea, it's my idea and it gets commissioned, it's easier to make your voice the loudest…

You get emails from people who think they're real experts 'you didn't say this, this and this, you're a real amateur' and you're thinking 'well actually we're working with the best scholars in the world'… when people say that they don't understand the complexity of production.

All of those interviewed agreed on the importance of scheduling and visibility (although they did not all agree on how successful scheduling had been). They reveal

the problems in trying to define programme genres and discuss how programmes

about religion/spirituality are often produced outside of the remit of the specialist

departments and commissioning editors. These discussions highlight the complexities

of the production processes, with multiple voices competing to create a unified text:

the processes of constructing television discourses are not simple and involve many

levels of negotiation between industry professionals, as well as consideration of the

audience.   In the next section, I explore their accounts of programme content to

discover their intentions when making programmes, and the programmes they believe

were (and were not) successful.

<u>Presenters, provocation and problematising: discussions of programme content</u>

All of those interviewed agreed that television's role in terms of depicting religion and

spirituality was largely to ask questions and to challenge people's ideas:

> **Michael Wakelin:** We need to really go on that journey with religion, to ask the
>
> big questions and find out what religion is saying about them all… we need to
>
> show, we need to interrogate, you can't allow religion to get away with sloppy
>
> thinking and irrationality and I think it does need interrogating but… *The Big*
>
> *Questions* is all wrong. That's overstating the interrogation and combativeness
>
> of religion.

Those interviewed, particularly in relation to Channel 4, spoke of the desire to spark

interest and create discussion when making programmes. The intention to provoke

debate and perhaps challenge perceptions of different belief systems was something

producer/director Dimitri Collingridge felt was important in his own documentaries.

When approached by journalist Rod Liddle and Samir Shah of Juniper TV to direct and

produce *The Trouble With Atheism*, he was attracted to the project because he'd 'read

Richard Dawkins's book and I sort of liked the idea of picking holes in it… it's so trendy to like Dawkins and I kind of thought I'd be interested to see what the other side, you know, actually look at where his arguments aren't as convincing'. The idea of Richard Littlejohn presenting a programme on Judaism (*The War on Britain's Jews*) appealed for similar reasons: '[it was] interesting you know, Richard Littlejohn presenting a programme about bigotry.'

Littlejohn was one of many famous faces used to present programmes about religion/spirituality, culminating in *Christianity: A History*, an eight-part series, presented by a series of well-known public figures, which became Channel 4's largest ever religion commission in 2009. An earlier celebrity-led series, *The Beginner's Guide…*, went out late at night and made headlines for films such as Peaches Geldof's *Beginner's Guide to Islam* and Johnny Vegas's film on Evangelical Christianity. Ahmed explained that the series was broadcast late when:

> Eleven o'clock was a big winner for Channel 4…. The idea of *The Beginner's Guide* was to try and get out of our comfort zone in religion, just for the hell of it and see could we engage the younger audience with it… Whether it worked or not, I don't think it did probably, but not because they weren't good, some of them were incredibly well made, incredible. I think Johnny Vegas's film was a really good film, that was a great journey… you can either do two things. You can either say I'm not bothered about trying to engage a different audience, or you can say we'll have a go at the same time as trying to do other stuff.

The Beginner's Guide was part of a trend within factual programming about religion and spirituality in the middle of the decade that drew upon the conventions of reality television (see Chapter Six). Two of the last such series, and the most controversial,

were Channel 4's *Make Me a Muslim* (2007) and *Make Me a Christian* (2008). Aaqil

Ahmed said they were commissioned because *Priest Idol* (2005) had been a success for

the channel. Despite the criticisms the two *Make Me…* series received, Ahmed argued

they were worth making because of the type of participants they had, and the

different audience they attracted: 'you know we can make as many documentaries as

we like, THAT bunch of people will never watch em. If that bunch of people[19] live as a

Muslim, will they understand Islam a little bit better and the Muslim community a little

bit better?'

These were not the only Channel 4 programmes about religion to attract controversy

and criticism. Programmes about Islamic 'fundamentalism', including *Cult of the*

Suicide Bomber and *Dispatches*' 'Undercover Mosque' attracted a lot of attention from

the media and from Muslim groups. David Henshaw is the Managing Director of

Hardcash Productions, responsible for several documentaries about Islam, both in

countries like Afghanistan and in the UK, where they filmed 'Undercover Mosque' and

'Undercover Mosque: The Return'. He spoke of the impact September 11 and the

subsequent media debates about Islam had on the interest in his company's films:

> When we made 'Beneath the Veil', it was a film that we had no idea of the kind
>
> of impact that it was going to have because we you know so it was made and
>
> initially shown in this country before 9/11. 9/11 happened very quickly
>
> afterwards, and then it acquired a significance and an importance, that… we
>
> had no idea it was going to have. It became a huge hit internationally…
>
> There was this commitment that we should do something, a big investigative
>
> enquiry… separating out factors that were actually more to do with cultural

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[19] Given the participants were largely working-class and Northern, presumably 'that bunch of people' is a group who are distinct from the ABC1 audience Channel 4 normally boasts of in its annual reports.

practices, tribal practices from Islamic practices and where, if you like,

reactionary mullahs had made use of the tribal practices like circumcision

which was sold as Islamic when obviously it wasn't, but also to look at a place

like Malaysia where you have an interesting contrast between regions which

are effectively controlled by pretty hard line reactionary Islamic militants and

other parts of the country which Islam, in a very Western sense, is a very

tolerant, pluralistic religion.

Henshaw's distinction between the 'pretty hard line reactionary Islamic militants' and

the 'very Western… tolerant, pluralistic religion' within Islam are common distinctions

within television discourse about religion, particularly Islam (see Chapter Five). In his

discussion of Malaysian Islam, tolerance and pluralism are emphasised (Brown 2006)

as Western values, in opposition to the 'other', 'controlling' militant side of Islam.

These distinctions were also evident in the 'Undercover Mosque' programmes, where

the preaching of 'militant' Saudi clerics and their adherents was contrasted with

moderate, tolerant British Islam (see Chapter Five). The first programme (2007) was

criticised strongly by Muslim groups (see Chapter Seven) and was subject to both a

police investigation and an Ofcom enquiry, although Hardcash and Channel 4 were

exonerated in both (Plunkett 2007). Henshaw claimed that the first programme was

made as a response to concerns from 'moderate Muslims', discursively constructed in

his discourse as in the programme as separate from the deviant 'others':

> We'd had information that moderate Muslims in the congregation were
>
> worried about what was being said, what was being preached… [these were]
>
> concerned members of congregations who weren't happy about what was

happening in their mosques… mosques or organisations which claimed to be committed to interfaith dialogue.

Hardcash and Channel 4 employed young Hindu reporter Bobby Pathak, who had gone undercover for a similar story in *The Mirror*, to film at the Finsbury Park mosque for a year. Henshaw had anticipated the controversy that would follow. He described how:

It just struck me over and over again that first of all this is profoundly shocking and the other thing that struck me at the time was that 'God this is really the opposite of anything that should be spiritual'. You know, there was no spirituality, there was no spiritual content in it, it was just a litany of hatred, quite extraordinary and I was quite taken aback by it and it was at that moment I thought 'Yeah, this is going to disturb a lot of people'.

In this extract Henshaw draws on discourses of 'spirituality' as being something distinct from the expressions of Islam 'exposed' in the documentary, ideas we also see echoed in television programming and audience accounts. In 2008, 'Undercover Mosque: The Return' was shown, this time also focusing on female teachers within British mosques. Henshaw explained their reasons for making another film:

There was a political story here as well, the political story was about the Saudi missionary activity in this country, well, and throughout the world… wherever we looked, the Saudis seemed to be involved so we wanted to make a second programme that looked at that more closely… When we asked for the mosque for their response to what we'd found, they tried to make out you know these were rare and unusual examples but literally you know our reporter went there virtually every weekend over three or four months, every weekend, the same kind of poisonous stuff was being spouted, so we were quite surprised by that.

So the second programme was, I think, a better programme because it was, you know, intellectually more coherent, and I think its political emphasis was much more pronounced.

Henshaw's construction of the Saudi activity as 'poisonous' and the 'political emphasis' of the documentary positions the British production team as having an emancipatory and enlightening role, something we see in the discourse of many *Dispatches* programmes (see Chapter Five). For Henshaw, there were strong political motivations in making these films, and he was keen to distance the 'poisonous' claims of the mosque teachers from the 'moderate' Muslims he was in contact with. His discourse here reiterates notions of the threat to Britishness that we see in the programme (see Chapter Five). When discussing responses to the programme, again he sought to distance an 'orchestrated' response from Shaykh Yasin from the more 'genuine' responses of supportive 'secularists' and 'moderate' Muslims:

There is obviously a huge volume of predictable and sometimes orchestrated complaint. I mean, for example, both programmes featured the use of a man called Shaykh Yasin… he has an organised network and we got bombarded by emails and phone calls… but at the same time [there was] a huge amount of support as well and not just from, you know, secularists, but from a lot of Muslims as well. When we were doing publicity for the first programme, I went on the BBC's Asian Network on one of their prime time programmes and I was really pleased that in the phone in, at least 50% of the callers who were Muslim were very supportive of the programme.

When discussing the response of the mosques involved, he again distanced the response of those filmed with the 'moderate' Muslims, a term he used despite

acknowledging that 'they' don't like it, constructing them, once more, as 'other' (Said 1978/1995, Abbas 2001, Richardson 2004).

I asked several of those I interviewed about the ideological tone of the programmes and my analysis (see Chapters Five and Six) that the dominant message in most of them was that religion was only acceptable in certain, 'moderate' forms. Dimitri Collingridge broadly agreed with the assessment, saying 'I don't know if that's a sort of editorial line at Channel 4, but that's what I certainly think'. Aaqil Ahmed agreed that this was partly true, but argued that Channel 4 did try to give voice to a range of perspectives. His discourse reiterates the sense of attempted 'impartiality' seen in policy documents through his claims to give 'everyone' a 'love-in' and a 'kicking'.:

> I think it depends on the story you're telling… if you look at Sharia TV for instance it's pretty full-on… our audience wants to be informed, they don't necessarily want to be lectured at… I think sometimes people don't wanna hear it and people accuse me of being an apologist for terrorism and all these things because we let these things be said and if you look at *Inside Hamas* the film we made where we got access to Hamas, we made Hamas look like what they are, which is a bunch of thugs and a lot of people didn't like that so I think there's always somebody who doesn't like the tone of what we're doing.
>
> I don't think we set out to say we're only gonna show the nice side of Islam or the nice side of Christianity or the bad side of Christianity… in *The Qur'an* for instance, the overall theme is this is a misunderstood book by Muslims as well as non-Muslims but within that you see the extremists getting a kicking, but at the same time the non-extremist, moderate type person is shown to be quite

weak I think and ineffectual… I think you could argue that in our programmes, everyone's had a love-in and everyone's had a kicking.

Mark Dowd acknowledged that there were certain words that were politically very loaded, especially 'fundamentalism'. He spoke of the difficulty he experienced in making *The Fundamentalists* because of the word's connotations:

Intellectually, that was probably the hardest programme, because you know, what is fundamentalism? It's just a swear word to people. If you call somebody a fundamentalist you're saying you're narrow-minded, bigoted, you're a religious nutter and then we have fundamentalist atheists… it definitely means a bad thing, doesn't it? Whereas a fundamentalist is somebody who in the original meaning of the term is somebody who won't compromise on the core meanings of his religion. And there are peaceable fundamentalists. That is a big regret in that programme, we should have had a section on the Amish community, or snake handlers in Appalachia, or somewhere saying fundamentalist doesn't mean militant, doesn't mean violent.

In this section, I have shown how those involved in production are aware of some of the tensions within faith communities about words such as 'fundamentalist' and 'moderate', although not to the extent that these words are avoided within television discourse. Many of those interviewed speak of a political motivation behind programme creation: to raise awareness of issues; challenge people; or provoke debate. Building on this, in the next section, I discuss the way those involved in the industry perceive their audiences.

<u>Who are we making it for? Notions of the audience in PSB programme making</u>

Michael Wakelin and Aaqil Ahmed believed the BBC and Channel 4 had somewhat distinct audiences, and their programmes should address those audiences accordingly. Wakelin's view was that, on the BBC:

> Programmes should be made for everybody really, I don't think you should target a specific audience, so for example when we do worship we went to Peterborough Cathedral and it looked fantastic so for the viewer it would be a great ethereal experience whether they were into the religious side of it or not.

Wakelin believed that the BBC audience were vaguely sympathetic to religion, in a more traditional sense: 'they're believers not belongers I should imagine, who'd call themselves broadly Christian' and that the corporation's output generally gets high AI (audience appreciation index) figures:

> Well this [*Around the World in 80 Faiths*] has been going exceptionally well. We've been getting AIs of 87 which is well above the average… It's only things like *24* or *The West Wing*, cult shows like that get 90, for series like this it's astonishing.

On Channel 4, however, according to Ahmed:

> The audience is younger, is more upwardly mobile than anybody else's so therefore we can't make the same programmes as anyone else.

Like Wakelin, Ahmed claimed that the important thing was not ratings, but impact:

> *The Qur'an* and *The Cult of the Suicide Bomber*, *Make me a Muslim*, *Priest Idol*, *Christianity: A History*, these are all the big films, the big projects that we've done and actually they're the most successful, full stop. You know ratings, critical acclaim and awards.

When discussing the audience response to specific programmes, those interviewed claimed that the responses would often vary according to people's own religious perspective:

> **Dimitri Collingridge:** In the *Trouble With Atheism* I had [a] very mixed response… I think that the response really was along the lines of what people who watched it believed… something called the Christian Broadcasting Trust or Committee gave us an award for it because they said that even though this wasn't about God it gives hope to some to you know to people who are religious and who feel that they are sort of philosophically under attack…

> **Aaqil Ahmed:** There's two or three kinds of religious audience in my book. One is they're converted, you know, the *Songs of Praise* kind of audience. That's fine and they've gotta be catered for. Then there's the audience that's interested in things going on in the world and religion's part of that. The third kind of audience is those that can't stand religion but actually always watch the programmes on it, and I think that our audience as a general rule is a mixture of the latter two, and the people that are complaining about *Christianity: A History* is the first lot.

Ahmed claimed that this third kind of audience 'will complain about whatever you do', whereas the first group is 'watching *Songs of Praise* and all that kind of stuff so that audience is never gonna be happy with *Christianity: A History*. But the other two audiences are our audience'.

Robert Beckford argued that, for his films, the level of audience response differed according to how 'serious' the subject matter and its treatment were, and he criticised Channel 4 for prioritising 'entertainment' rather than 'engagement':

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On the cultural films that's where you get the most engagement… People loved

the *Great African Scandal*, lots and lots of positive feedback, from kids in school

going 'Will you come to our school, we wanna go Fairtrade', to university

lecturers… The light fluffy ones, no real engagement, it's fluffy and

meaningless… that's the mistake I think, C4, they're making is that they're

going for audiences rather than engagement and that's a tragedy. You get

people who engage, they can move things on.

As well as the initial audience response, Beckford claimed several of the films had a

wider impact, such as *Empire Pays Back*:

Two things that happened with that film – we got an apology out of the

Anglican church a week later at the Synod for their involvement in slavery… the

film was shown in the Jamaican parliament and I got an award from the

government for the best non-Jamaican of Jamaican parentage over there

somewhere award which I got which now sits in my office.

Expanding online

The internet was acknowledged as being increasingly important as providing a space

for viewing, discussing and recirculating programmes. Mark Dowd spoke of the role of

YouTube (see van Zoonen, Mihelj and Vis 2010) and other online media in recirculating

his films:

I don't know who does these things because I've never put anything on

YouTube in my life but suddenly people say 'I've seen parts one and three of

God is Green on YouTube, can I have the whole programme?' or 'when are you

gonna put *Children of Abraham* on YouTube'? You know, YouTube now has the

whole of *The Fundamentalists* on in Polish… *Opus Dei*… is on YouTube all

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dubbed in Portugese... So when you see there are, you know, 27,000 hits on it, all from Poland you think well, these programmes are made to be watched, so I'm not complaining about it.

Both Michael Wakelin and Aaqil Ahmed talked about the increasing role the channels' online presences had for audiences. Both had areas of their websites dedicated to religion and belief[20] (see Appendices Three and Nine), featuring information and background details about their programmes, articles about different ethical and social issues, and information on the major world religions and other forms of spiritual belief, as well as on Atheism. The BBC 'Religion and Ethics' site contained its own active message board. The Channel 4 'Faith and Belief' site didn't, although there were many threads on the main Channel 4 message boards about religion or religious programmes (see Chapters Three and Seven).

Both broadcasters sometimes created separate microsites for some programmes, including *Kumbh Mela* and *Around the World in 80 Faiths* (see Appendix Three). In 2009 the whole Channel 4 website was redesigned. The message boards were removed, areas such as 'Faith and Belief' ceased to be updated, and all programme areas were integrated into one uniform look across the website. Blogs replaced forums, and there were comment fields on the pages for most programmes (see Chapter Seven and Appendix Nine). Ahmed wrote a blog post on the Channel 4 website for *Christianity: A History* and was pleased with the level of audience response the series was getting through the website:

It's the most successful blog in terms of responses in Channel 4.com's very short TV programme history... So much so that I had to do another blog... they

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[20] Neither Five nor ITV had such sections, at least not during the period of active research (2007-2009).

did a filmed interview with me in response to the questions… that's all been an

organic growth, it's all down to the high level of feedback… It's been a real

trailblazer, *Christianity: A History*, because we didn't plan any of it, it was all

really organic that whole web thing but the sheer number of responses and the

fact that we had to do that video response to it is quite pleasing because

actually it shows that there's a lot of interest. Video on demand as well, things

like *The Qur'an* and this, *Seven Wonders…* and *Christianity: A History*, they've

been very successful on On Demand as well.

Wakelin was keen for the BBC to expand its religious/spiritual content, although

(perhaps due to his own faith) he saw this mostly in terms of a Christian framework,

adding in Islam as an afterthought:

We need to give the consumer a much better online religious experience, both

for the believers and the non-believers... The BBC has a unique role to play 'cos

unlike most other religious websites, it's not after your soul or money, it is

actually wanting to help you explore and we should do that. The BBC needs to

own the Bible online… the online Bible would be fantastic, it would do this job

of re-linking, re-ligamenting, things together and you could have tagged

content, you could have verse of the day, lots of articles, access to all our

content we've made on The Bible in the past on radio and TV… and also we

should add in the Qur'an and then suddenly then the BBC is bringing the

religious communities together and making this accessible to the religious

searcher.

<u>What are 'they' doing? How broadcasters perceive each other</u>

As well as offering reflection on their own output, those interviewed were asked their opinion on what other broadcasters and producers were offering. ITV's decision to reduce its religious output was criticised by most of those interviewed. Aaqil Ahmed argued, however, that ITV shouldn't be judged too harshly, as they simply couldn't afford to produce such programming. Michael Wakelin was critical of Channel 4's output, whilst conceding that they had a stronger reputation in some areas than the BBC:

> Channel 4, my last understanding was I think they have fifty hours a year within which they can do religious documentaries and they tend to be low budget. They tend not to hit home very well, they don't get much attention, but they ARE perceived as the home of religious documentary, which is very damaging, I think, to the BBC, which is more to do with the quantity of stuff they do, I think, than the quality.

Likewise, Aaqil Ahmed was keen to stress the way Channel 4 was more innovative than the BBC:

> They wouldn't do the kind of stuff we're talking about because they're worried about what their role is in terms of religion, broadcasting and the licence fee… I think sometimes that can be a burden… I think it's easier for us to be braver because we don't have that burden of the licence fee and the relationship with worship programming and the state.

Robert Beckford was sceptical about the claims Channel 4 makes for itself about being innovative and risk-taking:

It's moved into a really mainstream terrestrial broadcaster… Channel 4 is

completely celebritised now… I don't think Channel 4 now is associated with

provocation or danger, I think that everything you'll find provocative on

Channel 4 you can find on BBC Two, you know, on ITV… I think the days of

Channel 4 being about controversy are long gone. It's a very straight

broadcaster and just as parochial as the rest of them as far as I can see.

Beckford's complaint about the rise of the celebrity in factual broadcasting was shared by Mark Dowd:

You look at the titles it's all: *Stephen Fry: HIV and Me*, Ann Widdecombe's,

Rageh Omaar's Tsunami Journey. Even what was a pretty good series on

Channel 4, I think, about Christianity, it had to be Cherie Blair and Michael

Portillo... it's hard to get programmes made about issues or titles unless they

have a name attached to them and that's a symptom of the culture we live in.

When asked which programmes stood out from other broadcasters/producers, Aaqil Ahmed and Robert Beckford cited Peter Owen Jones's series, whilst Beckford also praised Mark Dowd's programming, Ahmed mentioned *The Monastery* and Mark Dowd cited *God's Waiting Room* as his personal favourite (see also Noonan 2008, Buxton 2009) - programmes which also achieved positive press reviews and audience responses (see Chapter Seven).

In the next section, I look at how those interviewed perceived the future of broadcasting about religion/spirituality.

<u>The future of faith on factual TV</u>

At the time of the interviews I did not know Aaqil Ahmed would move to the BBC. When asked where he saw the future of religion on Channel 4, he felt it would be more focussed on Britain than the wider world, and was enthusiastic about his upcoming strand of single religious films, *Revelations*:

> It's going to be access documentaries and big question kind of thinking so it's going to be more big projects like *Christianity: A History*… I'm launching a new strand. It's gonna be a new *Everyman*, a new *Witness* for the new era of single documentaries, so it's gonna be two big chunks a year, a big thing like *Christianity: A History* and a big strand of single films[21]…

> It just goes in cycles you know. How many films do you wanna make about evangelical Christians in America? We've made quite a few, now we could make more. How many films do you wanna make about terrorism in the Middle East? We've had a bit of a break because we've made lots… you can't say one thing and say it's going to be the case for the next few years because it might change.

Michael Wakelin had ideas of where he saw the BBC's output going:

> We should be doing quicker response religious documentaries. There should be a provision within *Panorama* to do that... My mission would be to up the ante for religion, make sure we do serve the audience in the right way… I've secured an extra programme for Easter called *Easter at Kings*… that'll go down well with the punters… but it's hard selling stuff… The audience are four times

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[21] *Revelations* only ran for one series, in 2009.

more likely to be interested in religion than people who work in the telly. Do

you know that stat? It's a great stat and I think we need to bear that in mind.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that several factors influence the production of

programmes about religion/spirituality. Public service broadcasters have to balance

commitments to diversity with a desire for high ratings, good AI figures and, in the

case of commercial PSBs, advertising revenue. Broadcasting guidelines also have a

significant impact on the production process, stipulating what can and cannot be said

or shown with regards to religion and spirituality. Those involved in production are

influenced by factors including budget, time, expertise, policy, scheduling and the

perspectives of several different voices involved in the production process, as well as

an awareness of (potential) audiences. All these factors place limits on what can and

cannot be portrayed on television.

PSB commitments to represent diversity (Born 2005, Dept of National Heritage 1992)

are acknowledged in the publicity materials produced by broadcasters, in the

guidelines and remits produced by Ofcom (and formerly the ITC) and in the interview

narratives of media professionals. However, the limitations discussed, along with a

fear of 'box ticking' and lack of programme ideas seemed to restrict the diversity of

programmes made and beliefs/practices featured, as we will see in the following

chapters (see also Noonan 2008, Hargrave 2002, Thickett 2008). Those making

programmes discuss the tensions of making programmes for audiences of all faiths and

none, trying to balance making 'good' programmes - which they see as provocative,

challenging and unusual ones - with respecting beliefs and traditions, and trying to

whilst working within industry parameters.

Therefore, whilst I argue in the following chapters that television discourses of

religion/spirituality are problematic, it is important to bear in mind the factors

highlighted in this chapter that influence and constrain their production.

Chapter Five: Programmes – 'The Threat'

Introduction: The Soul of Britain?

At the start of the decade, the BBC broadcast a series called *The Soul of Britain* (*SoB*), presented by Michael Buerk. It combined panel discussion in a studio, video diaries and the presentations of a BBC survey about the nation's religious and spiritual beliefs. From the start it was clear that the Britain presented was that of much sociological theory at the time: secular but with an interest in the 'spiritual':

> Over the next few weeks we're going to uncover the true soul of Britain, discovering the values, attitudes and beliefs that make Britain what it is today. We've conducted the biggest poll ever into what Britain believes today and how that affects our lives. According to that poll, traditional faith is in sharper decline than we thought. Only one in four of us believes in God with a capital G (26%) but 69%, that's two out of every three of us, believe we have a soul. It looks as though religion is being replaced with vaguer feelings of spirituality, with one in four of us now believing in reincarnation.

Throughout the series 'traditional beliefs' in religion (predominantly framed as Christian) were positioned against 'spirituality' and secularism. The reasons given for Britain's apparent decline in religiosity echo those cited by many theorists (see Chapter Two): the rise of consumerism, scientific advances, the individualisation of belief, and the growth of multiculturalism.

Sociologists such as Grace Davie and Steve Bruce featured in the series, along with key religious leaders, journalists, politicians, well-known public figures and 'ordinary' members of the public. While the 'experts' and 'high status' figures were allocated

time as talking heads or members of the studio panels, 'ordinary' people spoke through video diaries and fly-on-the-wall footage, thus situating their opinions as non-expert, 'authentic' and part of 'everyday' life (Kilborn and Izod 1997). Famous names such as chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and scientist and Atheist Richard Dawkins featured in panel discussions, and several of these remained key figures in programming about religion throughout the decade.

Even though this show was broadcast before the two world events that would influence television discourses of religion and spirituality, the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, its depiction of Britain's relationship with the spiritual is replicated throughout the whole decade. Religion is positioned as part of the nation's history, yet its apparent decline is depicted as something we have not fully come to terms with:

> Our survey shows how confused we are. More people believe in a vague spirit or life force than the God of traditional religion… we just don't know what to think.

In the programme, Britons were shown as turning to the secular gods of consumerism, sex, alcohol, drugs and towards 'new age' spiritualities. Several older people argued that there was less respect in society, and concerns about 'tradition' and 'respect' were presented as common to the Jewish and Muslim communities as well as Christians or 'ordinary' Brits who were brought up going to Sunday School. Members of the public were shown drinking, going to nightclubs and being keenly interested in sex, whilst religious communities were depicted as divided over whether to embrace more liberal, secular interpretations of their faith or move towards more 'intense' forms, such as 'evangelical and Pentecostal' Christianity. The terms 'evangelical' and

'Pentecostal' were often used in close connection with one another, and associated both with evangelistic outreach and a 'new kind of certainty'.

Religious traditions were seen as still holding cultural or emotional significance for people, although not necessarily translated into strong affiliation to a religion. For example, the programme depicts Liz and Rob, who are about to marry in a church and who are represented as being like 'the majority of Britons' who don't believe in the Bible as the literal word of God, but see church services as having significance and importance, being something 'spiritual and moving…[with] seriousness and solemnness'. They have some connection with Christianity as a spiritual and historical/cultural tradition, but this does not impact their lives much further. Nevertheless, they are 'good people', like the majority of Britons, whom they represent.

Jewish and Muslim families were featured as respecting the traditions of their faith, although the programme questioned whether they would decline as Christianity had (Bruce 1995). However, their religious practice was normalised by the programme's anchoring of them: the Muslims featured were described as 'western Asians', whilst the Jews ran a grocers at 'the heart of the community'. 'Alternative' spiritualities, these were linked to consumerism, (Crumm 2005, Carrette and King 2005), with Buerk describing one participant's openness to 'all forms of spirituality' as being 'very much a spirituality that feels at home in our consumer culture'.

This programme sets the tone for the decade's programming in a number of ways: an emphasis on Britain as mostly secular but with a Christian past and a level of 'other' religious practice within multicultural communities; a sense of religion and spirituality having some, limited, positive benefits for their adherents, but more 'extreme'

variations (e.g. Pentecostalism) being subject to scrutiny; Britain being a place that is perhaps a little too enamoured with 'work', sex and alcohol; and a sense that moderation and tolerance are the most important values to live by.

In this chapter and the following one, I explore discourses of religion and spirituality in factual programmes on Britain's public service television channels. I identify which aspects of spiritual belief and practice are shown as acceptable or deviant; how British television 'others' not only the religious but also those in other countries, and what it reveals to us about 'Britishness' (see Ashuri 2005), and the 'limits to what a British audience will tolerate' (Davie 1994: 113). I begin in this chapter by exploring religion and spirituality as a 'threat' to British values and to those constructed as 'vulnerable', whilst in Chapter Six I look at programmes constructed around 'journeys'.

The majority of programmes in this chapter are within the documentary genre, primarily within three sub-genres: educational, current affairs and 'fly-on-the-wall'. All feature narration from an 'expert' or presenter on camera, or through voiceover, constructing what Hall calls a 'dominant-hegemonic' position for the audience (1973). This discursive position appears objective and 'common-sense', and invites the audience '(like the film maker) to keep a certain distance from the programme's content', to be an observer (Kilborn & Izod 1997: 40. See also Corner 2003, Lorenzo-Dus 2009).

The narration not only 'others' those featured in these documentaries, but constructs a sense of the 'normative' values, often couched in notions of 'Britishness', that the audience are presumed to share. That audience members are often themselves part of the groups featured in such programmes (see Chapter Seven), and may share their beliefs and practices is not acknowledged within any of the documentaries covered.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first looks at the presentation of religious 'fundamentalism' as a 'threat' to Britain within the two major current affairs strands on the BBC and Channel 4, *Panorama* and *Dispatches*. The second looks at the 'threat' religion/spirituality are seen to present to 'vulnerable' groups, and focuses primarily on programmes about the 'spirituality industry' and about the 'threat' to children and teenagers.

Religious 'fundamentalism' as a threat to British values: *Panorama* and *Dispatches*.

Panorama (BBC One) and *Dispatches* (Channel 4) are the two long-running weekly current affairs strands on the BBC and Channel 4. Their aim is to provide provocative, sometimes sensationalist (Gaber 2008, Lorenzo-Dus 2009) accounts of issues affecting the world and, most often, Britain. They position themselves as investigative and interrogative, often 'revisiting' subjects to highlight their own influence on the issues raised. Both have featured several documentaries about religious issues.

This section focuses on portrayals of what the programmes term 'fundamentalist' approaches to Islam and Christianity. According to Hoover and Kaneva, 'fundamentalisms' are 'uniquely connected with the media and processes of mediation' (2009: 1), both in terms of how fundamentalist movements use the media, and how the meanings of fundamentalism are constructed within the media. Several news events, from the Salman Rushdie affair of the late 1980s, to terrorist attacks throughout the 2000s and the role of religion in American political campaigning, have placed 'fundamentalism' on the news and current affairs agenda (Martin 1999, Shupe 2009), and portrayals of 'fundamentalism' can be found in a number of factual programmes.

Plant argues that media critiques of 'fundamentalism', including criticisms of the protection/recognition of religion and of multiculturalism are often simplistic[1], and in which, 'Islamic and American Christian fundamentalism become conflated, and then mapped onto religion as a whole' (Plant 2006: 275).

Within *Dispatches* and *Panorama*, as elsewhere, such portrayals tended to be associated with some form of 'threat'; here, in relation to British 'values'.

Mosques, Mullahs and 'moderates': the 'threat' of Islam

Several programmes seek to expose the 'hardline extremists' within Islam[2]. Whilst these are always positioned as being different from 'moderate' Muslims, the emphasis on 'exposing' what 'really' happens in Muslim environments serves to reinforce distrust of the religion (Abbas 2001, Macdonald 2003/2011) and of Islam as a threat to Britain.

Dispatches' 'Undercover Mosque' (2007) (UM) was one of the most high-profile of these, largely because of criticisms levelled against it by Muslim groups, and an investigation by West Midlands Police into those featured in the documentary and the production company Hardcash (BBC 2007), who later successfully sued the police for libel (Sutcliffe 2008). In 2008, a follow-up, 'Undercover Mosque: The Return' (UMTR) was broadcast. Both recorded secret footage in a number of mosques, with the aim to expose 'an ideology of bigotry and intolerance spreading through Britain' (UM). In both, there is an emphasis on the mosques' apparent commitment to tolerance and multiculturalism:

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[1] Though undermines his position slightly by using the term 'moderate Muslims' implying that Muslims are somehow 'worse' than Christians, because only some of them are 'moderate'. As it is apparently self-evident that the 'normal' Christian is not a fundamentalist, they do not require the 'moderate' label.
[2] This has continued beyond the decade studied, with programmes such as *Panorama*'s 'British Schools, Islamic Rules' (2010) and *Dispatches*' 'Lessons in Hate and Violence' (2011) and 'Britiain's Islamic Republic' (2010) in the 2010s.

London Central Mosque… is the most recognisable symbol of moderate,

mainstream Muslim life in Britain…the UK Islamic Mission [is] a major

organisation dedicated to interfaith work. (UM)

But this outward appearance is repeatedly contrasted with what 'really' occurs inside

them:

As soon as the interfaith group leaves, the same preacher's tone changes. She

now says Christian teachings are vile. (UMTR)

Islam is discursively constructed as something that cannot be trusted, with mosques

positioned as secretive, suspicious places, echoing Macdonald's (2011) argument that

they are often constructed as a symbol of Muslim 'separateness'. This position is

anchored by an emphasis on preachers who speak out against 'the kuffaar', or as we

are presumably meant to read the texts, 'us'.

Fig. 5.1 'Undercover Mosque' introduction

As with most media coverage of Islam, signifiers of mosques, beards, niqabs, hijabs,

burkhas and men engaged in worship and prayer (Fig. 5.1) punctuate these

documentaries. These are played alongside 'hateful' messages from fundamentalist

clerics or voiceovers discussing extremism, creating connections between outward

signifiers of religious worship and devotion and 'extremist' ideologies.

Fig. 5.2. 'Undercover Mosque' introduction

For example, in the introduction to UM, the voiceover describes 'an ideology of bigotry

and intolerance… on women's rights' accompanied by images of women wearing

niqabs (Fig. 5.2) and extracts of preaching stating 'Allah has created the woman

deficient' and 'If she doesn't wear hijab, we hit her'.

The main threat of Islam in these, and other programmes, including *Dispatches*' 'Britain

Under Attack' (2007), 'Unholy War' (2007) (UW), 'What Muslims Want' (2006), 'The

Dispatches Debate: Muslims and Free Speech' (2006), 'Young, Angry and Muslim'

(2005) and *Panorama*'s 'London Under Attack' (2005), 'How I Became a Muslim

Extremist' (2007) (HIBME), 'A Question of Leadership' (2005) (AQOL) and 'Muslim First,

British Second' (2009) is to 'Western', and particularly 'British' values, which are

deemed to be moderate, tolerant and gender-inclusive. In contrast, 'extremist' views

are depicted as intolerant of Christian, Jewish and secular views, anti-homosexual, oppressive to women and anti-democracy:

> Abu Usamah condemns the Western interpretation of free speech… in a DVD, he attacks the idea of gay rights (UM)

> Extremism feeds off a conviction that Islam is a superior faith and culture which Christians and Jews in the West are conspiring to undermine (John Ware, AQOL)

Panorama's 'True Brits' (TB) (2008) singles out Islam and Asian Muslims (but no other religious or minority ethnic group) as a potential challenge to British identity.

Fig. 5.3: 'True Brits' interview with Mozzam Begg

Mozzam Begg is interviewed in a mosque (Fig. 5.3). The voiceover contrasts Begg with his father and grandfather, Indian soldiers 'who fought for the British Empire in two world wars'. He tells us he was considering joining the British army, before the voiceover continues 'but of course he didn't. As a radical Muslim, he spent two years in Guantanamo Bay'. We are not told why Begg did not join the army, as if being a

'radical Muslim' who ended up in Guantanamo Bay (despite being released without charge) is reason enough.

TB presents immigrants as 'British, but with a different skin colour, food, language, religion'. It describes how governments 'celebrated these differences and called it multiculturalism', alongside celebratory images of carnivals and samba bands (Fig. 5.4).

Fig. 5.4. 'True Brits'

But now, we are told, 'they've changed their tune', a statement accompanied by footage of women in hijabs and niqabs (Fig. 5.5), suggesting that Islam is a threat to the colourful, but possibly naïve, ideals of multiculturalism (Davie 2009, Taylor 2009).
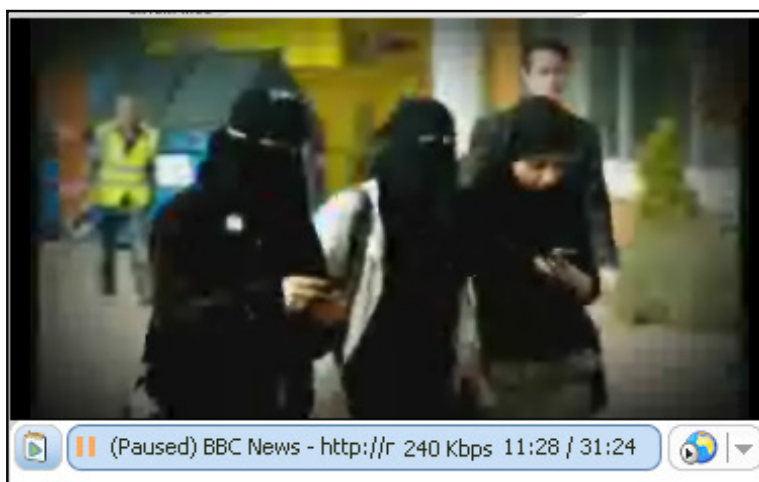
Fig. 5.5 'True Brits'

Macdonald argues that 'media representations are underpinned by a renewed accent on an imagined 'clash of cultures' (Huntington 1996) and by complacency about the benign qualities of 'Britishness''(2011: 128): tolerance; fair-mindedness; and openness to difference. She argues this 'clash' has, more recently, been depicted as occurring within Britain. This is certainly the case within the majority of documentaries about the threat of 'hardline' Islam within Britain (particularly post 7/7). However, the threat 'from within' is still discussed in terms of a negative 'outside influence' on British Muslims.

Replicating the Orientalist discourses identified by Said (1978/1995), Richardson (2004), Abbas (2001) and Yilmaz (2007) as depicting the 'barbaric East', anti-Western/British ideologies 'infiltrating' British mosques and Muslim organisations are presented as coming from countries such as Pakistan, Iran and, especially, Saudi Arabia (through sermons, websites, videos, teaching materials and other literature). The 'Undercover Mosque' documentaries repeatedly position 'Saudi clerics' and 'the Saudi religious establishment' as villains, whilst *Dispatches*' 'Unholy War' (2007) claims the influence of Palestinian, Pakistani and Iranian values on British Muslims cause Muslim converts to Christianity (fleeing persecution in their home lands) to face death threats and persecution here. However, as Macdonald (2011) and Karim (2006) note, this threat from Muslim 'outsiders' is often discussed outside of the political context of the relationship between Britain/the West and these countries.

The 'Undercover Mosque' documentaries emphasise that children are present in the mosques featured, and UMTR highlights that children are also in danger of being influenced by Saudi teachings at school:

This is another Islamic institution in Britain funded by Saudi Arabia. The King Fahad Academy… In 1998 the school started teaching some of the pupils the same official educational curriculum that's taught in Saudi Arabia.

Although the programme includes a statement from the academy claiming such passages had never been taught, its inclusion serves to leave the viewer suspicious of the academy's response.

One common feature in television discourse about Islam is the way that 'fundamentalist' Islam is presented as being in opposition to 'moderate' Islam and 'moderate Muslims' who may be described as having 'traditional' and 'tolerant' beliefs (UM). However, 'moderate' Islam is rarely given a voice. Those allowed to speak on its behalf have a great degree of social capital (usually academics) and often their voices come with a qualifier such as 'according to', suggesting their perspective is open to interpretation. Furthermore, moderate Islam is depicted as something that needs to be questioned simply because it challenges Western secular culture (emphases mine):

> This fundamentalist interpretation of Islam is being taught in Britain's most important, and **supposedly moderate**, mosque (UMTR).

> **John Ware:** The Muslim Council of Britain [is] **generally regarded as the moderate face of Islam speaking for the Muslim community**. On its website the MCB emphasises [that] it's working for better community relations and for the good of society as a whole…. **But** Mr Kantharia says that within the MCB **a distaste for western secular culture** still exists.

> **Mehboob Kantharia:** One of the most powerful strands… has been **an anti-British, anti-Western stand**.

Ware: Several MCB affiliates do have links to **anti-Western ideologies** from abroad. (AQOL)

When 'moderate' Islam is not depicted as suspicious, it is often seen as ineffectual. 'A Question of Leadership' argues that the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is unable to function effectively as a voice for British Muslims, while British authorities are also shown to be ineffective[3]. For example, the prison system in *Dispatches*' 'From Jail to Jihad' (2008) has 'never dealt with suicide bombers' and in many documentaries, the Labour government is depicted as being 'taken in' by extremists.

Fig. 5.6. 'True Brits'

Plant argues that in recent media representations of religion, 'The crumbling 9/11 towers are adduced as symbolic evidence for the old argument that religion - *any religion* - causes intolerance and violence' (2006: 275. See also Macdonald 2003: 74, Hjelm 2006). Whilst this is often the case, in British documentaries from 2005 onwards, the July 7 attacks on London are more frequently referenced (Fig. 5.6), especially the imagery of the devastated bus in Tavistock Square which, to use Peirce's

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[3] A common theme within *Dispatches* and *Panorama* programmes, regardless of the topic, or of who is in government.

(1894) concept, has become an index of the threat of problematic religion to Britain.

TB uses this image to illustrate its argument that 'The Britishness project became a top

priority when a few British citizens made it clear their loyalties lay elsewhere',

reiterating Macdonald's (2011) claim that the media are concerned with a perceived

struggle 'within' Britain between Muslims (who often 'stand in' for immigrants or

'multiculturalism') and 'mainstream' Britain (see also Khan 2000, Cesari 2005).

Using images of the physical threat 'fundamentalist' Islam poses to Britain, *Panorama*'s

'How I Became a Muslim Extremist' (2007) (HIBME) opens with footage of 'the latest

attack on Britain' (the bombing at Glasgow airport). This programme focuses on Shiraz

Maher who presents himself as a former extremist and describes how he previously

'wanted to see nightclubs shut down, alcohol made illegal… women covered from head

to toe'. *Panorama* presenter Jeremy Vine continues that 'this is a mindset the British

government is trying to change' and the programme's narrative sets up a conflict

between the 'normal' British way of life (and its liberal attitude to sex, alcohol and

nightclubs) and angry young Muslims.

Many programmes depict British Islam as being in a state of 'struggle for hearts and

minds' (HIBME) and AQOL makes this more explicit, positioning Muslims as 'those for

whom Islam is personal' against 'those who also wish to pursue Islam as a political

ideology, fuelled by the rages and injustices of much of the Islamic world', indicating a

view of 'good' religion as a personal, private matter and cautioning against religion

becoming part of political ideology. As we shall see, this final point is not solely

applicable to Islam.

Sex, salvation and the 'sinister': the Christian threat

As well as Islam, Christianity is portrayed as having a 'dangerous' side, and is often also seen as influenced from 'outside', with doctrines and practices originating from the Vatican, Africa and the USA; these countries operate as the symbolic enemy and a threat to British values, or something which the British can feel superior about (Gilroy 2004a).

The portrayal of Christianity on television is complicated by the long relationship between Church and State in Britain, and many 'threatening' movements are seen as originating from Catholic or Pentecostal traditions, rather than the Church of England. While *Dispatches* and *Panorama* deal with Islam in similar ways, their presentation of the Christian 'threat' is more distinct. *Dispatches* focuses on evangelical and Pentecostal streams, and *Panorama* concentrates more on sex scandals within the Catholic Church. It is unclear why the programmes have such different approaches, although it could be that the BBC is naturally more 'sensitive' to protestant Christian values, given its history and the relationship it has with its protestant Christian audience.

Dispatches' 'The New Fundamentalists' (2006) (TNF) and 'In God's Name' (2008) (IGN) share similar portrayals of the threat of what they depict as 'evangelical fundamentalist' Christianity to British values and society :

> I believe many are possessed of views which are at odds with mainstream, liberal Britain about freedom of speech, education and homosexuality. (TNF)

> Tonight *Dispatches* explores how fundamentalist Christians are trying to transform society... Many here believe that the Bible is not open to

interpretation, that it's literally true. They want to see a society built on these beliefs. (IGN)

The documentaries make no real attempt to explain the terms 'hardline', 'evangelical' or 'fundamentalist', and often use these interchangeably.

Fig. 5.7 'In God's Name'

Fig. 5.8 'The New Fundamentalists'.

Where documentary discourse about 'fundamentalist' Islam is punctuated with the iconography of niqabs, mosques and prayer, discourses of evangelical Christianity feature images of preaching, crowds of worshippers with hands extended and singing

contemporary worship songs (Fig. 5.7 and 5.8), people praying in tongues and 'unconventional' crosses and lecterns, creating links between these practices and the problematic beliefs the programmes aim to expose. Both IGN and TNF begin and end with the camera focused on outstretched hands as they tell us about the dangers posed by the Christians featured:

> This week, the human fertilisation and embryology bill goes through parliament. Religious hardliners are leading the fight against it… They're attacking abortion rights, gay rights and embryo research. But they're not just protesting. They've secured access to the heart of Westminster. (IGN)

> These are evangelical Christians worshipping in a church in London. A happy, colourful branch of our established church. But a rapidly growing branch, too, and one which now commands real political clout. (TNF)

The narrative of IGN positions America as a villain, arguing that the 'fundamentalists' involved are 'drawing inspiration from the religious right in America'. The relationship between the 'religious right' and American politics is the subject of many British news stories and a number of other documentaries, including *God's Next Army* (Channel 4 2008) and *With God on Our Side* (Channel 4 2004). The political dangers of evangelicalism are highlighted, with IGN allying the Conservatives with the evangelical movement. It shows Ann Widdecombe at 'a meeting held by the pro-life lobby' and Nadine Dorries meeting with anti-abortion campaigner and Public Policy Director of the Christian Lawyers' Fellowship, Andrea Williams. We see Williams organising protests against the human fertilisation and embryology bill.

Throughout IGN, Williams is portrayed as someone trying to 'stage manage' an image, requesting the camera is turned off when difficult questions are asked, hesitating

when asked about whether she would call herself 'a fundamentalist' and how old she believes the earth to be. However, David Modell's voiceover makes clear that this masks a more sinister agenda (emphasis original):

> The human fertilisation and embryology bill will also improve the rights of gay parents and help embryo research. Things Andrea believes are **evil**.

We are told Williams is on 'a recruitment drive' and Modell expresses surprise that he 'didn't expect' one of these groups to be a ladies' prayer group 'in a small town in Sussex'. The white, middle-class, middle-aged women sitting in a conservatory (Fig. 5.9) epitomise 'Middle England'. Presenting this context as unexpected[4] reiterates the programme's fears of fundamentalist ideologies reaching the heart of Britain.

Fig. 5.9 'In God's Name'

Just as many programmes on Islam seek to 'expose' the commitment of 'moderate' Muslim organisations to interfaith initiatives as merely a veneer, IGN emphasises the hostility of evangelical Christians to Islam. Modell's voiceover states that 'Islam is now one of the main targets of fundamentalist Christians'. We see Williams at a conference

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[4] Although Modell doesn't tell us which kind of groups he *would* expect Williams to visit.

we're told she's arranged, called 'Understanding Islam'. Modell says that 'the key

speaker is someone she claims is an authority on Islam, Sam Solomon. Sam describes

himself as a former Muslim who has converted to Christianity and he says that his life

will be in danger if his image is broadcast'. We hear him preaching against Islam and

saying it is about hate, as the camera lingers on the word 'hate' on his presentation

(Fig. 5.10).
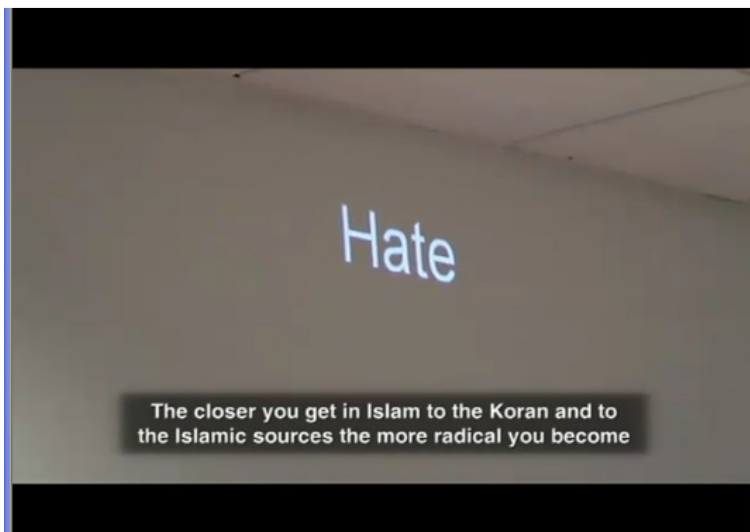
Fig. 5.10 'In God's Name'

Williams and Solomon aren't the only ones depicted as being anti-Islam. IGN

interviews Stephen Green of campaigning group Christian Voice, praying at the site of

a proposed mosque:

> **Modell:** Eventually Stephen says something that Muslims will find truly
>
> offensive, that appears to go to the heart of his spiritual belief.

> **Modell:** …You said it was your belief that Allah came from Satan.

> **Green:** Well Allah is Satan, yeah…

Despite Christian Voice being a small movement, Green garnered much media attention for visible protests against *Jerry Springer: The Opera* and continually appears in documentaries and news coverage as representing evangelical Christians, much to the consternation of many Christians who do not see a fringe group as speaking 'for them' (see Chapter Seven).

Dispatches emphasises that 'fundamentalist' Christians 'target' vulnerable groups, including children and 'the poor', we're told in IGN that 'Spreading the word is part of their mission and socially deprived areas are often their most fertile territory'[5]. The 'threat' to children from 'fundamentalist' religion is explicit in TNF and IGN, which criticise the development of faith schools and Academies and remind us that these are 'government endorsed' and cater for the children of 'ordinary' Britons. TNF presents this as the biggest threat of all:

> The danger that some evangelicals pose to freedom of speech, sexual health and homosexuals in Britain today is worrying enough, I suppose, but there's worse to come when we investigate exactly what other evangelicals are saying - to pupils in **state** schools... Of course, parents who want their children to receive this kind of education can pay... [but this] is a state school, and if you live within the catchment area, tough. (TNF, emphasis original)

Rod Liddle examines the Academy schools funded by Reg Vardy, whom he continually refers to as a 'used car dealer', presumably drawing on the stereotype of that profession as one not to be trusted. We're told that some such schools are strict disciplinarians[6], anti-women and anti-gay, whilst in IGN children are shown praying

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[6] Which is, we're told, 'perhaps the result of an unbending adherence to the Bible'.
[6] Which is, we're told, 'perhaps the result of an unbending adherence to the Bible'.

with teachers and being taught Bible verses. Both programmes emphasise the creation/evolution debate, a recurring feature of programmes about religion[7]:

> Being an independent school, Carmel does not have to follow the national curriculum. Here children are taught that evolution is wrong. (IGN)

> [On being told evolution is also a theory] Well it might not be a proven fact but the process which led us to accepting it… was at least wholly rational, rather than grounded in superstition. (TNF)

In a similar way to the 'Undercover Mosque' documentaries highlighting Saudi curricula, these programmes emphasise that creationist materials have come from America, reasserting America's villain status and reassuring viewers that this is not the 'British' way of thinking.

It is not just in schools that young people are deemed to be 'at risk'. TNF accuses American abstinence movement The Silver Ring Thing of 'foisting misleading sex education upon teenagers'. Abstinence is a recurring theme in programmes about Christianity, along with abortion, homosexuality and contraception. In TNF, Liddle's discussions are interspersed with images of teenagers in a youth service, and again the camera emphasises a charismatic worship style (Fig. 5.11), reinforcing its connotations with 'dangerous' activity.

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[7] Though, despite creation myths occurring in most faiths, the debate is almost always framed as being about Christian concepts of creation.
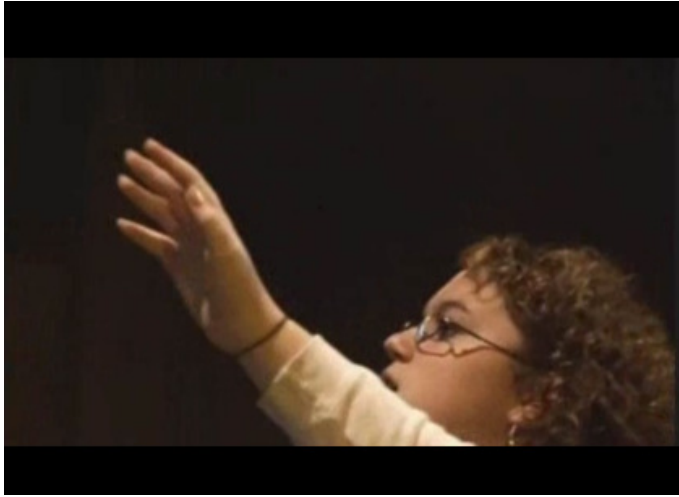
Fig. 5.11 'The New Fundamentalists'

Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph* the day before the broadcast of IGN, film-maker David

Modell reinforced the message of this documentary, and reaffirmed his depiction of

American 'fundamentalism' as a threat to liberal Britain, using the metaphor of

'spiritual warfare' to describe the US-based curriculum at Carmel school and American

groups' influence on British anti-abortion and anti-gay campaigners. Modell's article

equates the terms 'evangelical' and 'fundamentalist', referring to such beliefs as

'hardline', 'strict', 'radical' and 'uncompromising'. These Christians are depicted as

being non-'mainstream' and allied with the 'Pentecostal' movement (despite

evangelicalism being a pan-denominational strand of Christianity) which, according to

his documentary, has two million followers in Britain, out of a church-going population

of an estimated 7.6 million (TearFund 2007). While other media have concentrated on

Islam, his aim is to focus on the 'less apparent' radicalism of Christianity. Criticising

Sam Solomon's discussion of Islam, he suggests that the 'radical' Christians are just as

'bad':

> He could be describing the beliefs of the Christian fundamentalists I've met. He
>
> says these crazed fanatics believe any non-believer is destined only for hell

(check). That they must convert all non-believers to their belief (check). That

they think society must be built on their beliefs alone (check) (Modell 2008).

According to Liddle in TNF, British Christianity is represented by 'good old-fashioned'

Anglicanism, a 'brand of Christianity' that 'offers something very different from the

absolute, Biblical certainties of the evangelicals':

> No rock music, no waving of the hands in the air, and not much in the way of
>
> speaking in tongues so far as I can remember [footage of church bells, organ
>
> music, hymn singing]… I like this side of Anglicanism. Doubt, rather than
>
> certainty is its defining characteristic. It mirrors the rest of our culture, a place
>
> where debate is encouraged.

This 'liberal', traditional and inclusive Christianity is represented by two female clergy

presiding over communion (Fig. 5.12).

Fig. 5.12 'The New Fundamentalists'

A fundamental problem with religion?

That 'fundamentalist' Christianity and Islam are 'as bad as each other' is emphasised in

another *Dispatches*, 'Unholy War' (2007). The documentary looks at Muslim converts

to Christianity receiving death threats. We are told that a Muslim convert received 'abuse… fled his home… his children [were] sworn and spat at…' and was 'emotionally scarred'. The blame for the persecution of former Muslims is placed with familiar villains: 'hardline' materials from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and the influence of 'radical' groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir. However, we then see 'evangelical' Christian groups 'targeting' Muslims for conversion and the same concerns as in other *Dispatches* documentaries emerge (emphasis mine):

> One group is using dubious methods. We gained a report from **US-based** group the Caleb Project who sent people to Bradford's Muslim community.

We're told that this group were using the pretence of an ethnographic study to 'go in and convert' Muslims. Again, the emphasis is on the threat to the vulnerable within the Muslim community:

> This is example of the hidden and subversive tactics used by some American evangelicals… divorced women are a target… children are most susceptible… drug abuse and gang violence… [are] used as opportunities to spread Christianity and win converts.

As with most of their documentaries, *Dispatches* position themselves as moral guardians, reassuring us that they 'raised our concerns with Bishop Nazir-Ali about converting vulnerable members to Christianity'.

Other major faiths are generally not positioned as a 'threat' to British values in the same way as Christianity and Islam[8], though a key exception is the portrayal of Sikhism (a religion usually ignored in television) in *Dispatches*' 'Holy Offensive' (HO). This

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[8] Although *Panorama* has made a number of programmes about NRMs that position them as threatening.

programme looks at Sikh protests against the play *Behzti*, Christian protests against *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (*JSTO*), and the shooting of film-maker Theo van Gogh in Holland.

The pre-credits voiceover positions the show as being about 'religious fervour versus the freedom to express yourself' and questions whether religious groups have had too much influence on the arts. Protests following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (see Grillo 2007, Modood 2007) are shown throughout as a reminder of another visible symbol of religious protest. Booker-Prize winning Rushdie is shown speaking out against religious protests, as are other high-profile names, including Rowan Atkinson (famous for portraying 'very British' characters) and Nicholas Hytner, director of The National Theatre. *JSTO* is afforded high status as 'award-winning' and *Behzti* is portrayed as very pro-women, while actors in both are shown speaking up for their artistic merit.

In contrast, the protestors' actions are demeaned by being repeatedly emphasised as violent in the *Behzti* protests (Grillo 2007) and the eye rolling of the Jerry Springer actors when speaking to the Christian protestors. The presence of 'moderate' Christians and Sikhs involved in the arts as talking heads and in the casts further legitimises the productions, as does a more 'tolerant' (traditional, Anglican) church which allows *JSTO*'s cast to perform at a concert for charity. The Bishop of Chelmsford attends and tells us that 'freedom of speech is essential'. Although there is some discussion about blasphemy, and media and arts professionals are asked to consider how certain materials could be offensive, these criticisms are dismissed by their responses that the arts should be allowed to be provocative. Similar issues are raised in TNF where Green's protests are positioned as restricting the freedoms of 'you', the

audience, who presumably will not be offended by the same things (emphasis original): 'Some are campaigning to stop you watching things that might offend **them'**.

In HO, comparisons are made with the murder of Theo van Gogh in Holland, where the blame is laid on multiculturalism creating an enemy within[9] (Taylor 2009). Towards the end of the documentary, Liberal Democrat MP Evan Harris argues that secular groups are not afforded the same access to government as religious groups, we're told that writers and performers are lobbying parliament over the religious hatred law, and Rushdie says that 'we're seeing a revival of religious-based censorship… in a country where most people are not religious'. Britain is positioned as a predominantly secular place, and whilst there is some acknowledgement of the way religious groups might be offended, the offence is dismissed because there are 'tolerant' religious people who believe in freedom of speech.

A few months after TNF was shown, Rod Liddle broadcast a similar programme on Channel 4 called 'The Trouble With Atheism' (TWA), which looked at 'fundamentalist' Atheism with a critical eye. The focus of TWA is that 'the absolute certitude with which Atheists seek to destroy religion and the contempt they have for people who follow it' makes Atheism as problematic as religion: 'after all history has shown us it's not so much religion that's the problem, but any system of thought that insists that any group of people are… in the right'. Liddle uses the examples of eugenics and communism as negative consequences of Darwinism and Atheism. He calls some Atheists 'dogmatic and certain', similar terms to those he uses to describe evangelicals in TNF, and uses religious terms as he tells us that 'Atheism is becoming a religion of its own, with its

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[9] It is worth noting here that, as if to emphasise the difference of some of the religious groups and 'the rest of us', a number of the Sikhs who object to *Behzti* are not English language speakers, whilst all of those who support it are.

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own gurus, sacred texts and temples'. He ridicules Atheism's 'own brand of radical

loonies', such as American (naturally) David Bedford who changed his name to Darwin.

However, despite apparent similarities with TNF, this programme was a one-off, and

not broadcast as part of *Dispatches*. It was captioned 'The Trouble With Atheists by

Rod Liddle', positioning it more as an essay than an investigative documentary.

Whereas TNF's advocates for evangelicalism were local teachers, youth workers and

fringe protestors like Stephen Green, many of the Atheists Liddle speaks to are high

status scientists and academics such as Richard Dawkins. He ends, not by warning us

of the threat posed by Atheism as he ends TNF cautioning us about evangelicalism;

instead he offers a 'moderate' argument that 'the true scientific position of course is

that there may be a god and there may not be a god. Why can't we leave it at that?'

As I have shown in this section, within current affairs, 'fundamentalism' in Christianity

and Islam is seen as a threat to Britain in a number of ways. It threatens the liberty of

children and young people, the quality of their education and the ability of their (non-

fundamentalist) parents to intervene in their children's learning. Television discourse

constructs fundamentalism as a threat to freedom of speech and creativity, the right to

abortion and the rights of gay people. These fundamentalist forms of religion are

connected with Saudi Arabia (in the case of Islam) or America and Africa (in the case of

Christianity), rather than being 'British' versions of the faiths. In contrast, 'Britain' is

depicted as liberal, tolerant, sensible and rational. There is room in Britain for

'moderate' forms of religion, but those that do not represent ideal Britishness are

positioned as deviant, dangerous and foreign.

Religion and spirituality as a threat to the 'vulnerable'

As I have shown, there is a concern within documentary discourses about religion and spirituality about their relationship with vulnerable groups. Along with mainstream religions such as Islam and Christianity, alternative spiritualities and New Religious Movements (NRMs) feature in programmes highlighting their negative influence on women, children, the poor, the sick and the bereaved.

Concerns for women and gay people are recurring themes, with programmes such as *Queer and Catholic* (Channel 4 2001), *Witness*: 'Going Straight' (Channel 4 2000), *Transsexual in Iran* (BBC Two 2008) and *Revelations*: 'Divorce Jewish Style' (Channel 4 2009) exploring the negative effects religions have on these groups. Across genres and programmes, the role of women in religion, women's dress and appearance, and issues of abortion and sexuality recur frequently, with 'fundamentalist' strands of religion, and religious organisations outside of Britain, positioned as posing a threat to 'vulnerable' groups.

In the following section, the way television constructs religion as a threat to the 'vulnerable' will be explored through two key themes: the 'spirituality industry' and the threat to children.

The spirituality 'industry'

In keeping with Ofcom's guidance about claims for supernatural powers (see Chapter Four), programmes that explore themes such as spiritual healing and mediumship take a questioning, often sceptical, approach. Programmes investigating spiritual healing emphasise the potential exploitation of the vulnerable, the need to investigate such practices and the money being made by practitioners.

In *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed* (BBC Three 2009) (*GYPP*), Britain is again presented as a secular place. The 'Atheist bus' (see p15) (Fig. 5.13) and cityscapes are soundtracked by presenter Emeka Onono telling us that 'We live in an age of science and technology, yet we're still prepared to believe in the strangest things'.

Fig. 5.13 *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed*

Six part series *Trust Me, I'm a Healer* (BBC Two 2006) (*TMIH*) takes a similar approach, with Danny Horan's opening voiceovers positioning spirituality as almost anachronistic to contemporary Britain: 'I wanted to see why so many people in 21st century Britain believe in a man who claims he can work miracles'.

Many of those seeking healing or spiritual readings are depicted as vulnerable and desperate:

> It seems to me that the popularity of John of God is testament to people's need for hope, even in the most desperate of circumstances. (*TMIH*: 'John of God')

> What concerns me is the potential exploitation of vulnerable people (*Enemies of Reason*)

One of the most 'desperate' people we meet is British woman Chrissie Morgan, diagnosed with terminal cancer, one of several Brits visiting healer John of God in

TMIH. Morgan (Fig. 5.14) is often shown in bed or a wheelchair looking fragile and frequently shown crying. She is disappointed by John of God's failure to 'operate' on her and is told to go home. At the end of the programme, we're told that Morgan died shortly after her trip.

Fig. 5.14 *Trust Me I'm a Healer*: 'John of God'

Although the programme attempts to set up an enigma (Barthes 1970) within the narrative as to whether or not healing would occur, the emphasis on Morgan's fragility, and the presentation of the programme as an investigation make it unlikely that the mystery will be resolved with the revelation that John of God heals. The programme's conclusion attempts to construct a discourse of objectivity, discussing

'people's need for hope', but its scepticism is confirmed by Nick Cave's 'Into My Arms' playing over the credits with the lyrics 'I don't believe in an interventionist God… and I don't believe in the existence of angels'.

The dominant discourse in programmes about spiritual healing is one of suspicion. Horan says he 'can't see any real harm being done' by Stephen Turoff in *TMIH*, but we are given the impression that another aspect of his spirituality, photography that he claims shows spiritual 'lights', is questionable not least because the photos cause friction with his wife, shown frequently distressed by Turoff's behaviour (Fig. 5.15).

Fig. 5.15 *Trust Me I'm a Healer*, **'Stephen Turoff'**

BBC Three's *Conning the Conmen* (2007) (*CTC*) is less generous to Turoff, seeking to expose him (along with 'mediocre medium' Derek Acorah and several sales and business people). *CTC* describes him as a 'self styled cockney saint who manages the odd miracle', a 'fruitloop' and a 'faking psychic' whose 'super-duper powers' are described in sarcastic tones whilst 'Unbelievable' by EMF plays. The presenters, on the pretence of working for a Romanian television company, concoct a series of tasks to 'trick' Turoff, including asking him to greet their viewers in Romanian. Subtitles reveal this is a prank (Fig. 5.16):

Fig 5.16 *Conning the Conmen*

One of *CTC*'s key criticisms of Turoff is that he 'cons thousands of pounds out of sick and desperate people'. Spirituality is repeatedly constructed as a 'multi-million pound industry' (Crumm 2005, Carette and King 2005) in television discourse:

> It's a multi-million pound industry that impoverishes our culture and throws up new age gurus who exhort us to run away from society. (*Enemies of Reason*)

In *CTC*, the camera lingers on Turoff's house and pool, whilst in *GYPP*, we see frequent shots of cash registers (Fig. 5.17).

Fig. 5.17 *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed*

In *TMIH*, healer and 'mystic' Mary Malone is depicted as having two lives: one in Britain where she offers Catholic prayer, 'exorcisms' and 'healing' for free; and another in the USA where she charges money for psychic readings. She is shown visiting a 'vulnerable' family where a man committed suicide, and conducting a reading, telling the son his father was murdered. Another aspect of spiritual healers that lends them an air of suspicion is their blending of elements from different spiritual and religious traditions. In *TMIH*, Horan concludes that Mary Malone's 'two sides' appear to be competing:

> There's the devout Catholic healer with her talk of Satan and there's the new age psychic with her glass of water…for me they're not so easy to reconcile and from what I've seen the new age psychic wins out most of the time.

In *GYPP*, Gary is shown channelling the prophet Abraham and attending spiritualist ceremonies, whilst footage of him at 'psychic trade fairs' is intercut with imagery of his healing sessions. The footage of the fairs shows stalls selling dreamcatchers, angel statues and Buddhas, as if they were all equivalent parts of the 'spirituality' industry, suspicious because of its lack of coherence and its 'pick and mix' approach (Fig. 5.18).

Fig. 5.18 *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed*

Enemies of Reason (Channel 4 2007) (*EoR*) also connects a range of icons and practices from different spiritual traditions, mostly originating from the East (Fig. 5.19) as presenter Richard Dawkins says 'Atlantis', 'Chakras', 'angels' and 'the therapeutic stabs in the dark touted here in Glastonbury' are all 'great money spinners'.

Fig. 5.19 *Enemies of Reason*

Discourses of alternative spiritualities, therapies and medicines are repeatedly presented as being in conflict with discourses of science and rationality. In *EoR*, Dawkins positions spiritual and alternative therapies and medicines as 'desperately seeking credibility' and legitimisation by medicine and science. BBC Two showed two

series produced by the Open University, *Alternative Medicines* (*AltM*) (2007) and

Alternative Therapies (*AltT*) (2008) whose aim was just that; to test the claims made by

'alternative' treatments. Both were presented by Kathy Sykes, repeatedly referred to

as a Professor and a scientist. The OU's publicity materials describe them like this

(emphases mine):

> *AltM*: 'With an open-minded, scientific spirit [Sykes] examines the three most
>
> popular alternative medicines… Her investigation takes her into the **strange**
>
> world of shamans, therapists, **bizarre** practices and ancient texts. She hears the
>
> most **extraordinary** claims from practitioners and patients. She **forensically**
>
> **tests** the claims for herself and, using **ground-breaking scientific techniques**,
>
> she conducts her own experiments to get the answers. This is the most
>
> **authoritative and exhaustive investigation** into alternative medicines ever
>
> conducted on television'.

> *AltT*: 'Join Kathy Sykes on a **personal journey** of exploration into the
>
> **controversial** world of alternative therapies… The key to this series is Kathy's
>
> **open mind**. **Neither a true believer, nor an out-and-out sceptic**, Kathy is there
>
> to **assess each therapy scientifically**. She witnesses **extraordinary** examples of
>
> some therapies in action… investigates how what she has just seen might
>
> actually be working **scientifically**… subjects each therapy to s**erious**
>
> **examination**….

> This series offers more ways of **exploring therapies beyond the simple 'do they**
>
> **work?' approach**… In the end, Kathy shares her conclusions and discovers that,
>
> as in all the best **journeys**, she has learned as much **about herself** as she has
>
> about the subject she set out to explore'.

In both, Sykes' open-mindedness serves as evidence that she is an appropriate

presenter for the series and gives them a sense of impartiality (Kilborn and Izod 1997).

It is deemed rational and proper that she subject these treatments to scientific testing.

However, when the emphasis is on *medicine*, the alternative treatments are presented

as 'bizarre', yet when it is on *therapy*, Sykes is allowed to 'explore' herself on a

'personal journey' (see also Chapter Six). This need to 'test' healing (Ofcom 2009) is a

recurrent theme. Sykes is shown frequently in libraries or using her computer to

conduct research and and undergoes scientific tests to examine the claims of the

alternative healers (Fig. 5.20).

Fig. 5.20 *Alternative Therapies*

A similar approach is used in the 'Spirituality' episode of BBC Two popular science

series *Am I Normal?...* (2008) (*AIN?*) where another high profile scientist, Dr Tanya

Byron, uses scientific testing and research to explore phenomena such as spiritual

healing, prayer and speaking in tongues, phenomena relating to traditions within some

streams of Christianity and Spiritualism. Despite the 'spirituality' of the title, these are

framed within discourses of 'religion' and her opening monologue uses symbolism common to programmes within many genres[10]:

What place does religious belief, which depends not on rational thinking or scientific proof, but simple faith, have in the modern world?
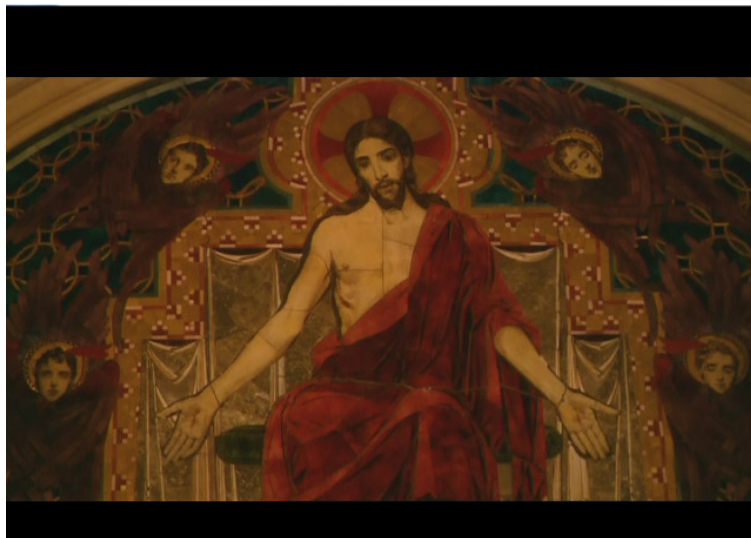
Religion has inspired beautiful art

And inspired acts of terrible violence.

Fig. 5.21 *Am I Normal?*

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[10] Including the 7/7 bus, despite no mention of terrorism, or even Islam, in the programme. It is assumed by the programme that the audience will have the cultural knowledge to interpret this indexical signifier (see Barthes 1970).

Byron positions herself as an 'expert', with eighteen years of practising as a clinical psychologist. Her discourse contrasts the 'rational' scientific approach with the 'eccentric' behaviours of believers. The claims she makes about 'mental health professionals' are not supported by reference to any specific examples:

> I was trained to interpret individuals' beliefs and behaviours using an empirical, evidence-based, rational approach. Traditionally in our secular society, religious devotion, where beliefs and behaviours are based not on hard facts, but on simple faith, has been regarded by mental health professionals as at best irrelevant, and at worst as a manifestation of mental illness. But I believe there is often a very fine line between behaviour we may find eccentric, but which we regard as acceptable, and behaviours we write off as abnormal.

Throughout, she tries to present an air of balance, asking whether psychology has demonised faith, but it is clear that Byron considers certain behaviours as falling outside of 'normality'. She repeatedly asks whether belief is a form of disorder, and seeks to provide psychological or scientific explanations for it. She attends a charismatic service and analyses the worship (Fig. 5.22):

> Within moments of the service starting, the audience is in apparent ecstasy. It's not that different from a rock concert or a football match. For believers, this euphoria is a result of being touched by God. To a psychologist, it seems more like the result of a highly suggestible audience being whipped up to a heightened state of emotion. I can spot all the signs of arousal typically found in large gatherings: the raised arms, the communal singing, closed eyes and easy intimacy with other believers suggest a learned experience, where open expressions of faith are both expected and encouraged.

Fig. 5.22 *Am I Normal*?

Byron talks to singer Sinitta about her conversion to Christianity, following a period of personal difficulties, including addiction. According to Byron, Sinitta's friend Simon Cowell was concerned about her faith as, Byron tells us, 'there is a belief that someone who becomes suddenly religious is having some sort of a mental breakdown'. Sinitta discusses her conversion, saying it was like 'losing an unhealthy mind and gaining a good one'. She says people thought she'd been brainwashed and that in a way she had 'had her brain thoroughly washed so she could see things in a clear perspective'. Although Sinitta's reference could be a humorous rebuff to her critics, this is not how we're encouraged to see it:

> Sinitta's decision to remake herself as a child of God has undoubtedly brought
> her happiness. Modern secular society, however, is uncomfortable with
> behaviour not based on hard fact, but blind faith.

Conversion, however positive, is framed here, not as a religious act but as an identity choice (King 1998).

Similarly, Sister Susan, a nun of Byron's age, is described as entering into a 'strict and self-denying lifestyle'. As Susan describes her calling, Byron's voiceover says 'Sister

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Susan makes it sound like an easy decision to turn her back on the outside world, but I wondered if that decision was more about a personal need than any divine calling'. As Susan explains how, in her mid-twenties, she had a sense that something was missing from her life, Byron tells her she did too, but finding her husband fulfilled the longing. Despite Susan telling us she had a boyfriend during this period of searching, who presumably did not meet this need, we are not encouraged to see Byron's fulfilment through finding a man as an unusual or insufficient response to her own longing.

Spiritual healing again comes in for criticism, with Byron's question, 'Where does a sincere belief in God meet behaviour which is odd, bizarre, or even damaging to others?' accompanied by footage of a Benny Hinn rally. Hinn's ministry is discussed in terms of the money that is made, and Byron tells us that: 'no medical evidence is ever produced and depending on your beliefs, the sick and disabled are either swept up in moment or touched by God' (see also: Schaeffer 2002).

Byron interviews presenter Jeremy Vine about his own faith, and he expresses his conviction with stutters and slight embarrassment:

> It's difficult to be a Christian in a post-religious world because anything [like that] is doubted… The closest I have come to knowledge is in prayer, when I feel I am not the only person in this conversation and there's someone there. Really I think that there is a god, that Christ was who he said he was... maybe that makes me totally mad, but that's what I think.

When asked about whether he would trust prayer or medicine for healing if his child was sick, Vine says medicine, confirming his position as someone with an 'acceptable' level of faith in that he has doubts, he doesn't believe in faith over science, and he wouldn't put a child 'at risk' (see pp. 207-230).

Despite 'spirituality' often being presented as a growing interest for Britons (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) on television it is most frequently featured in these kind of 'investigative' programmes that seek to debunk spiritual healing, mediumship, self-help and other practices. It is far more common for any positive benefits 'spirituality' may have to be discussed within the context of mainstream religions (see Chapter Six). Spirituality outside of mainstream religions is often characterised by its exploitation of the 'vulnerable': the sick, bereaved or depressed, who are perceived as giving their money to make those in the 'spirituality industry' richer, whilst themselves receiving no tangible benefit.

<u>Suffer little children?</u>

Perhaps those deemed most 'vulnerable' within television discourses about religion/spirituality, as within the media more generally (Buckingham 2000, Gauntlett 1997), are children and young people. Drawing on a discourse of childhood as a time of vulnerability and susceptibility (James and James 2004, Rosier 2009), a number of programmes, especially documentaries, portray religion/spirituality as a form of 'threat' to the young – as we have already seen in 'Undercover Mosque', 'In God's Name' and 'The New Fundamentalists'. Several documentaries[11] focus on the lives of 'religious' children and families, often from other countries. The young are often depicted as victims of sexual, physical, emotional or spiritual abuse, and the term 'abuse' also punctuates much of the audience response to such depictions (see Chapter Seven).

Panorama's 'Power to Abuse' (2000) (PTA) and 'Suffer the Little Children' (2002) (SLC) explore sexual abuse within the Catholic Church and Jehovah's Witnesses respectively.

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[11] Reality television has a very different approach (see Chapter Six) and children/young people are rarely featured in arts or history programming.

They use similar narrative structures, asking how abuse could happen, getting victims

to recount their experiences and investigating power structures within the churches.

SLC begins with the story of two British sisters who were abused by their father, and

the alleged inactivity of the Jehovah's Witness church they belonged to in response to

their accusations against their father. Through close-ups of them crying and

recounting their abuse (fig 5.23) they confess to interviewer Betsan Powys (Fig. 5.24)

who acts as an interlocutor (Foucault 1976, Shattuc 1997).

Fig 5.23 'Suffer the Little Children'

Fig 5.24 'Suffer the Little Children'

Although the abuse of one girl began when she was eleven and mostly occurred during her teens, the programme infantilises her by showing stock footage of a child's tea party with child models who are much younger (Fig. 5.25).

Fig 5.25 'Suffer the Little Children'

The story serves as evidence of abuse and corruption within the movement, which is swiftly conflated with both America and money, common signifiers of problematic religion:

> New York, the capital of big business, and a fitting home for one of the largest
>
> and richest religious organisations in the world. From here the Jehovah's
>
> Witnesses control over six million members… this, too, is where they keep
>
> records of suspected and convicted paedophiles in their ranks.

The narration makes it explicit that this is a movement that 'controls' its members, and protects child abusers within its 'ranks', reinforcing moral panic discourses about both NRMs and paedophilia (Critcher 2003, Jenkins 1992, Hjelm 2006/2011).

Several more case studies are explored with the term 'victims' used frequently to describe the children in both this and PTA[12], even if those featured choose to dtance themselves from the term:

I don't want to tell my story but I've heard the word 'victim' too many times today, and all of us are standing out here today and we're standing tall and proud and saying this happened and that it can't happen and we're survivors, and we're fighting and we're not victims.

Whilst SLC calls them 'survivors' immediately after this speech, the discourse soon reverts to 'victimising' the abused and highlighting the 'risk' the movement presents to children:

We asked the church for an interview to discuss the claims that they're putting thousands of children at risk. They offered us instead some video tapes… "Leave it for Jehovah". That, according to thousands of victims, is the Jehovah's Witness child protection policy laid bare.

Religion is portrayed in both programmes as enabling the continuing abuse, with church leaders being seen to cover up the accusations. In SLC, those who 'overcome' such as Heather, her sister Holly and mother Sarah Poisson, only gain freedom by removing themselves from their religion. Poisson and her children are portrayed as having 'no life' outside of religion. The personal 'cost' of leaving the church is illustrated starkly, but it is made explicit that Sarah's 'motherly love' is more important, and she eventually chooses the 'right' thing, following intervention from social workers:

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[12] The programme uses graphic descriptions of abuse from the (now adult) 'victims', but this is not seen as in any way an ethically questionable practice that might contribute to the 'harm' done to them.

Powys (voiceover): Time and again the girls were told to wait outside while their mother begged local elders for help. Time and again they saw her sent home to pray harder and be a better wife… Social workers… gave her a stark choice, leave your husband or we take your children. But if she left him, she knew the church would cut her dead.

Poisson: At that point I had to make decision between God and my kids. And I knew… well at that time I knew that if I chose my kids, I don't have prayer, but I didn't care anymore. So we lost everything in one day.

Powys (voiceover): Sarah Poisson had no life outside the Kingdom Hall. When the congregation cast her out she had no choice but to move away. She didn't just lose every friend she had, overnight she was homeless, penniless, scraping a living to bring up her children.

Even though, in both *Panorama* programmes, British abuse cases are prominent, they make clear that the ultimate responsibility lies at the centre of the organisations in other countries:

The final decision on the archbishop's future lies here in the heart of the Catholic Church in Rome… there's only one man who can force him to go and that's the Pope… we've exposed terrible failings in the makeup of the church which have left children at risk but it's those church structures which make Archbishop Ward very powerful. (PTA)

The continuity announcement for *Dispatches*' 'Saving Africa's Witch Children' (SAWC) (2008)[13] makes an explicit connection between 'extreme Christianity' and 'shocking

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[13] Which won a number of prestigious awards: International Emmy for Best Current Affairs (2009), BAFTA for Best Current Affairs (2008), Amnesty Media Award for Best Documentary (2009), Sandford St

child abuse'. This documentary follows the charity Stepping Stones Nigeria's (SSN)

work with children accused of witchcraft and the term 'abuse' is used frequently in this

programme and the 2009 sequel, 'Return to Africa's Witch Children' (RAWC)[14].

Children and young people are presented as lacking in agency (James 2009) and

needing help. Images of children crying (Fig. 5.26), looking sad and sporting injuries

punctuate both. Footage of deserts, shacks and discussions of poverty reiterates the

deprivation of Africa common in media discourse about the continent (See Kahn 2001,

Mahadeo and McKinney 2007).

Fig. 5.26 'Saving Africa's Witch Children'

Oppositions between the narrative's villains and heroes are reinforced through

language, lighting, sound and narrative events and the 'problem', a rise in accusations

of children being witches and subsequent abuse or abandonment, is blamed on the

religious context within Nigeria, with preacher Helen Ukpabio acting as a figurehead

'villain' throughout both programmes. Churches within Nigeria are described as being

'centres for extreme Pentecostal worship' where 'Religious fervour and an often

Martin Trust Best Religious Programme Merit Award (2009), One World Children's Rights Award (2009)
and the Rory Peck Sony Professional Impact Award (2009) (Channel 4 2010)
[14] This is largely a repeat of footage and commentary from the first documentary reframed with a 'what
happened next' narrative.

unquestioning acceptance of the Bible are combined with an historic deep-rooted belief in sorcery and witchcraft'. As with Mary in *TMIH*, combining spiritual traditions is seen as a sign of their danger.

The documentaries do not highlight the role of colonialism in bringing Christianity to Nigeria, and even make a distinction between the imported beliefs of that era and the more recent Pentecostal turn:

> Although there have been Christians in Nigeria since the 19th century, most are moderate. But an influx of Pentecostals over the last fifty years has shaped more extreme religious practice in some areas and it's during ordinary church services that pastors first raise the spectre of witches and wizards. Traditional African belief has it that nothing happens for natural reasons in life. Any ill-fortune is the work of witches. (RAWC)

A combination of 'traditional' African beliefs with this new 'extreme' Pentecostalism is presented as creating this abusive system. As with programmes on the spirituality 'industry' and 'faith healing', this problematic spirituality is associated with money:

> Exorcism is big business… preachers claim, for a price, they can exorcise demons, cure the terminally ill and even resurrect the dead. (RAWC)

We see a local man saying that Christianity in the Niger Delta is 'seriously questionable'; mixing Christianity and traditional beliefs 'all make nonsense out of it'.

Helen Ukpabio is portrayed as the key villain, and the rise in witchcraft accusations are explicitly linked to the influence of her film *End of the Wicked* which talks about child witchcraft. Ukpabio's video is deemed to have a negative 'effect' on Africans, with no acknowledgement of the complexity of so-called media 'effects'.

Ukpabio is described as a 'self-styled prophetess or evangelist' (SAWC) and 'one of the wealthiest and most influential evangelical preachers in Nigeria'. When a *Dispatches* reporter confronts her, she is shown saying 'a white man or a white woman cannot come into my country and say [things] against me' (SAWC). RAWC delights in replicating threats from Ukpabio such as a letter of complaint she wrote about the first film and a court order she tried to use against the organisations featured in SAWC claiming they were making an 'unlawful and unconstitutional infringement of her constitutional rights to the belief in God, Satan, witchcraft, Heaven and Hellfire'.

The most visible 'hero' in the films is white Briton Gary Foxcroft; described as 'an Englishman who has devoted his life' (SAWC) and a 'British charity worker who has dedicated his life' (RAWC) to the cause. His Lancashire roots are emphasised throughout and children are frequently shown reaching for him (Fig. 5.27).

Fig. 5.27 'Saving Africa's Witch Children'

Black Nigerian Sam Itauma of CRARN (Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network) also features prominently in the programmes, but the documentary clearly positions him as a helper. The salvation Gary and Sam offer comes through a 'safe' shelter for the children, schooling and political campaigns for their rights. The programmes are

unambiguous about the 'good' being done by those 'Saving Africa's Witch Children' and the harm being perpetrated by Ukpabio and others practising 'extreme' religion.

In RAWC, *Dispatches* also constructs itself as a hero, claiming the first programme effected change:

> Such was the impact of *Dispatches*' first report, that much has changed for Africa's Witch Children. Apart from the introduction of the Child Rights Act, some churches that branded children witches have been closed. Pastors and parents found [guilty] of abusing children are arrested and now make front page news.

Foxcroft appears to confirm the importance of the documentary in this process, saying the response from SAWC 'has been pretty phenomenal in many ways'. RAWC ends with Foxcroft and the children on a trip to the seaside, with connotations of traditional British holidays that the audience might perhaps associate with their own childhoods. There is an over-the-credits call to all the 'sensible', like-minded Britons at home to share in the 'salvation' by donating to the cause.

Dispatches is not alone in positioning itself as having an interventionist role for the children and young people featured. In *Everyman*'s 'The Hallelujah Kids' (BBC One 2001) (THK), filmmaker Christopher Morris revisits the American Walters family, whose 'child evangelist' son Shaun was the subject of his 1995 *Lowdown* film 'The Hallelujah Kid'. THK presents us with the enigma (Barthes 1970) of 'what went wrong' for Shaun Walters in between the two films, adding the storyline of his younger brother Jacob now being involved in the same ministry. Morris[15] presents himself as the voice of

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[15] Whose approach throughout is similar to that of other filmmakers of the era, such as Louis Theroux and Jon Ronson, in expressing 'care' for their documentary subjects.

rational concern, and as the one who can, perhaps, resolve the enigma and 'save' Shaun from his lifestyle and from preacher father Mike.

This form of presentation is common within factual television, where a presenter interprets the actions of those they are filming, inviting the audience to share in their reading. In this way: ''our' values inevitably frame 'them', sometimes even producing an implicit (unconscious) claim which functions to persuade the viewer that 'we'… have a truer perspective on 'them' than they do themselves' (Kilborn & Izod 1997: 47. See also Ashuri 2005, Corner 2003, Lorenzo-Dus 2009).

Throughout THK, footage of Shaun as a charismatic fourteen-year-old preacher is interspersed with footage of the now-nineteen year-old Shaun looking despondent, sitting alone or appearing distressed. Morris confirms the sadness of Shaun's situation by telling us that 'this [the bare room] is the first permanent home Shaun has ever known'. Shaun's father Mike is presented not as a controlling villain, but as a naïve and slightly ignorant man, misled by faith: 'He isn't rich. He left home at sixteen and has been grafting for God ever since… it's cost him a lot, not least his marriage'. Morris paints a picture of Shaun's childhood as being a problematic one:

> Sean went on the road aged seven, just after he'd been ordained. For ten years
> of his life he lived on the road… This was a tough life, one of endless churches,
> motels and diners. He had no friends and little education… It seemed to me
> that he was losing his chance at childhood.

There are numerous shots of motels and open roads, emphasising Morris' point about the loneliness and distance of the Walters' lifestyle.

In attempting to be the 'salvation' of Shaun, Morris frequently questions the family: 'are you happy with how Shaun turned out?... You don't regret taking him on the road for 10 years?' Morris continues to reinforce that Shaun is still not 'normal' throughout the programme, and he is compared frequently with younger brother Jacob who, it is implied, can still be 'saved' from the same fate as his older brother:

> Jacob seems to have carved out a life for himself both within and outside the church. At the age of ten the two things can co-exist... Yet at nineteen, Shaun has no friends and few interests... the settling down has come too late to give Shaun anything like a normal life.

Morris believes that he can be Shaun's confidant:

> I keep noticing him looking at me as if he's dying to make contact, but every time I catch his eye he looks away.

He repeatedly tries to engage Shaun (and Jacob) in conversation to try and 'prove' his assertion that Shaun has been damaged by his travelling evangelistic lifestyle. Morris creates a scenario specifically designed to 'trigger' Shaun's memories, as if he were Shaun's therapist:

> They still have the Cadillac in which Shaun spent so much of his early life, so I asked Shaun to let me film him with it. I wanted Shaun to relive his past. I've puzzled for five years over an incident we filmed at this church in Pensacola... it was here that I first saw just how vulnerable Shaun really was.

We then see archive footage of Shaun becoming distressed after offending a pastor at an event, claiming a demon was attacking him. At another event we see Jacob and Mike preaching, but time runs out before Shaun takes the platform. He is shown chewing his nails and looking down anxiously. Afterwards, Morris claims:

We sat down together and talked. I really didn't know what to say to reassure

him… his increasing strangeness was really beginning to worry me.

In a conversation with Shaun, Morris again attempts to act as his interlocutor and

counsellor:

Morris: I mean why would God show you a vision when you were six and then

let the devil torment you when you were serving him so faithfully? I just don't

understand Shaun... When you preach about demons and devils all the time,

surely it makes it worse for you in your own head? Why don't you take a break,

preach on something else, preach on love?

Shaun: You're right, you're right.

Just over half way through the documentary, there is a moment of revelation (Hill

2002) as Mike reveals that Shaun has a form of autism. Morris uses this revelation as

vindication for his suspicions:

Little action has been taken since and Mike has little understanding of what

autism is. If Shaun were mildly autistic, it would explain so much. His

awkwardness with other people. It could also explain the transformation that

occurs when he's on his favourite subject. Many autistics have harmless

obsessions but Shaun's obsessions with demons, devils and hell is gradually

consuming him. Mike seems to love and shelter Shaun but I got the feeling that

he doesn't seem to know now what to do for the best.

Similar concerns are echoed in other documentaries about young preachers, such as

Cutting Edge's 'Baby Bible Bashers' (Channel 4 2008) (BBB). Where 'Suffer the Little

Children' infantilises teenagers as 'little children', the title here infantilises the children

featured as 'babies', as well as drawing on a well-known derogatory slang term for Christians. Three children are featured, Americans Samuel (seven) and Terry (nine) and Brazilian Ana-Carolina (twelve). From the opening voiceover, discourses of childhood as a time of innocence are referenced, and it is clear what the documentary believes about their ministries - the children are being exploited by adults:

> Born-again parents are increasingly putting their children in the frontline of the crusade to convert sinners… Are these children just innocent conduits of the work of God, or are they the result of desperate parents and overzealous congregations in search of the miraculous?

Fig. 5.28 Promotional image, 'Baby Bible Bashers'

Samuel is the child featured most frequently. Fair skinned, blue eyed and with blonde hair, he looks 'cherubic', highlighted by the programme's promotional images which portray him with light radiating from him as if he is an angel (Fig. 5.28). The camera often films from his height as if to emphasise how small he is in the 'big wide world'. When he is shown preaching in public, the camera focuses on people laughing at him or disagreeing with his message.

Fig. 5.29 'Baby Bible Bashers'

As with the Walters boys in THK, Samuel is shown travelling with his father and being separated from his mother at frequent intervals and at one point he is shown crying and wanting his 'momma' (Fig. 5. 29). Samuel and Kendall are shown preaching about homosexuality and abortion which are, as we have seen, frequent themes in coverage of 'fundamentalist' Christianity. We see Samuel arguing with his mother, and the voiceover tells us that 'like any seven year old boy, he occasionally struggles with the rules'. Samuel is shown saying 'please don't put your hand on me' and the family ask for the camera to be turned off during the argument. The voiceover tells us his parents 'firmly believe disobedience needs punishment'. This is intercut with mother Vikki speaking to the camera about the bible saying 'spare the rod spoil the child' and claiming she does spank her children. We hear Samuel crying and yelping off-screen as we see a clip from his father's interview saying 'it's part of the training', leading us to suspect Samuel is being physically hurt by his parents.

The programme also hints at abuse within Ana-Carolina's section. Her relationship with her father, Ezekiel, is described as close, and subtitles translate Ezekiel as saying 'we sleep together, we wake up together and we live together' (Fig 5.30), although it is unclear whether what he is saying in Portuguese would have the same connotations as the English translation.

Fig. 5.30 'Baby Bible Bashers'
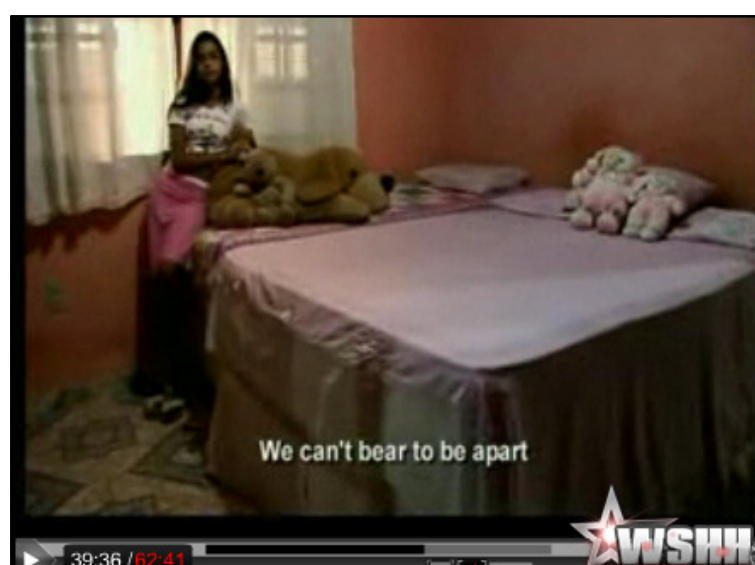
Fig. 5.31 'Baby Bible Bashers'

Fig 5.32 'Baby Bible Bashers'

Ana's bed is shown pushed up next to a double bed and she says she will sleep there until she is married. There is no context given as to why the family share a room (their house appears modest so it is possible this is the only bedroom), allowing the audience to draw connotations of an 'improper' relationship between Ana and Ezekiel. Ana is later shown freshening her breath over her voiceover telling us her father is 'everything', further emphasising this (Fig 5.32). We are later told Ezekiel was once in prison but 'won't speak of his charges', heightening our potential suspicion of him.

Fig. 5.33 'Baby Bible Bashers'

The familiar iconography of raised arms and preaching to symbolise charismatic worship[16] features throughout Terry and Ana's sections (Fig 5.33), with Terry's claim to be a faith healer treated with familiar scepticism. Terry's father and grandmother are described as having a 'master plan' for Terry to become a star, and we see a range of merchandise they have produced to promote him. The documentary reinforces connections between charismatic religion, child exploitation, Pentecostal worship, faith healing and money.

Even though the documentary purports to be objective, giving the children, families and congregations a voice, their (American and Brazilian) voices carry less weight than the British voiceovers and interviewers. The final voiceover anchors the message that these children are not being used by God, they are being exploited by their families:

> These three children are united by an overwhelming fear of the devil. Obeying their parents is their best bet of escaping an eternity in hell, something Ana-Carolina's father has made all too clear… Backed by his father's PR machine, Terry has the potential to mean big business… But at what cost?... And what about Samuel? His father is already planning new mission trips. Can Samuel ever live up to his father's religious expectations?

The programme's final words come, not through voiceover, but through Samuel saying in an interview that in hell 'worms are gon' be eating you', which is juxtaposed with his out-of-tune singing and guitar strumming of 'Amazing Grace'.

Although the children in BBB are looked at very much with a geographical 'other' eye (Riggins 1997) as Americans and Brazilians, *Deborah 13: Servant of God* (BBC Three

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[16] The documentary doesn't place the families within specific faith streams, but uses a general, unspecific term 'The Christian evangelist movement' to categorise them.

2009) (*D13*) looks at a British teenager living a 'religious' life. It takes a 'fly on the wall' approach, but its placement on BBC Three, a channel aimed at teenagers and young adults, suggests a different audience to those of THK and BBB.

The initial voiceover sets the scene:

> Meet Deborah… thirteen years old and very different from the average teenager living in Britain today. Deborah lives tucked away in a remote corner of rural Dorset. She rarely leaves the farmhouse where she lives with her Dad Andrew, mum Ruth and eight out of ten of her brothers and sisters… But all that's about to change. This summer, Deborah will spend a few days with her brother at university to get a taste of what life in the outside world is really like.

The programme's discourse repeatedly contrasts Deborah's life at home, where she is home-schooled, with that of the 'real world'. She is frequently asked questions about 'snogging', parties, fashion and sex, presumed to be 'normal' teenage concerns (see also pp. 276-280). She is described as 'a strict evangelical Christian' who 'believes she found God at the age of six and has never looked back'. In one sequence, she is shown talking to other teenagers, congregating in a bus shelter. The camera lingers on graffiti naming people 'slags' as she talks about her beliefs. The teenagers are interviewed afterwards, trying to articulate their own feelings about the spiritual:

> **1:** I think what she was saying was true but I don't think any of us here believe in God, so it's a bit weird to think that God created the world and God says we're gonna go to heaven or hell or like he decides for us, um, I mean I don't think… do you agree?
>
> **2:** Um yeah?

3: My nan and granddad are like Christians and everything and I went to church a lot when I was younger but I don't really believe in it that much.

1: 'Cos you don't really know when you were younger did you?

2: It's obviously like meant [to] like mean something but like nobody actually knows if it's true because nobody's ever been there and come back if you think about it.

As the sequence ends, the camera focuses on some paper in a gutter: the implication here seems to be that these are rejected copies of the tracts Deborah handed out to the teenagers, although it is unclear if this really is the case. The central crux moment (Morreale 2007) comes when the theme of Hell emerges. A mum at the 'outreach' puppet show[17] is shown to be appalled at the mention of 'judgement':

It's just too in your face, absolutely disgusting, talking about judgement day to young kids. My children are very impressionable and to be told that when you're in bed at night think about all the wrong things you've done and God will judge you, I thought what a load of crap that is.

Deborah is shown on a separate occasion talking to the interviewer about Hell, while her brother Matthew is seen to be concerned by this. His confession leads to a sequence where Deborah visits him at university. They are shown talking to Matthew's friends, shopping and in a nightclub with Katy Perry's 'I Kissed a Girl' playing. Deborah appears uncomfortable in the environment (although nothing is said about the appropriateness of a thirteen-year-old being in a student nightclub). Hell

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[17] Although when I interviewed the family they talked about the church they were members of at the time, who were involved in the puppet show, there was no mention of a church made in the documentary, presenting them as if they were acting outside of a church. The family told me several sequences of church services were filmed, but none were shown.

and boys punctuate the conversations Deborah has with the students, and we see a drunk female student asking if they want to write on her breasts.

I asked Deborah and Matthew about this trip and how it came about:

Matthew: I think the idea of the university trip came from me because I had said to them in one of the first meetings that when I went to university I had a bit of a culture shock… but I'd always said that was a positive thing because I got on with them really well and I could talk about my background and they could talk about their background… I could get on as a Christian in the "normal world" so I said one thing I would love for her to do is to come up, we could go to a park or something, sit on a bench with a bunch of my friends from up there and then Debbie could talk to them about the differences between their lives and their backgrounds and her life and her background.

Deborah: They wanted me to be really surprised about there's a bigger world and there's people with blue hair and stuff but I wasn't. I'm not as sheltered as they wanted me to be at times.

Ruth: Well your older sister has pink hair!

Matthew: Well when we actually did go up there it was really different… it ended up always being situations where Deborah couldn't have a chance to speak to them like a really loud house party or a club… I thought they would go up there and film in the club… then film Deborah having fun elsewhere in her situation and then compare the two, like, look these people are having fun in their situation and here Deborah's also equally happy without having to drink… instead they took Deborah and put her in that situation and it just seemed

uncomfortable, and I understand why they did, but at the same time it never felt like what I'd imagined.

The final sequence in the film depicts Deborah talking about her belief that Jesus has forgiven her and taken away her sins and she cries. The credits appear over footage of the family walking and running together. The family told me that they'd been given some editorial control over the final product, and this credits sequence came about at their request, as well as some changes to the narration:

> **Andrew:** Yeah, things the narrator said things like 'compulsory Bible study', well we have family devotion every day but I said the language you're using is quite emotive, you wouldn't call it compulsory tooth brushing but we have compulsory tooth brushing every day!
>
> **Deborah:** And they changed it.
>
> **Matthew:** They said you had no friends.
>
> **Ruth:** And the puppet show, they said something about the annual outing, something like that, never been out before.
>
> **Deborah:** An adventure out of my house! [All laugh]
>
> **Andrew:** They spoke about the Bible we use as being a radical Bible and that was changed.
>
> **Deborah:** Yeah, just because we use like the King James Version[18].

As with other participants (see Chapter Six), the family claimed the documentary wasn't a well-rounded picture and presented Deborah in a very particular way:

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[18] The translation of the Bible deemed suitable for a series of BBC television and radio documentaries marking its 400th anniversary in 2011.

> **Deborah:** I thought it only portrayed me in a certain light, like this is only a slim part of my life… they got me talking about hell a lot of the time and going out and witnessing like I don't have any friends… they filmed another family that came here… they came to stay and had a barbecue with us… but they didn't show that part… I thought if you watched it without knowing me at all or knowing how the media works and you believe everything you see, you could have thought [of] me as a lonely child who doesn't know anyone, stays in the house, doesn't know anything about the outside world, only knows how to witness to people every single day and tell them that they're sinners and sometimes I don't think it came out perfectly… [but] I think they could have made me look much worse and more radical than I am. I think I'm quite happy with the way it's done.

Despite reservations about some aspects, such as the emphasis on Deborah's 'isolation', they expressed that they were, overall, happy with the finished product.

Although this section has largely concentrated on children within a Christian context, other religions are portrayed as having a similar negative influence on children's lives. For example, in *Bodyshock*'s 'The Girl With Eight Limbs' (Channel 4 2008), there is repeated conflict emphasised between medicine and Hindus when it comes to the treatment of Lakshmi, born with extra limbs: 'To doctors, she's the result of a rare and life threating abnormality and needs an operation urgently… but people in her village believe she's a living god'. The educated medics are positioned against the residents of the Indian village where she was born. Villagers, including her parents, are seen as backwards, as we are told that her 'family lived a life untouched by the 21st century'

until her case received media attention[19]. Although her parents keep their faith, eventually they make the 'right' choice and choose for her to undergo surgery.

Whilst television discourses are carefully constructed so as not to entirely dismiss religious belief, they repeatedly express scepticism about the authenticity of spiritual experience, particularly when relating to children, and the over-riding message appears to be that faith is acceptable only when there is no chance of someone being exploited or deviating too far from accepted norms.

Conclusion

As we have seen, religious belief coded as 'fundamentalist' is deemed to be deviant and to pose a threat to rationality, tolerance, liberalism, wellbeing and security. In particular, both Christianity and Islam are deemed to have aspects that are potentially threatening to liberal, tolerant Britain.

The term 'fundamentalist' is frequently used in connection with particular language and imagery, providing strong thematic links between certain religious/spiritual practices and things we might find abhorrent, such as abuse. In terms of the portrayal of Christianity, charismatic worship, raised arms, speaking in tongues, creationism, anti-abortion protests, homophobia and the terms 'fundamentalism', 'Pentecostalism' and 'evangelicalism' become conflated, thus creating a homogenous, simplified picture of what in actuality is a diverse group of people with a range of beliefs and practices. With Islam, images of mosques, niqabs and prayer are associated with 'fundamentalism', 'clerics' and images of terrorist acts (see also Macdonald 2011,

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[19] The irony of this is not really picked up on within the documentary.

Abbas 2001, Poole 2002, Richardson 2004), even when programmes claim that 'most' Muslims do not believe in fundamentalist interpretations of their faith.

The 'threat' to the 'vulnerable' is a concern throughout, with the sick, depressed and bereaved, women, gay people and children being deemed most susceptible to the negative sides of religion and spirituality, although this is largely a reflection of the concerns for 'vulnerable' groups within Ofcom and broadcasters' guidelines (see Chapter Four). This 'threat' manifests in different ways: through physical, emotional or sexual abuse; through a potential challenge to human rights (e.g. abortion legislation or gay rights); through perceived miseducation (e.g. about sex or evolution); or through financial exploitation.

In the next chapter, I discuss how factual television employs the notion of 'journeys' to explore religion and spiritual practice. I show how the 'acceptable' forms of religion/spirituality are those that are both 'personal' and compatible with moderate, liberal 'British' values. The next chapter will show that even in programmes with very different narrative structures to the documentaries in this chapter, religion/spirituality, Britishness and 'others' are often represented in very similar ways.

Chapter Six: Programmes - The 'Journey'

Introduction: Journeys of faith

One of the most frequently used words in factual programming about religion and spirituality, indeed in factual programming in general, is 'journey'. The term is used to describe literal journeys across countries and continents as well as metaphorical journeys into the past, and journeys of self-discovery and transformation. Programmes of this kind fall into several factual genres, some of which are difficult to define, as they demonstrate the hybridity identified by Hill (2007) and Biressi and Nunn (2005). However, they can be loosely categorised as falling into the categories of travelogue, history, arts, fly-on-the-wall and 'reality'.

In this chapter I explore the different kinds of 'Journeys' represented within factual programming about religion and spirituality, which I have organised into Journeys to 'other' cultures, Journeys into the past, Journeys into the self and Journeys around Britain. As I will show, however, there is a lot of crossover between these four categories within many programmes.

Journeys to 'other' cultures

Several programmes, including *Mel B: Voodoo Princess* (*MBVP*) (Channel 4 2001), *Crucify Me* (*CM*) (Five 2003) *The Beginner's Guide...* (*TBG*) (Channel 4 2006-2007), *Extreme Pilgrim* (*EP*)(BBC Two 2008) and *Around the World in 80 Faiths* (*ATW80*) (BBC Two 2009), offer a mixture of 'reality', documentary, video diary and travelogue, although it is the latter category which they perhaps most clearly fit into. These series often feature well-known faces such as presenter and clergyman Peter Owen Jones (*EP*, *ATW80*) or minor celebrities (*MBVP/TBG*). The usual format is the

presenter/celebrity experiencing a series of religious or spiritual practices and sharing their thoughts and feelings on the experience with us.

As well as these more experiential 'travelogues', programmes such as *God is Black* (Channel 4 2004) (*GIB*), *Tsunami: Where Was God?* (Channel 4 2005), *Rageh Omaar's Tsunami Journey* (ITV1 2005), *God is Green* (Channel 4 2007), *The Fundamentalists* (Channel 4 2006) (*TF*) and *Louis Theroux: The Most Hated Family in America* (BBC Two 2007) combine travelogue with investigative documentary. These programmes may have an investigative 'edge' but share many stylistic conventions with the former group.

Programmes in this category are personality-driven, with our presenter delivering a mixture of interviews, voiceover, footage of themselves undergoing experiences, video diaries and monologues to camera. Beattie (2004) argues that the monologue gives 'the personal' added prominence and Kilborn and Izod (1997) claim it adds a layer of emotional 'authenticity'. Alsama and Pantti describe how this aids a sense of 'confession' with the camera and viewers acting as interlocutors (Shattuc 1997, Foucault 1978). This monologue form, despite being something rarely present in 'real' life, is seen to reveal something 'authentic' about the confessor:

> The thrill for viewers is to hunt for the few rare authentic moments when the participant seems to reveal their 'real self' (e.g. Hill 2002)… the form serves the purpose of giving the viewers the ultimate opportunity to assess the key characteristic of authenticity: the participant's integrity and credibility when it comes to feelings. The paradox of an individualized society is that while one is talking alone about one's deepest emotions, at the same time one is selling one's authenticity to viewers (2006: 181).

The journeys made are framed at the start. For example, it may be a journey of personal 'discovery' such as Mel B searching for her African 'roots' (*MBVP*) or *Witness*: 'Moving Heaven and Earth' (Channel 4 2002)(MHE) where filmmaker Andrew Slorance takes a road trip around the world 'in search of a miracle' to cure his paralysis. Others make grander claims for their travels. In *ATW80*, Peter Owen Jones discursively frames his journey as being about disproving the secularisation thesis (at least in countries other than our own), and representing the 'diversity' of the world's spiritualities, some of which 'offend', whilst others 'enlighten':

> People often say religion is a spent force but I suspect it's alive and kicking. Now I've been given a chance to see for myself… I know about the six big world religions, but they are only part of the story. Faith is belief in the sacred, in that which transcends the everyday and there's a startling range of belief out there, expressed in a rich diversity of rituals… I'm going on an unprecedented journey, to take part in rites rarely filmed before and learn about how humankind practices religion. As a priest I'll be confronting cultures that will challenge my values and prejudices. I'll be surprised, offended, enlightened and amidst the baffling and the bizarre I'll find moments of great warmth and serenity. My goal is to take the religious pulse of the planet. My hope is to understand the depth of humanity's fascination with the divine.

During this monologue we see footage of his work as a parish priest, contrasted with images from his travels, emphasising colourful and exotic practices such as snake-handling and Sufi whirling. The language used illustrates the way in which the religion and spirituality of other countries are constructed across all programme discourses in this category; as sometimes offensive or bizarre but with moments of 'serenity'.

Look at me, looking at 'them': travelogues and the practice of 'othering'

Whilst ostensibly a personal account of individual experience, the presentation of 'others' is very similar across programmes. Wooden church signs from the 'Bible Belt' signify America (Fig. 6.1) and impoverished villages and 'tribal' dancing, Africa (Fig. 6.2).

Fig. 6.1 *The Fundamentalists*

Fig 6.2 *Mel B: Voodoo Princess*

In many cases, the 'unusual' nature of the beliefs and practices of 'others' (Ashuri 2005, 2009) is highlighted by making individuals seem bizarre or exotic. For example, in *The Beginner's Guide… to Yoga* (2007), Jayne Middlemiss searches for a 'guru'. When she meets her guru Lali-Baba she cries 'Oh no! He looks like a right nutter'. Lali-

Baba is covered in ash and carries a skull on a stick. Throughout his chanting, the camera zooms in on his features, accentuating his exotic, almost animalistic qualities (Mills 1989, Hall 1981, Riggins 1997).

Our 'guides' present themselves as open-minded by their willingness to travel. This helps reinforce when a practice is acceptable or not. Frequently, they decide for us which practices these 'others' engage in are authentically spiritual and which are 'bizarre', 'sinister', amusing or 'uncomfortable'. During a voodoo sacrifice to Thron in *ATW80*, a puppy and kitten are sacrificed and Peter Owen Jones finds this too much to take: 'For the first time since this series began, I just want to go. I don't, I don't want to be part of it. You know I've got, I do have lines and the line's been crossed. I just see it as something profoundly dark. It's not for me. I'm not enjoying this at all'. In *Crucify Me*, Dominik Diamond's mother and wife express concern about his plan to be crucified. Diamond's wife says 'I don't really have any insight into why I think it's so hideous', and through his 'journeys' to Jerusalem and the Philippines, Diamond comes to the same conclusion, via a recognition that he needs spirituality in his life, just not one that 'extreme'.

Similar themes occur in *The Beginner's Guide to… L Ron Hubbard* where Hardeep Singh Kohli visits 'the Free Zone'[1] in Germany and Russia. Kohli tells us that 'Everyone I told of my impending journey reacted either with laughter or scorn', and the preview clips at the start feature him shouting 'fuck off' very loudly, him calling a man stupid, the same man giving a Nazi salute (Fig. 6.3), strange looking electrical contraptions (Fig. 6.4), and people saying he is being brainwashed, all set to the dramatic strains of 'O Fortuna', often used to signify a slightly camp or humorous sense of 'dramatic tension'

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[1] However, he refers to 'Scientology' throughout the programme.

in entertainment and reality programmes, most notably *The X Factor* (ITV1 2004-present).

Fig. 6.3 *The Beginner's Guide… To L Ron Hubbard*

Fig. 6.4 *The Beginner's Guide… To L Ron Hubbard*

Kohli begins by declaring his open-mindedness: 'my parents taught me, and it's in the Sikh scriptures, that there are many roads to God'. He refers several times to the programme being a 'spiritual journey'. As he describes Scientology's origins and beliefs, we see clips of 1950s American cartoons (Fig. 6.5) and grainy footage of hospitals from the same era.

Fig. 6.5 *The Beginner's Guide to…. L Ron Hubbard*

When Kohli describes the process of 'auditing' being about healing past memories, black and white footage of a dancer plays, giving a comedic, mocking feel (Fig. 6.6). Archive films and cartoons are used throughout the programme, usually with visuals unconnected to the voiceover.

Fig. 6.6 *The Beginner's Guide to… L Ron Hubbard*

The discursive construction of 'Scientology' is of something bizarre and sinister. Kohli asks 'why are some of the most visible people on the planet publicly singing its praises when the church is awash with accusations of cultism, brainwashing and silent births?' He expresses concern that he will be brainwashed and says 'I hope I won't get fucked up doing this film'. We're repeatedly told that he is anxious and worried and even

when Kohli meets followers who believe it has improved their lives, the language used to describe how 'we' see Scientology remains negative. When he finds himself believing some of the teachings, he expresses fear that he will end up 'taking a left turn down bizarre'. Dramatic music plays during the 'auditing' scene, and there are several close-ups of the equipment (Fig. 6.7), although the music changes to a softer piano piece when Kohli shares memories during the process and discusses his difficult relationship with his brother. Whilst his conclusion is that Scientology does help 'real people' and he isn't sure whether he will pursue it, the final line that anchors the programme is 'Scientology is still a dirty word'.

Fig. 6.7 *The Beginner's Guide to… L Ron Hubbard*

Whilst in an ostensibly more 'serious' genre, Panorama's 'Scientology and Me' uses similar techniques to *TBG*, with footage of scientific 'equipment', and references to celebrities, cults and secrecy, reinforcing their portrayal as a 'social problem' (Barker 2011). It claims that Scientologists believe the Holocaust was caused by psychiatrists, leaving us in no doubt about its negative practices. Again, accusations of sinister 'brain-washing' are made: 'I find Scientology's hijacking of the holocaust sickening.

After ninety minutes I feel as though they're taking control of my mind and I can't bear another second of it'.

<u>The 'religious' guide and authenticity</u>

Often, a presenter's confession of their own faith position can serve to legitimise their 'reading' of others' spirituality. In the case of Aboriginal 'baby smokers', Aboriginal people carrying out a traditional infant 'blessing' ritual, Peter Owen Jones concludes that their practice is inauthentic because, now the participants have been converted to Christianity, it has been removed from its original spiritual context within 'authentic' Aboriginal culture:

> There's something not quite right here… I'm beginning to believe they've forgotten the spiritual meaning of this ritual… I wonder if the Aborignal culture is just becoming a tourist spectacle… I feel like a tourist myself… This is not what I'd hoped for, I still want an insight into their aboriginal roots… as an Anglican I don't mind that they're Christian. I should be thrilled, but somehow I think that all my romantic, somewhat childish illusions about the great wonder of dreamtime are, uh, being shattered completely. What I feel like I'm left with is an empty remnant of ritual completely severed from its religious context and, I don't know, I just found that upsetting.

Owen Jones' account here, as elsewhere in *ATW80* and *EP* contains many discursive features that serve to reinforce his credibility. He stutters over his words and struggles to articulate his feelings. There is a degree of self-reflexivity (Corner 2003, Ruby 2005) as he acknowledges his own preconceptions, what he 'should' be feeling as an

Anglican. That he is a Christian[2], and is rejecting the spiritual authenticity of these 'other' Christians gives weight to his interpretation that the 'baby smoking' is inauthentic. Similarly, his own status allows him to be critical of Korean Pentecostalism:

> I'm a bit worried, my own Anglicanism is pretty laid back. What I'm going to see is hot, full-on Christianity with an emphasis on the fundamentals of faith.

And in America he says that, as a Christian himself, he did not find Evangelical[3] worship a spiritual experience:

> I come much more from the still, small voice of calm school and I don't really like being shouted at, yelled at, preached at… I think it's fair to say tonight I didn't see any miracles. But what I did see was a very strong God saving America and there is no room for any other religion within that.

In *God is Black* (*GIB*), Robert Beckford's status as a black, academic Christian whose ancestors are African, reinforces his credibility. His aim for the 'journey' to Africa is borne out of a concern for the English church[4], which is under 'threat' from the continent (emphasis original):

> As a Christian and a theologian, I'm deeply troubled by the church's decline. I'm on a journey to discover what the future of Christianity in this country will be… The Church of England has never been more vulnerable and this is the biggest threat it's facing. **This** is African Christianity. It comes in many forms,

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[2] Owen Jones, along with other presenters with a self-declared faith such as Omaar, Dowd and Beckford, presents himself as liberal, open to questioning his faith, supportive of homosexuality and equality and critical of 'fundamentalist' belief.

[3] In this case Evangelical and Pentecostal are used interchangeably (see Chapters Five and Eight).

[4] Represented by a liberal female vicar, Sally. Beckford's video diary says this of her: 'I like Sally, she's a top vicar… but her confidence in the liberals seems to be a little misplaced'.

it's enormously popular and hugely ambitious and it's spreading across the globe. In Britain's cities it's already taken hold.

Beckford visits Anglican and Pentecostal African churches, and in both, finds attitudes that are presented as alien and challenging to Britain. In his video diary, he says that:

There's no room for critical thinking…[or] individual expression… [it's] as if they've rehearsed this… and worse still, it's completely inflexible… I find them charming, but their Christianity is pretty hardcore, and the ideas behind it are diametrically opposed to the traditions of the liberal church in England.

In the Pentecostal churches, Beckford visits healing services where people are seen holding placards with their conditions on, and the camera lingers on one that says 'HIV/AIDS'[5]. Beckford says to camera that he has never seen anything like it before: 'it is absolutely mind-boggling what's taking place'. In voiceover, he says 'If this is the future for Christians in Britain, then heaven help us'. The Sunday school he visits is 'just as troubling'. We see children singing that the 'Holy Spirit is flowing through his anointed servant', preacher, TB Joshua. Beckford tells us 'It's not God they're worshipping, it's the man in the blue suit. This is one of the prime indicators of a cult'. This reading is further anchored when Beckford interviews Joshua and says 'I don't have a clue what he's talking about…his answers to all of my questions were just as opaque'. Unconvincing interviews with leaders within religious or spiritual movements, or being refused an interview occur frequently, emphasising how untrustworthy certain leaders are: this is also a feature of 'Scientology and Me' and several other current affairs documentaries.

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[5] HIV/AIDS in Africa is also a familiar subject within British media and are the subject of *Panorama*'s 'Can Condoms Kill' (2004) which blames the Catholic church for their spread.

One important aspect of the 'travelogue' format is comparison of 'others' with Britain,

reinforcing both the 'lack' in Britain and, more often, our superiority to other nations.

Fig. 6.8 *The Fundamentalists*

For example, in *TF*[6], visiting an American mega-church (Fig. 6.8), Mark Dowd

demonstrates his discomfort with 'the kind of demonstrative worship, captured by

church cameras which had this rather self-conscious English Catholic pining for Latin

Anthems'. In most programmes, whilst Britain is seen as superior, compared to other

less advanced, bizarre or threatening cultures, there is sometimes an argument that

'they' may have something 'we' are missing. This is particularly evident when the

'journeys' yield results.

The effect on 'me'

The spiritual practices encountered by the guides in these travelogues have a range of

effects. Often the approval or disapproval of a faith, individual, or practice is based on

how it makes our guide feel. Jayne Middlemiss frames her reaction in terms of

whether or not spiritual guide Lali-Baba is the right 'choice' for 'her' spirituality, saying

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[6] Although *The Fundamentalists* sees Dowd travelling around the world to explore what
'fundamentalism' is and its role in several world faiths, its application to Britain is made clear through
the familiar image of the bombed-out bus on 7/7.

'He's not my guru, there's no way he's my guru, he's not my type' (*TBG… Yoga*).

Throughout his journey in MHE, Andrew Slorance describes the ceremonies, places

and people he encounters as bizarre, and often seeks to rationalise his experiences:

> I just felt his hands on my head… [after being stood up] soon my legs gave up
>
> and I was back in the chair. It's not unusual for me to get muscle spasms in my
>
> legs… this was obviously what was happening, not divine intervention.

Humour is used by presenters as they describe their experiences. Peter Owen Jones

uses a range of 'knowing' facial expressions, Hardeep Singh Kohli bares his bottom and

most use humorous asides:

> **Slorance:** Perhaps the bizarre fairground music that was piped through was to
>
> lighten the atmosphere. (MHE)

> **Owen Jones:** [on Indian eunuchs] What a life to have your genitals cut off and
>
> go round dressed as a woman singing incredibly badly. (*EP*)

However, the 'culmination' of journeys is some form of spiritual or transformative

experience. Unusually, particularly given the Broadcasting Code's emphasis on testing

claims of healing (see Chapter Four), MHE concludes not by dismissing spiritual healing

altogether, but with Slorance visiting John of God/Jao and having what he perceives as

a spiritual experience:

> I felt that I had come to the right place. What was happening here was
>
> incredible, I felt that I wanted to understand more… I found that my body
>
> seemed to be possessed by the energy in the room… What had gone on at the
>
> Casa may look horrifying but I genuinely think it may work for me.

Slorance is not healed, but vows to return to John of God's Casa and this is where the programme ends. However, this is a very rare example, and for the most part, the impact is something much more mundane, such as a sense of calmness, a new respect for believers or a resolve to live slightly differently. There is not usually any 'conversion', although in some cases, such as Slorance's, Kohli's and Mel B's, there is an openness to exploring further the faiths they have visited.

The kinds of practices our 'guides' respond to most often are quiet, still practices such as meditation, or those involving nature. Physical manifestations, speaking in tongues or hearing sermons do not tend to be cited as experiences that cause a positive effect. Even after a 'spiritual experience', presenters are often unable to clearly articulate their response, and express self-consciousness about having experienced anything at all:

> **Middlemiss:** I don't really talk about this stuff… I came back talking about it and people looked at me as if I were a nutter, and when I bathed in the source at the ganga, people said 'wasn't it cold'? I didn't feel cold, all I felt was electric, alive and living, and like a big volt had gone through me and I understood absolutely everything. It was amazing. It was beautiful… I feel like a part of me died when I was in India… yoga is liberation… liberating yourself from yourself. (*TBG… Yoga*)

> **Mel B:** It was a very, very magical experience. I believe in it… they did four chicken sacrifices, which I thought I'd be quite freaked out about, but actually I wasn't… I feel like, er, blessed, erm, sacred, changed, calm - not changed, but [a] calm woman. (*MBVP*)

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Sometimes the effect an experience has had on a presenter is not only personal, but causes them to reflect on what is 'wrong' with the West:

Owen Jones: What's really struck me here is that I think for the first time in a very, very long time I've seen male physical affection that is nothing to do with sexuality at all... as a man it has really made me feel how lacking we are in our society because any form of male affection is seen as homosexual... how much we have lost in the West, associating affection with sexuality... Inexplicably I'm there doing Zen, doing martial arts... with a bunch of people who look after each other... it is love, unselfish... and I'm filled with a deep sense of belonging, to the whole group. (*EP*)

Journeys into the past

Several arts and history programmes also adopt the discourse of 'journeys', with many partly utilising a 'travelogue' format. Journeys into the past tend to look not only at the development of a belief system, culture, religious text or spiritual practice, but at its contemporary relevance. Many programmes in this category begin by positioning Britain as secular, with a religious history (see Abercrombie and Warde 2000, Brown 2001, Walter 1999). They tell us religion is assumed to be something of the past, but that this is not the whole truth:

Ours is said to be a godless age. Yet billions remain faithful to religions thousands of years old. (*Christianity: A History*, Channel 4 2009) (*CAH*)

Once, faith was at the heart of all local communities. (*The Way We Worshipped*, ITV1 2006) (*WWW*)

In this section, I look at three key types of programming. The first type examines the history of belief and disbelief, and the way that even those with a global outlook connect these histories with Britain and Britishness. The second type explores the role of religion and spirituality in culture, and the third seeks to discover the 'truth' about religious figures and texts.

<u>Britain, the world and a history of (dis)belief</u>

Pagans (Channel 4 2004) begins like this: Richard Rudgley tells us that 'We think our lives are shaped by 2000 years of Roman and Christian tradition but I've never really bought into this… we lived in a different world before that and I believe that world shapes who we are today… this is the world of the Pagan'. However, although his stated aim is to remind us how Paganism has shaped how we are today, the series 'others' Pagan practices in a number of ways.

Episode one, 'Sexy Beasts', claims it wants to show how Roman and Christian thinking misunderstood Paganism, seeing 'some Pagan behaviour…too shocking to contemplate'. However, the programme revels in this 'shocking behaviour' and in wondering about the sexual and violent nature of Paganism, particularly the idea that people and animals were possibly having sex with each other. The title cards for the episode feature the imagery of dripping blood to further emphasise the barbaric, animalistic nature of Paganism. Rudgley compares male 'mastery' of animals to driving a sports car, and when it comes to women, 'depending on who you read they spent a lot of time with their kit off, showing their genitals to cattle and pleasuring themselves with giant stone dildos – but how do we separate fact from centuries of Christian fiction?' The answer, apparently, is to show stylised footage of naked women dancing

round monuments and to look at ancient Norse books and play exaggerated drum music with visual highlights on the words relating to animals and sex.

Despite claiming to be about British history, Rudgley spends much of the programme travelling overseas. When visiting Estonia, he tells us 'I had every cliché in my head as I was driven through the wilds of Estonia. I was being taken to a place I'd heard of called the death house, I felt like I was entering a 70s slasher movie'. His description is accompanied by shots of burned out vehicles and wilderness.

Throughout the series, Pagan practices are deemed to be different to 'ours'. The second episode focuses on 'magic' and is full of 'spooky' sounding music, references to 'magicians', 'witches' and 'wizards' and repeated assertions that 'magic existed in a different world to our own'. The third episode focuses on manhood, violence is again emphasised, and we learn that, in contrast to 'us', 'Pagan kings would spend more time with their gods than their families'. The fourth programme looks at the relationship with nature and again reiterates how different the Pagan world was from our own: 'It's difficult for us today to imagine having a meaningful relationship with a tree'.

Throughout the series, Paganism is framed as a historic practice. Contemporary Pagans are not featured, other than one or two examples of people in 'other' countries, such as women Rudgeley meets who try and live 'as Vikings'. The implication is not that this is a faith which is still relevant, but one that we have evolved out of. Although there is an attempt in the conclusion of each episode to back up his opening claim that there is something of Paganism 'in us', these connections are very loosely made and do not extend as far as 'us' being like 'them'. Instead of communicating with trees, having sex with animals or cooking bodies, 'our' Pagan

roots simply call us to appreciate nature a little more, 'find ourselves' and see the 'magic' in contemporary life: 'When we feel the pull of the countryside, that's our Pagan past calling us; when we feel dissatisfaction with our urban landscape… that's our Pagan past calling us to reconnect with ourselves' (episode four).

Pagans is unusual for its presenter not explicitly stating their faith position. As with travelogues, most history programmes feature presenters who position themselves in terms such as 'a former Christian' (Michael Portillo) and 'not a Christian but a candid friend of Christianity' (Diarmaid MacCulloch). *A History of Christianity*[7] (BBC Four 2009) (*AHC*) features British historian Diarmaid MacCulloch's 'journey' to seek out the religion's past, whilst Channel 4's *Christianity: A History* (2009) (*CAH*) offers eight individual polemics on this history, each episode preceded by a continuity announcement emphasising 'a personal journey' or 'a personal take'.

Although the Channel 4 series is more polemical, and the BBC series broader in its coverage of types of Christianity (the Eastern Orthodox Church, for example, features in *AHC*, but not in *CAH*), they have much in common. The wonders of religions are displayed through sweeping shots of buildings, emphasising their grandness (Fig. 6.9), whilst candles, crucifixes, English countryside churches, the Dome of the Rock, Catholic mass and Pentecostal worship with arms raised are all familiar indices of the faith used in the opening sequences and throughout the episodes.

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[7] Prefixed onscreen as *Diarmaid MacCulloch's A History of Christianity*.

Fig. 6.9 *A History of Christianity*

Opening voiceovers, backed by dramatic music, emphasise the 'scale and drama' (*AHC*) of the faith which, 'Whether we are believers or we are not… continues to exert the profoundest influence on the world in which we live' (*CAH*). Both talk about the inspiration and the conflicts of the faith:

> Religious belief can transform us for good, or for ill. It has brought human beings to acts of criminal folly, as well as the highest achievements of goodness and creativity (*AHC*)

> It brought salvation to countless people and death and destruction to countless more (*CAH*)

Both emphasise Christianity's 'survival' through persecution, wars and secularism, this latter 'particularly in Western Europe, where it seems threatened by the apathy of a secular society' (*AHC*). In *CAH*, Cherie Blair argues that the decline in Western Europe, and Britain in particular is not replicated in other parts of the world, such as America (supporting the claims made by Mitchell 2004, Davie 2000/2007, and Berger et al

2008), although unlike Liddle and Owen Jones, she sees the British emphasis on old buildings and tradition as something holding the church back[8]:

> For me, it has to break out of the old straitjacket of a religious system dominated by ancient static buildings built for another age. Christianity is not a physical building but a body of people. Beautiful as these buildings are, my faith is not about architecture, it's about community.

However, she emphasises that the church needs to modernise through becoming more gender inclusive and 'creating bridges between cultures'. Beckford, in his episode on the Dark Ages, also calls for tolerance and acceptance, although this is aimed not just at Christians, but at Britons:

> Today in a world where asylum seekers are vilified, where racism, homophobia and social exclusion are still common, where Islamic extremists and Christians who are angry vie for the headlines, I believe the message of Lindisfarne is needed now more than ever. It has revolutionary potential because it teaches us that identity is neither fixed nor given but always changing and that the most creative time is when these identities are open to others. But even more important, those Dark Ages gave us a sense of national identity, one state, one language and until recently one religion. You don't find that in many countries, but you do in Britain… the peoples of Britain created a new idea of themselves a Christian identity which made us what we are today.

The importance of Christianity to our national identity is also emphasised in ITV1's *The Way We Worshipped* (2006) and *My Favourite Hymns* (1998-2005) and BBC Four's *Sunday Schools: Reading, Writing and Redemption* (2009), all of which take a nostalgic

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[8] Blair's programme is also unusual in its lack of demonisation of American evangelicalism, although she was criticised for this by members of the audience (see Chapter Seven).

view of Christianity's place in shaping people's experiences and morals. However, these programmes frame the religion more as something that was about communal identity and learning 'right and wrong' (*WWW*), rather than a spiritual experience.

They also emphasise Anglicanism or 'Christianity'/'the church' in general, and present a Southern English setting for much of the discussion, rather than looking at the impact of strands such as Scottish Presbyterianism or Methodism and its influence in Wales and in working-class Northern English communities.

History series do not present Christianity as entirely 'doomed'. Blair, in *CAH*, thinks it is still 'as strong as ever' and will 'prosper' if different faiths work together, whilst *AHC* argues that churches like St Martin-in-the-Fields that work for social justice and have a liberal agenda have an approach compatible with contemporary Britain.

However, the threat of the 'other' remains. *AHC* repeats the connections made in other programmes between 'Evangelical Protestantism' and money and political power. In *CAH*, as in *GIB*, the emergence of the African Pentecostal Church is seen as a challenge in Kwame Kwei-Armah's[9] episode, and he emphasises their desire to evangelise the nations that once brought Christianity to them:

> Europe is now the new dark continent, a place where Christianity is now a shadow of its former self. The missionary boot is on the other foot.

In *A Brief History of Disbelief* (BBC Four 2004) (*BHD*), Jonathan Miller argues that he does not want to use gimmicks such as reconstruction in his presentation. Standing in a large library (Fig. 6.10), he positions himself as being 'above' the trivialities of television documentary and offering something more serious. Despite this claim, the

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[9] Another black Christian presenter.

programme uses classic black and white clips of silent movies in a manner similar to

TBG's L Ron Hubbard programme (Fig. 6.11).

Fig. 6.10 *A Brief History of Disbelief*

Fig. 6.11 *A Brief History of Disbelief*

His opening episode begins with contemporary connections: interviews with

philosophers, scientists, historians and journalists; vox pops with Britons in a shopping

centre all declaring their own disbelief; and imagery from 9/11[10]. He claims that

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[10] This programme was made before the 7/7 attacks.

people today 'enjoy the luxury of thoughtless disbelief'. In his conclusion to the series, he acknowledges that there are tolerant believers and believers who are scientists, but reminds us of the 'long history of atrocity committed in the name of religion'.

He cautions that:

> Islam has gone about a widespread, but by no means universal, mutation, and the non-Muslim West is seriously threatened for the foreseeable future by swarms of these lethal mutants. And, on the other hand, there is now an uncouth cabal of short-sighted Christian fundamentalists in the White House …one way or another I think it's increasingly important for those of us who don't believe to establish an eloquent and in all probability completely ineffectual resistance.

These other cultures and their fundamentalist interpretations of religion are, as always, a threat to 'us'.

Programmes about the history of (dis)belief use a particular, familiar discourse: the rise of Rome; the significance of Jerusalem to the three Abrahamic faiths; the role of religion in conflict; and the role of science and the Enlightenment in 'secularisation'. This last topic is almost always discussed in terms of evolution versus creationism, and proponents of the latter are usually American. In most programmes, including *BHD, CAH, AHC, Clash of the Worlds*[11] (BBC Two 2007), *The Battle For Britain's Soul* (BBC Two 2004), and *An Islamic History of Europe* (BBC Four 2005), the focus is on the Abrahamic faiths, and secularism/Atheism, with other religions and spiritualities rarely mentioned, and this is also true of programmes looking at culture and religious texts/figures.

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[11] Which, of course, echoes Huntington's (1996) 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis.

Television is comfortable with the idea of religion as being something that is part of British (and world) history, although there are frequent assumptions that 'we' have somehow progressed from our religious past. Countries where religion is still seen to be a dominant force, such as Africa or America, are positioned as less enlightened than 'us', and potentially threatening to 'our' way of life.

A culture of faith

The impact of religious and spiritual belief on culture, in the world and in Britain, is something many programmes explore, often in a celebratory manner, particularly when considering art and architecture, although programmes such as *Science and Islam* (BBC Four 2009) and *Did Darwin Kill God?* (BBC Two 2009) also discuss the role faith had to play in the development of science.

Series such as *The English Church* (Channel 4 2002) (*TEC*) and *How to Build a Cathedral* (BBC Four 2008) (*HTBC*) celebrate the architecture of Britain's (usually traditional) religious buildings. The sweeping camera styles and shots of churches in the countryside, stained-glass windows and arches are similar to the iconography for British churches (Fig. 6.12) used in a range of other genres. *HTBC* tells us that in contemporary Britain, 'the splendour of the great cathedrals, the commitment and skill of those who created them, these remain: reminders of a glorious ambition: to realise the vision of the Book of Revelation and have Heaven on Earth', and the glory of the buildings is emphasised with footage of light sweeping through stained glass windows and the sun setting through Cathedral arches.
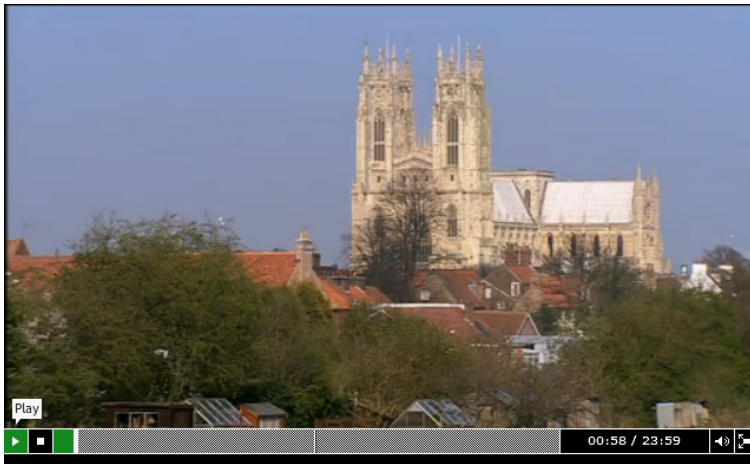
Fig. 6.12 *The English Church*

Even those who are avowedly Atheist claim there is worth in religious architecture and art. Looking at stained glass windows (Fig. 6.13), Jonathan Miller notes 'I don't believe the divinity of it… but I would be very impoverished if I didn't have these in my imagination. It would be a very thin form of life that didn't have these images' (*BHD*).
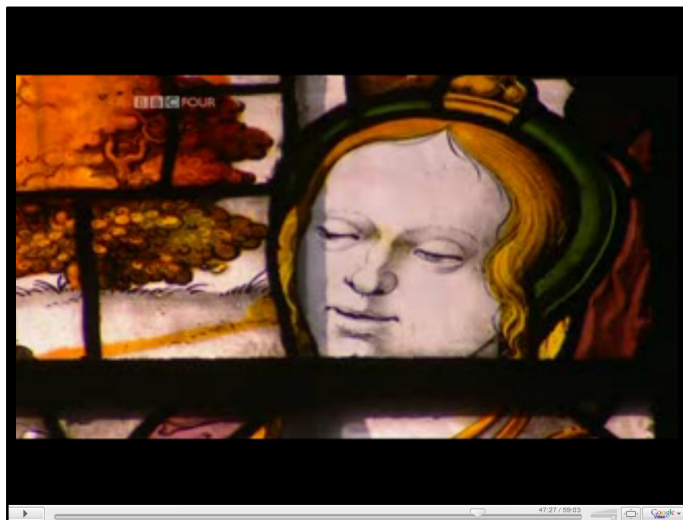
Fig. 6.13 *A Brief History of Disbelief*

It is not just British Christian art and architecture that are celebrated. Series such as *The Art of Eternity* (BBC Four 2007), *The Private Life of an Easter/Christmas Masterpiece* (BBC Two 2006-present), *The Seven Wonders of the Muslim World*

(Channel 4 2008) (*7WMW*) and *Dan Cruikshanks' Adventures in Architecture* (BBC Two 2008) (*DCAA*) emphasise the 'magnificence' of religious culture around the world. In *7WMW* and *DCAA*, historically and architecturally significant religious buildings are shown in use and their spirituality is emphasised.

However, in the series celebrating British (Christian) architecture, worship is rarely portrayed within these buildings, and worship in other countries' buildings is presented through the gaze of either a British 'outsider' (*DCAA*) or a 'native' of another country whose life we are learning about (*7MWW*), and described by a British narrator. Contemporary buildings are excluded from such programmes, as are contemporary expressions of creativity within British faiths. These programmes about the cultural impact of faith have much in common with more conventional history programmes in their positioning of religion/spirituality: as something that has made a significant, often worthwhile, contribution to human culture. However, its relevance to contemporary Britons is only in terms of us being able to acknowledge its beauty, rather than seeing religion/spirituality and culture as having a continuing relationship.

Digging up the past

Several programmes position themselves as investigating the 'truth' about particular religious/spiritual events, figures or texts. The list of such programmes is extensive, but includes *The Qur'an* (Channel 4 2008) (*TQ*), *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Channel 4 2004), *The Hidden Story of Jesus* (Channel 4 2007) (*HSJ*), *Son of God* (BBC One 2001) (*SoG*), *Secrets of the Jesus Tomb* (Five 2008) (*SJT*), *Tony Robinson and the Paranormal* (Channel 4 2008) (*TRP*), and *The Muslim Jesus* (ITV1 2007).

These programmes blend archaeology, documentary analysis and discussions with historians to investigate some form of 'mystery' or 'enigma' and employ 'experts' in

the investigation. There is also, often, a sensationalist aspect to the programmes, such as the claim to discover what Jesus really looked like (*SoG*), or whether Jesus' bones can be found and thus 'shatter the faith of millions' (*SJT*). Having established the central mystery, the open-mindedness of our presenters, and the academic or scientific credentials of the experts, we are able to examine the 'evidence' these programmes present that might help us see religious texts, events or figures in a new light. However, there is very rarely enough 'evidence' to conclusively prove the historical 'truth' these documentaries seek, and conclusions are often somewhat open-ended. *SJT* concludes it is 'unlikely' they can prove whether or not they have found Jesus' tomb, given 'Jesus' and 'Joseph'[12] were such common names at the time, whilst Tony Robinson concludes that 'there are things we're not sure we can explain' (*TRP*).

In *HSJ*[13], Robert Beckford attempts to do what 'most Christians are scared to'; explore Christ-like narratives in other faiths. His conclusion is that many faiths have similar stories, but this does not, for him, disprove his own faith; rather it opens up the need for interfaith communication. Framing the discovery as a personal one, as well as one we can all learn from, he suggests the commonality across religions and belief systems means that there are many routes to God (emphasis original):

> As a Christian I've been surprised by the many similarities I can find between Krishna and Jesus. But most Christian **fundamentalists** refuse to accept that they can learn anything from, or have anything in common with, any other religion… learning to tolerate each other would make fundamentalism even more of a nonsense than it already is… What really matters is Jesus' message, a

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[12] The tomb refers to Jesus, son of Joseph.
[13] Broadcast on Christmas Day 2007, to the consternation of some Christians. See Chapter Seven.

message that all these religions share, a message that if we follow, we can change the world for the better.

Several programmes, from *THJ* to *WWB* to *TQ* emphasise the need not to interpret religious texts literally, explaining how their translations have altered over time. Those who take a literal interpretation[14] are deemed 'fundamentalists', and 'fundamentalism is worrying' (*TQ*). However, in accordance with the Broadcasting Code (see Chapter Four) they do not denigrate sacred texts, but instead offer the hope that they can, as Beckford says, 'change the world for the better'. The conclusion of *TQ* tells us that the Qur'an 'speaks to the seventh century and twenty-first century' and that it 'offers choices, not dictates'.

Overall, the message from such historical 'investigations' seems to be that spiritual and religious events, texts and the lives of religious figures are open to interpretation, but as long as you do not take them too literally, and value other beliefs as equally valid, they can be inspirational.

Journeys into the self

As we have seen, travelogues and history programmes often frame their discourse in terms of 'journeys' and the effects on 'individuals'. However, the genres most associated with 'journeys' and their effects on the individual are lifestyle and reality (Dovey 2000, Hill 2002, Hill 2007, Macdonald 2003). 'Reality' television was one of the most visible and popular genres of the 2000s, with the term being used to describe a whole range of programmes about 'real' experiences. The genre is diverse (see

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[14] Usually of the Qur'an, Bible or Torah, as other sacred texts are rarely mentioned on television.

Chapter Two), but at its heart is the idea of participants adopting new behaviours and taking a 'journey' into the self (Redden 2007, White 1997).

In the middle of the decade, 'reality' took a spiritual direction with the arrival of programmes like *Priest Idol* (Channel 4 2005), *Make Me a Muslim/Christian* (Channel 4 2007/2008) (*MMAM/C*), *The Monastery/Convent/Retreat* (BBC Two 2005/2006/2007) (*TM/TC/TR*), and *Spirituality Shopper* (Channel 4 2005) (*SS*) being shown in peak time on BBC Two and Channel 4, as well as several episodes of 'lifestyle swap' reality strands such as *Singing With the Enemy* (BBC Three 2007), *Wife Swap* (Channel 4 2003-2009), and *The World's Strictest Parents* (BBC Three 2008-present) (*WSP*) featuring religious participants. This 'spiritual' turn in reality and lifestyle programming should not be a surprise, for, as White says:

> The media... are a site for the dialogue of the sacred and the secular in three areas: (a) the search for ultimate, consistent patterns of mythic meaning and the integration of the "unexplainable" into the common sense cultural consensus; (b) the search for perfect community and the confrontation of community with the power structure of social practice; and (c) the search for authentic personal identity and the resolution of the conflicts between personal and social identities' (1997: 47. See also Hoover 2002: 2, 2006: 39, Buxton 2009).

The format of such programmes involves an individual, family or group of individuals adopting a different lifestyle or a range of spiritual practices, discursively constructed as a 'journey' of self-discovery. Participants speak both within coverage of activities and conversations and, in many programmes, through a 'video diary' (Kilborn and Izod 1997, Dovey 2000). However, although this gives a sense that we are accessing the

authentic 'voices' of the participants and their 'real' experiences, a combination of editing and narration serves to anchor our readings of each participant's 'journey' and restrict the level of power the 'ordinary' have within such discourses (Fairclough 2001: 70, Talbot 2007: 46).

In this section, I explore two key types of programme, those exploring primarily adult 'journeys' making over the 'self' and those with the aim of transforming teenagers' behavioural habits.

Transforming the adult self

Lewis argues that late modernity is characterised by a 'makeover-oriented' culture which is replicated within reality television and its discourses of self-improvement (2007: 287). 'Reality' programmes are concerned with a 'journey into the self' culminating in some form of transformative experience or makeover, and this is a common aspect of those that feature religion/spirituality.

The most notable, and perhaps most influential, 'reality' programme about religion/spirituality was *The Monastery* (2005) (*TM*), a BBC Two series that became a ratings success with over 2.5 million viewers (BBC 2005b). *TM* followed five male participants as they stayed at Worth Abbey Monastery for forty days and nights. It spawned two sequels, *The Convent* (2006) (*TC*) and *The Retreat* (2007) (*TR*) and a one-off follow-up, *The Monastery: The Return* (2006) (*TMTR*). All involved a group of volunteers spending time on a 'spiritual retreat'. *TC* followed four women staying in the Poor Clares' Convent, and *TR* was the only series to leave Britain, following a mixed-sex group undertaking a Sufi Muslim retreat in Spain.

Channel 4 also broadcast three reality series with the aim of transforming the lives of 'ordinary' Britons. The first of these was *Spirituality Shopper* (*SS*) in 2005. Presented by Jonathan Edwards, it featured a different individual each week taking on a range of practices from different spiritualities[15], such as meditation or helping in a soup kitchen. It drew on the idea of a 'pick'n'mix', individualised approach to spirituality (Beckford 1992, Roof 1999, Puttnam 2000). *Make Me a Muslim* (2007) (*MMAM*) and *Make Me a Christian* (*MMAC*) followed a mixed group of volunteers as they attempted to take on a range of 'challenges' set by religious mentors.

As with many programmes about religion and spirituality, the opening monologues to these series depict the spiritual or religious life as something very different, or 'other' to everyday life in contemporary Britain, which may once have been religious, but isn't any longer. In the case of *TM*, the monastic experience is framed as a potential antidote to a society that has perhaps lost a sense of 'life's deeper meaning'. The personal aspect of the experience (White 1997, Redden 2007) is also emphasised. Whilst the stay at the monastery is a communal experience for the five men and for the community of monks, the individual response and 'journey of self-discovery' is emphasised throughout:

> Each of those selected had his own particular reason for being here. All have agreed to leave behind friends, family, careers, whilst they go in search of life's deeper meaning. For the duration of their stay, they will be forced to abandon the desires and temptations of the outside world. Perhaps for the first time, they'll have the space to really question their values and priorities and discover if what they learn here can sustain them in their lives outside.

[15] Although the majority were from mainstream religions.

All of the series present contemporary Britain as a place where people are obsessed with sex, alcohol, partying and working hard, and suggest that participants may be looking for something 'deeper' than this in their lives. However, there is a tongue-in-cheek aspect to some of the programmes, most notably *MMAM* and *MMAC*:

> Britain is in trouble. A wave of drunkenness, promiscuity and disrespect is sweeping the nation. But one man is determined to hold back the tide. Reverend George Hargreaves wants us all to rediscover Christian values like decency, respect and moderation. So what happens when a group of volunteers from the Leeds area live by strict Christian values for three weeks? They must stop their ungodly ways and live by the teachings of the Bible.
>
> (*MMAC*)

These introductions are delivered in a slightly incredulous tone, as if we, the audience are in on a joke about 'strict' religion, and are soundtracked by upbeat music reminiscent of the soundtracks to comedy programmes. This light-hearted feel undercuts the supposedly serious aims of the 'experiment' and firmly positions the series as reality television, often associated with a level of humour and 'irony' (Kilborn 2003).

Participants fall into two major categories: those who have (or have had) some form of faith; and those who do not. All are seen as having some form of 'lack' in their lives, however, and are depicted as being on a 'spiritual journey' or 'search', which is portrayed as a typical twenty-first century struggle for 'meaning' and a desire to overcome 'the self'.

In *TM*, the surroundings help give the sense of a 'safe' space for this journey. Shots of lush countryside, the sun, the moon, lit candles and the Abbey, its wooden chapel and

altar, and the cosy meeting rooms with sofas and armchairs where the men and monks meet all work connotatively to create a sense of the 'homeliness' of the Abbey, and anchor the portrayal of Worth Abbey's spirituality as a quiet, sensible, tolerant one, very different from the exuberant, large, loud Christianity of the 'evangelicals' we see in other programmes. *TR*'s surroundings, in sunny Spanish countryside, have the same effect to an extent, but here the 'exotic' nature of the retreat's location, along with the colourful clothing and fabrics worn by participants makes the Muslim faith seem more 'unusual' than the homely setting of the British monastery.

Whilst *TM* and *TC* are based in Catholic centres, Catholicism itself is downplayed with no real references to familiar media shorthand for the faith such as the Pope, the Virgin Mary or Catholic sex scandals. What is emphasised throughout is the 'spiritual' life of the monks and nuns, and the spiritual 'makeover' the participants are to receive. In the pre-publicity for *TC*, the experience is portrayed as 'detox for the soul' (see Buxton 2009), and in *TM*, Father Christopher, the Abbot, explains the discipline of silence as being therapeutic, and offering a journey into the 'self' (Hawkins 2001):

> The silence is like a wonderful spiritual bath which we invite you to get into to relax your spiritual muscles so that you can start listening to God, listening to other people and listening to the ear of your heart through your own deepest self.

In contrast to evangelicals, whom *Dispatches* tells us take the Bible literally, the monks are shown to have a liberal approach to scripture, emphasising its 'poetry' rather than its instructions, even when Tony challenges Father Christopher about this approach:

Tony: When there's things in the Bible that you don't necessarily agree with, you can say, well that's all down to interpretation and that's your little, like, disclaimer at the end…

Father Christopher: It's very easy to take what are called the hard sayings of the Bible and put them in a box marked 'it's all down to interpretation'… what you feel is that I cheat a bit, or people like me would cheat a bit on that level… I could give you a very searing set of reasons why we should dismiss the bible out of hand, I can give you that analytic argument… but at my own personal level this text feeds me in a way which never ceases to amaze me.

What is interesting here is that Father Christopher, portrayed throughout the series as a tolerant, friendly, kind, liberal man, is justifying his faith and relationship with the scriptures by acknowledging there is an 'analytic argument' that might dismiss the scriptures but his 'cheating' by adopting a relativist 'down to interpretation' stance is justified because the Bible 'feeds' his inner life. As we have seen, this kind of attitude towards scripture is a recurring theme in programmes about religion, with liberal commentators and presenters seeking to distance their personal relationships with holy books from the literal interpretations of 'fundamentalists'. The nuns in *TC* and retreat leader Abdullah in *TR* are seen as similarly liberal in their approach to the 'fundamentals' of their faith, but some of the mentors in *MMAM* and *MMAC* are presented as stricter, with their emphasis on (heterosexual) sex within marriage.

Characters in reality series are usually chosen for their potential for conflict and redemptive transformation; key features of the reality genre (Heller 2007, Redden 2007, Morrealle 2007). Conflict comes in a number of ways: through those set up as antagonists, such as 'former Hell's Angel' Martin (MMAC) and 'strict Muslim' Aisha (*TR*)

who argue with their mentors and other participants; or through acts of rebellion.

Rebellion usually comes in the form of breaking a rule, and this 'rule breaking' tends to

be a sign of a character 'flaw' that must be overcome. For example, we're told that

Anthoney (*TM*) and Muddassar (*TR*) find it difficult to switch off from work, and they

are shown wrestling with having to give up mobile phones and rebelling against their

new disciplined lifestyle by taking phone calls from work. Others bring in alcohol,

refuse to participate in activities, or abscond to go to the pub. Morreale (2007: 99)

argues that moments of conflict or rebellion form the 'crux' point of reality or

makeover television; the moment where participants need to realise their own need

for redemption and so submit to the process. Such crux moments occur in all series,

where conflict is resolved, rebellion is contained, and the journey to 'transformation' is

allowed to continue.

Although not 'indulged' in in the same way as mobile phones or alcohol, sex is the

'vice' for many participants. Tony (*TM*) has been working in the pornography industry,

and we see him working on photo shoots. Victoria (*TC*) is said to have an 'open

marriage' with a husband and a lover, and Faye (*MMAC*) is a 'lapdance manager'.

Participants in *TM* and *TC* engage in frequent discussions with monks and nuns about

celibacy. Tony's work in the porn industry (*TM*) and Faye's lap dancing are frequently

referenced (*MMAC*), as are participants' sex lives:

> **Tony:** [when asked what his work involved] Titillation, bit of girl on girl…lipstick
>
> lesbian stuff.
>
> **Anthoney:** Well that ain't a bad job is it? (*TM*)

Fig. 6.14 *Make Me a Christian*

Sex shops, sex toys and provocative imagery feature throughout *MMAM* and *MMAC* (Fig. 6.14), with several discussions about homosexuality and abortion. In *MMAM*, the mentors are, we are told, looking for a wife for gay participant Luke, and in *MMAC*, 'lesbian'[16] Laura was, according to Joanna Jepson, sent to heterosexual speed-dating[17], although this was not shown on-screen. When I interviewed them, Jepson and Victoria (*TC*) accused the producers of their series as being preoccupied with sex:

> **Jepson:** They were hunting for the most extreme, distorted versions of
>
> humanity that they could find and throwing them to the Christians… it was very
>
> sexual, they were looking for sexual distortion as well, seeing how that went
>
> down, so it was very contrived… They sent Laura, the lesbian who isn't really a
>
> lesbian at all speed dating… whose idea was it? The TV crew's. So they're
>
> taking you to a heterosexual speed dating evening without any of us mentors
>
> knowing and they're going to put that out there as the Christians' little exercise
>
> for the lesbian to try and turn her, are they? I was livid. I went mental… they

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[16] Although when I interviewed Joanna Jepson, mentor in *MMAC*, she claimed Laura wasn't a lesbian, and in the series, Laura talks about liking both men and women.

[17] Clarified by Laura in some forum posts she made.

> kept… imposing her sexuality as her and I kept saying 'This isn't her, this isn't
>
> who Laura is', you know Laura's a person and her sexuality, whatever that is, is
>
> just a part of that, stop kind of skewing all the tasks towards her sexuality.

While many of the programmes I have discussed criticise religions for being inflexible,

discipline and 'rules' are encouraged within reality television discourse. Instead of

being seen as something that restricts freedom, they are perceived as a challenge for

participants to live 'differently'. For example, depressed divorcé Charlie in *SS* is

perceived to need spiritual disciplines to give structure to his life, lacking since his

father's death and his divorce:

> He's lost a lot… it seems there isn't much left from his previous, happier life…
>
> there's not much to fill his days at the moment.

It is a common feature of reality television that participants' journeys should involve

public confession (Dovey 2000, Corner 2003, Alsama and Pantti 2006, Hill 2007), and

we see this when Gary in *TM* reveals his past imprisonment, Anthoney reveals his

difficult relationship with his mother, and Michelle (*MMAC*) reveals a health scare.

However, the 'real' journeys that occur in these environments may not be those seen

on television. When I interviewed Victoria, she argued the 'story' of her stay in *TC* was

completely cut out of the television narrative in favour of presenting her and friend

Angela as the 'rebels', with blonde Iona and Debi taking the role of the vulnerable,

something that was far from her 'real' experience. She argued this was partly due to

the limitations of the 'reality' format[18]:

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[18] When interviewed, she told me the call for participants had styled *TC* as a serious documentary, not reality television.

Initially we were all asked why we'd come in. If you watch the programme with this in mind, everybody got to say why they came in except me. *They* said why I came in and the reason they said wasn't the reason… I asked… why they'd done this, they said it was because you're too complicated… I had too many stories and so they chose the one that was going to fit with their presentation of the programme. Now, for me… the most important journey that I took… was around the baby [I miscarried] and the thing that I had the biggest issue with was that they never mentioned that at all… I was prepared to talk about my experiences of losing the baby because I thought OK I'll share that personal thing because it's important to do so and I think that what they did end up making was a trite pseudo-reality TV programme… because they were competing with *Big Brother*.

As well as moments of disclosure, moments of transformation are key to the success of reality television, as we see some culmination of the 'journey' our participants have taken. The 'pressure' of the lifestyle challenge is then often intensified in order to provoke 'reactions' from participants. In *MMAC*, the participants are sent on a 'retreat' and we're told they were only to eat food they had foraged on the walk, although Jepson claims the presentation was different from the reality:

One of the team had forgotten – but I suggest that it wasn't forgotten at all – they forgot all the camping food equipment so we had no food to eat. So we're in tipping rain [see Fig. 6.15] with no food and of course that had the desired effect because people got hungry, they got upset, they got cold and there was some kind of mutiny and of course that was all contrived I'm sure.

Fig. 6.15 *Make Me a Christian*

In *TM*, the men are sent to spend time with some Carthusian monks whose lifestyle of silence and solitude is portrayed as being more 'extreme' than that of the monks at Worth:

> **Voiceover:** For the group, it's a unique opportunity to experience monasticism in its purest form, which Father Christopher hopes will inspire them on their own spiritual journeys…

> **Nicholas:** I was utterly awestruck, and I felt dizzy. That singularity of purpose is taken to the ultimate extreme. I was inspired and at the same time confused because it provoked such an intense reaction in me.

The culmination of the journeys is always framed as having had some effect on each participant, although the effects seem more profound for some than others. Perhaps the two most significant transformation moments in these programmes come for Pom in *TR* who converts to Islam, and Tony in *TM* who has a 'spiritual experience'. It is unclear whether or not these were the only participants to undergo such an experience, but it is worth noting that both are white, attractive, blonde, twenty-

somethings who are articulate and seemingly 'sensible'. *TM* participant Nicholas

Buxton says Tony's experience is perhaps one of the reasons the series was seen to be

a 'success': 'the combination of these dual expectations - and their dramatic fulfilment

- could help to explain the tremendous impact the series had on viewers. It is surely

no accident that Tony's transformative experience features so prominently in many

people's recollections' (2009: 162).

Both transformation moments are interesting because of the way that they are quiet

and somewhat understated. For Tony, this occurs during a session with mentor

Brother Francis. The men are shown praying quietly on comfortable sofas, a familiar,

unthreatening environment, and Tony starts to cry. There is a lot of silence in this

sequence, with no background music, perhaps to reinforce the moment's

'authenticity'. Pom's experience is similar. We see her with mentor Abdullah sitting

underneath a tree, discussing her need to commit to something and her growing belief

that Islam is the right choice. Throughout, their exchange is punctuated with moments

of silence:

> **Pom:** I feel, not nervous exactly, but someone said erm, if this is the one that
>
> really feels right for you, maybe you should make some kind of um,
>
> commitment and I felt really split because on one hand I was thinking wow, you
>
> know maybe I can, you know, and that's actually… I didn't expect it to be
>
> appealing but it did seem really exciting actually, but then on the other hand I
>
> was thinking that's ridiculous. I've been here for three, three and a bit weeks…
>
> **Abdullah:** So I think you need to make your decision
>
> **Pom:** I think I have.

Abdullah: It's gonna be a profound change .

Pom: I'm comfortable with that. I'd like to do it.

In this exchange, we see the kind of discourse common to reality/makeover shows: the need to make a decision, the emphasis that this will be a 'profound' life change and the rationalising of making big decisions within a small, concentrated space of time. As with Tony's experience, the stillness and Pom's 'ums' add to the sense of it being a genuine, rather than scripted, moment.

Both give a confession to camera (Alsama and Pantti 2006) following their experiences:

Tony: That's the greatest experience I've ever had in my life. I don't know. I think, you know, it think I'm, it was a religious experience, quite a profound one… Something happened, something touched me very deeply and very profoundly but I tell you something, right, and this is me talking, this isn't someone that wanted this to happen, or expected it to, when I woke up this morning, I didn't believe in this and I, as I speak to you know, I do. Whatever 'it' is, and I still don't know what that is, I believe in it, 'cos I saw it and I felt it and it spoke to me.

Pom: Yes it's dramatic in that I wasn't a Muslim five minutes ago and now I am but it's not dramatic because I'm not changing who I'm worshipping, um, and I'm not changing myself, so yeah, it just feels like a kind of natural enhancement, erm, and I feel that because over these four weeks I've began to feel more and more and more accepted and familiar with Islam... I kind of feel like I'm home rather than I've arrived somewhere new and strange.

The close-ups of their faces, their soft spoken tone of voice and reiteration of being changed, coupled with their inability to clearly articulate their feelings add to the feeling of these confessions being authentic; transformative, yet also a natural step in the self-cultivation process.

Even where participants' transformations are less 'obvious' than Tony and Pom's, some evidence of change is always offered. For example, in *SS*, participant Charlie is asked by presenter Jonathan Edwards 'are you a changed man?' and Charlie affirms 'several times' before adding the qualifier that 'I don't think I've got anything spiritual from this series in terms of I'm not going to convert… [but] collectively the experiences have refocused and re-energised me and given me a sense of direction. Prior to the journey… I was a viewer watching the world go by now I'm more of a player'. His transformation is confirmed by his family who tell us he has changed and is no longer a victim. Presenter Edwards ends Charlie's episode with a piece to camera: 'I didn't think he'd stick it out. I was wrong. Charlie says he hasn't found anything spiritual on his journey but the different religions have shown him the importance of life and connecting with family and friends'. These end remarks are interesting, given that Charlie has not had a 'spiritual' experience or 'converted' to a religion and the only practice (of four) he shows any interest in maintaining is Tai Chi. However, we are reassured that this does not matter: the journey has still proved worthwhile.

In many ways, there is little to distinguish these programmes from other reality/ makeover strands – whilst the context of the 'transformation' might be religious/spiritual rather than based on fashion, history or diet, the format of people experimenting with new practices and being 'changed' remains the same; even if the precise nature of the change is hard to articulate (Morreale 2007, Redden 2007, Heller

2007). Furthermore, whilst off-screen the impact on participants from a religious/spiritual 'life experiment' *may* be different from those of other formats (for example, if someone has had a sense of the supernatural or transcendent or a desire to live by the precepts of a particular faith), the potential role of any new-found faith in a participant's life is downplayed by the television discourse. Pom in *TR* is said to still believe in Islam but there is no indication her life has changed in other ways such as attending mosque or adopting a hijab. Likewise, Tony in *TM* (and in *TMR*) has no commitment to a regular church and expresses his sense of Christian faith as being very personal rather than aligned with particularly 'religious' doctrines or practices. Transformation via religion/spirituality, it appears, is desirable, as long as it only changes one a moderate amount by giving a sense of 'peace' or causing one to change previously 'deviant' behaviour.

Transforming teenage behaviour

Within the reality/lifestyle genre, there is a marked difference in the way teenagers are presented from the way they're shown in documentaries and current affairs, which is as victims, or innocent children who need protection (see Chapter Five). BBC Two's *No Sex Please, We're Teenagers* (2005) (*NSPWT*) and BBC Three's *The World's Strictest Parents* (2008-present) (*WSP*) are part of a wider trend within reality television, evidenced in programmes such as *Brat Camp* (Channel 4 2005-2007) (see Braitch 2006) that seek to 'reform' the behaviour of teenagers.

WSP features two teenagers each week who are sent to live with a 'strict' family in another country and adopt their lifestyle. Although not a series specifically 'about' religion, religious families from several faiths feature heavily[19] such as 'the Christian

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[19] Four out of five families in 2008, and five out of eight in 2009.

regime of the Roses' ('Jamaica' 2008), the 'God-fearing Garnett family' ('Alabama', 2008) and 'strict middle class Hindu family' ('India' 2008). *NSPWT* follows a group of teenagers who form a group called the 'Romance Academy', led by Christian youth workers Rachel and Dan. They pledge to stay abstinent through the course of the series and the programme traces their 'experiment'. As with their adult counterparts, teenagers in these series are depicted as being obsessed with sex, drugs and alcohol, and often as being 'badly behaved'. However, the behaviour of adults and of religious organisations is presented not as the cause for teenagers' problems, but as part of the solution. The programmes attempt to address parental concerns in their discourse and feature images of teenagers engaging in such 'troubling' behaviours (Fig. 6.16):

This is the world your teenagers are growing up in, where sex is as easily available as fast food (*NSPWT*)

Can traditional parenting change the lives of wayward British teenagers? (*WSP*)

Fig. 6.16 *No Sex Please, We're Teenagers*

In *WSP*, parents are shown seeking the 'help' of the programme to 'correct' their children's wayward behaviour. For example, in the episode 'Lebanon', the parents of Dan and Debbie are shown bemoaning their lack of commitment to their A-Levels and the arguments they get into.

These programmes also offer a 'solution' to the problems of Britain. Religion[20] is seen as offering something strict and traditional, although, as with the adult series, the programmes are less about reforming the teenagers' spiritual beliefs and practices and more about shaping their lifestyle and behaviour. They are given behavioural guidelines, and in *WSP*, frequently have to modify their appearance, wearing modest clothing and removing piercings.

Fig. 6.17 *No Sex Please, We're Teenagers*

Moments of rebellion are very similar to those in adult series: feigning boredom (Fig. 6.16), having arguments, partaking in illicit alcohol, smoking and sex, or flouting other rules prescribed to them by the families/youth workers. As with the adult shows, the teenagers all eventually conform to the transformation process.

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[20] Regardless of which faith it its - *WSP* has featured Muslim, Hindu, Mormon, Jewish and Christian families.

WSP deliberately takes the young people to an 'other' country, and familiar

stereotypes such as Americans owning guns and Muslim women wearing hijabs and

niqabs feature heavily, as a way of enforcing the difference between 'them' and 'us'.

In *WSP*, Debbie has to dress in a niqab when visiting a mosque.

Even though *NSPWT* occurs within a British context, the teenagers are taken to an

American church to hear about the abstinence movement in the USA, and their

experience there is contrasted with their experience of Britain and of British religion.

The American service uses the familiar signifiers of charismatic worship, and some of

the teenagers are shown leaving, as, the voiceover tells us, they find it 'offensive':

> **1.** It's too much.

> **2.** A church in England is like praying and preaching… the Americans put their
>
> hand in the air… I don't like it.

The teenagers' transformations are similar to the adults'. None are shown converting

to religion[21], but all describe their experience using words such as 'amazing' and 'life-

changing' and speak of their new-found respect for themselves and others. *WSP* in

particular emphasises that the teens' deviant behaviour has diminished since the

experiments, and they are now more 'acceptable' to their parents. The 'changes' in

teen behaviour are in many ways similar to those of adults: becoming less 'rebellious';

feeling 'better' about themselves; moderating their sexual behaviour or drug/alcohol

consumption; and, in many cases, receiving a level of physical makeover through

removing piercings, receiving new hairstyles or wearing new clothes. As with the

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[21] Although some of the teens in *NSP* are already Christian.

adults, these changes are rarely framed as being the result of an encounter with the supernatural, and instead are seen as a result of the television experiment.

In television discourse, the 'self' is something that is always considered to be in need of changing or reforming. However, the transformations that occur throughout reality/lifestyle formats are remarkably similar. Whatever the nature of the 'experiment' or 'makeover', the result is the same: enhanced self-awareness and self-esteem; a respect for one's friends and family; a concern for the environment; or a sense of moderation in one's personal habits. Religion/spirituality may be a part of the transformation of the self, but the role they play is not very different to the role of diet, fashion or any other mechanism.

Journeys around Britain

In this final section, I look at programmes with a 'fly on the wall' approach, that explore religious and spiritual practice within contemporary Britain. The aim of these programmes is not to partake in a transformative experience, but to journey within our own nation and discover people who are, at the same time, like 'us' and different from us (Kilborn and Izod 1997: 59). Whilst those featured are British, their 'otherness' within British culture is emphasised.

The 'extraordinary' in 'ordinary' Britain

'Talking to the Dead' (TTD) is one of the films in Channel 4's 2009 strand, *Revelations*, which purported to 'explore the impact religion has on the lives of believers and non-believers in Britain today' (Channel 4 website 2010), although it featured only Judaism, Christianity (twice), Spiritualism, Islam (twice), a programme about exhumation and

one with major figures from five faith groups[22]. As with travelogues and history

programmes, our narrators and presenters depict themselves as open-minded and

willing to learn:

> I had what I would call a healthy scepticism about a belief system that many are
>
> quick to ridicule, but with no firm convictions as to what might happen when
>
> we die I was as open to the idea of a spirit world as to that of a man rising from
>
> the dead 2000 years ago… the truth is that like most people in the audience, I
>
> hoped that the medium might just have a message for me (TTD).

In TTD, Richard Alwyn claims the Spiritualist mediums try and make contact with 'what

I at least call 'the dead'', as if his own terminology serves for us as the discursive

authority on their practices. Alwyn meets a Doctor[23] who claims to have had a

revelation about his late grandfather. A familiar surprise about the connection

between the 'spiritual' and the 'scientific' is expressed: 'A Doctor, a man of science,

was possibly the last person I'd have expected to find in a spiritualist church'. Alwyn

states that the Doctor's vision of his grandfather was accurate but he still has doubts

about this being proof of the spiritual, and the Doctor himself claims he isn't entirely

sure if the grandfather was there or if he was guessing.

When describing the church, Alwyn says: 'What really stands out in the church are all

the memorials to deceased members of the congregation and their friends, including a

huge candle… emblazoned with the picture of a man, James Wilde' (a former church

warden). We see his widow Margaret tending his grave and talking of her belief that

he is not gone and that she will one day be reunited with him. Although her belief in

an afterlife seems little different to many people's (see Davie 1997, Heelas and

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[22] Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Protestantism, Catholicism.

[23] Referred to as 'The Doctor' throughout the programme, rather than by name.

Woodhead 2005, Walters 1999), Alwyn says Margaret's belief that Jimmy is still with her 'is staggering to me' and while he wonders if Spiritualism is 'a fool's paradise', 'part of me also envies Margaret'.

Congregation member Keith shares his difficult life experiences with his father, and claims his father came back to say sorry after he 'passed'. Alwyn's narration reveals that Keith told him his father 'in spirit… had now become his best friend' and that this spiritual experience had given him some (in Alwyn's) words 'much needed resolution, but 'it seemed to me that for all the people I met at Walthamstow, Spiritualism heals in the widest sense'. Over sad background music, we see Keith lighting candles. Alwyn tells us that he is 'confident' Keith's beliefs can be explained through his life story[24], and the same is true for 'all' those he met except, 'perhaps', the Doctor, who he claims is more reluctant to be described as being 'part' of the church.

The conclusion takes the familiar form of expressing scepticism about whether Spiritualism is just for comforting the distressed, or whether there is something in it. Alwyn doesn't attack spiritualism in the manner some do (see pp. 194-207) but argues that his own stance of being uncertain is appropriate. Spiritualism is what 'others' take comfort from:

> As religions go, Spiritualism seems fairly benign to me. No-one has gone to war
> over it… but the truth is there are aspects of Spiritualism that are too much for
> me… whereas I'm more or less happy to accept that there's more to life on
> earth than we might know for that very reason I also find it hard to accept
> Spiritualist certainties… so for now I'm content to see the world as I do, through
> a glass darkly, and let others take comfort from talking to the dead.

---

[24] As opposed to a genuine spiritual experience.

Another *Revelations* programme exploring British religion is Jon Ronson's 'How to Find God' (HTFG). HTFG looks at one small group taking an Alpha course and focuses on some of the course participants and their group leaders. The participants are shown as being 'ordinary' Brits, although some, like nervous Mel and comedy writer Ian, discuss having a sense of a lack in their lives.

The church environment where the course takes place seems to be a traditional church that has been modernised inside, and the camera focuses on candles (Fig. 6.17) (a common signifier of religion/spirituality within television discourse), stone arches and the food being served.

Fig. 6.17 'How to Find God'

Vicar Charlie Cleverly (Fig. 6.18), leading the course, speaks gently, and Ronson tells us that 'this all looks gently meandering but it's actually very structured'.

Fig. 6.18 'How to Find God'

Ronson is generally warm towards Cleverly and the members of St Aldate's church where he is filming: it is the course itself that he seems suspicious of, particularly Gumbel. As he explains how the course materials work, we see footage of Cleverly preaching intercut with Gumbel, the implication being that the talks are interchangeable:

> Nicky Gumbel's unconfrontational Tony Blair-like delivery sets the tone... the speeches delivered... are mostly written by Nicky Gumbel.

Ronson also claims Gumbel had the notion of 'young pretty Christian women serving the food' at the course.

Ronson sets up a 'who could it be?' narrative within the programme, telling us that one of the 'Agnostics' on the course will take 'a giant leap towards Christianity'. He says that some of the Alpha team think freegan Ed, often shown disputing points, will be the one to 'convert' as 'Alpha leaders say that hostility is often a clue that the Agnostic is ready... an Alpha person told me Ed's haphazard lifestyle makes him ripe for conversion, but I think he seems quite happy'.

The crux of the programme comes at the course weekend away, which Ronson calls 'intense' and 'strange'. As we see the participants arriving, Ronson's voiceover says they are 'unaware that by tea-time' they'd encounter speaking in tongues. In the meeting, Cleverly mentions that speaking in tongues is like a child learning a language to talk to their father. Ronson says 'The prospect of tongues, dropped gently into the speech is greeted with alarm by some of our Agnostics'.

We see footage of people being prayed for and Cleverly beginning to speak in tongues, when the camera cuts to a shot of the window and smoke starts appearing (Fig. 6.19). Ronson says 'it is at this moment, just as the atmosphere in the room feels ready that something unfortunate happens', and we hear the revs of the classic cars whose convention shares the same venue. Moments like this, and Ed's freeganism, punctuate Ronson's documentary, providing a sense of the comedic and absurd.

Fig. 6.19 'How to Find God'

Participant Ian is shown leaving, and he talks to the camera, saying he felt 'a repulsion… at first you feel kind of fear because all these people are doing things in a room that you find unusual… when I mean repulsed, I mean being pushed the other

way you know'. However, student Dave claims it was 'a good…. surreal environment'.

Reflecting on the effect the weekend has had on participants, Ronson says 'Tongues is

a giant gamble for Alpha and I quite admire them for the gamble. As much as Charlie

tried to make it seem every day, it isn't. It's something serious. It's the moment of

truth, the moment the Agnostics have to decide'. Here, the lack of 'I think' in Ronson's

interpretation means his take carries more weight than Cleverly's.

Regardless of the belief system, those who engage in religious or spiritual practice are

seen as 'other' to 'normal' Brits, especially when they also have non-British ethnic

origins. For example, the three-part series *Jews* (BBC Four 2008) looks at different

examples of British Judaism: Samuel, a member of an Orthodox family, who has

recently left jail; second-generation Jews, sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors;

and retailer Jonathan Faith who 'has set himself a mission' to arrest the 'terminal

decline' of Judaism within Britain. In all three programmes, the series repeatedly

'others' their Jewishness. For example, the opening voiceover to episode two tells us:

> Second-generation Jewish immigrants, the children of refugees and survivors,
>
> usually seem as British as the next person. Born and raised in this country,
>
> often highly assimilated and not necessarily religious, they nevertheless carry a
>
> legacy from their parents, and invisible inheritance. Whatever their parents'
>
> best intentions, unspeakable trauma rarely evaporates revealing itself as a
>
> psychological stain.

All of those interviewed speak of feeling rootless in Britain, and the difficulty of

reconciling Britishness and Judaism[25], emphasising their 'otherness'.

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[25] Something also raised in *Aliyah - The Journey Home* (BBC One 2008) which looks at Zionism, and
British Jews 'returning' to Israel. However, unlike the 'returning' to the Holocaust, which seems to be

The Orthodox community in episode one are frequently described as being 'disciplined', 'traditional', 'extremely devout' and wanting little to do with the 'outside world'. They are depicted as living by the 'strict rules of the Torah', once more repeating the familiar assertion that living by religious texts means adhering to something dogmatic and unusual. When Isaac is interviewed in episode one, his account seems to reinforce both his 'normality' and his difference:

> **Interviewer:** Is your family strict?
>
> **Isaac:** Not within the community, I mean you dress Hassidic, we're all eating Hassidic, kosher and everything else. You'd call it strict from your point of view, from a general point of view, but that's the way we've been brought up.

In both episodes one and three, which take a 'fly-on-the-wall' or 'docusoap' approach, there is a use of comedic background music throughout. Jewish practices such as kosher food and dress codes are emphasised in both, with the filmmakers asking questions about why and how such practices occur, repeatedly marking them out as 'different'.

Likewise, *Karma Babies* (BBC One 2007)[26], positions the audience as being outside the faith and explains and thus 'others' the practices of the British Hindu couples preparing for parenthood, through the use of Asian style music, close-up shots of cameras and voiceovers that refer to Hindus as 'them':

> For Anu and Sandeep, their path to parenthood is no ordinary one: it's a religious journey, too, with life-changing rituals to perform, and Hindu protocol

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encouraged within British factual television (programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* (BBC One, 2004-present) also often look at the role of the Holocaust in the backgrounds of their subjects), the idea of Israel being a 'spiritual home' for some Jews is described as controversial, and footage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is used throughout.

[26] Shown in the Diwali 'festival slot' that is shared by Sikhs and Hindus. It was a thirty minute programme, shown at 11.30pm.

to follow… But will these traditions, borne out of the East, make sense to Hindus in the West? Keeping check on Anu and Sandeep religious responsibilities is Kiran, Sandeep's mum who lives with them.

This voiceover contains familiar language; the 'life-changing' 'journey', coupled with religious 'protocol'. We see the difference between the secular West and religious East, represented by an older generation. The second-generation couples seek to emphasise their ordinariness, whilst acknowledging that religious practices emphasise their difference from 'us'. In Anu's segment there is acknowledgement of the importance of faith but a distinction between having a faith and 'praying for hours on end':

> **Anu:** We are expected to, like, perform rituals during pregnancy and after the baby is born. I wouldn't say it's important to myself, but it's important to our mothers, so that makes it important to us, really… I think our Hindu faith is very, very important to us. I don't sit in a temple and pray for hours on end. Even if it's expected of me, I don't think I'd be able to carry that out, I'm not that religious.

The documentary repeatedly contrasts the way Eastern Hindu families might approach parenthood and the way they operate in Britain, or the West:

> Hindus believe the mental as well as the physical well-being of the mum affects the unborn. In India she would be putting her feet up. Over here she does not have that luxury… For some Hindu families, a boy would be particularly celebrated. Not only as a breadwinner, but also to carry on the family name. But in Britain today is there any pressure for Anu and Sandeep to produce a son?

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When their child is born, Anu has an emergency caesarean and this means that a religious tradition cannot occur:

> Many Hindu families practice a ritual in the first few moments of the baby's life, whispering God's name into its ear and putting honey in its mouth. But as the priority for this baby is medical rather than spiritual, this is overlooked…. But not to worry, in no time at all the family arrive, to put him back on the religious track offering money for wealth and prosperity, and black wristbands to ward off evil.

Discursively it is clear that religious practice must take second place to more important things, and it doesn't matter if a ritual was missed, because there is time, later 'to put him back on the religious track'.

Buddhism is rarely featured in programmes about British religion, but during BBC Two's Buddhism season in 2003, *Everyman* showed 'The Buddhists of Suburbia', a fly-on-the-wall account of three British Buddhists. The programme opened with stock footage of celebrities such as Jeff Goldblum and Richard Gere[27], and a somewhat tongue-in-cheek voiceover:

> Buddhism is increasingly becoming the religion of the rich and famous. Other, more ordinary mortals are also being drawn to it. Throughout the western world people are turning to Buddhism to fill the spiritual vacuum in their lives… Among the converts to the teaching of the Buddha are a former Jew, a Catholic and an Atheist… Each of them is about to go on a journey of discovery. Will their Buddhist faith still be as strong at the end?

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[27] Another *Everyman* programme in this season was 'Richard Gere: Celebrity Buddhist'.

Immediately, Buddhism is presented to us as something of a 'celebrity' fad, yet it is also discursively positioned as a potential remedy for the 'spiritual vaccuum' in the West. The Jewish, Catholic and Atheist aspects of our three participants' identities are highlighted, along with that familiar word, journey. For each of them, the journey also takes a literal form. Bessie and Abhaykirti are white Britons and both travel overseas within the programme. Abhaykirti, whose family were Jewish, and who says he used to be an Atheist, visits Auschwitz. Like the second-generation Jews in *Jews*, the televisual discourse of Judaism requires that he cannot be separated from this part of Jewish history, despite his Atheist and Buddhist experiences. For Abhaykirti, Buddhism is presented as part of a lifestyle and identity choice: 'on a deeper level I just wasn't satisfied... felt an emptiness... my marriage just wasn't going to work... Being a Buddhist is about becoming a better person... leading an ethical life', and his journey to Auschwitz is depicted as one of 'self-awareness'.

Bessie's Buddhism is also expressed as a lifestyle choice. Middle-class and in her mid-twenties, she discusses having experimented with other spiritualities and travelled a lot. She says that, 'there was an appreciation for the spiritual life in India she hadn't experienced in England', and this was part of her conversion experience. We see her engage in a number of spiritual practices such as meditation and talking to monks, but all of this occurs when she is in Bodhgaya, not in Britain, further reinforcing the exoticism of Buddhism.

Teresa, on the other hand, does not need to travel outside of Britain, but she is Brazilian, so is already 'other'. She is shown moving house into a communal Buddhist environment and choosing to work in a café. A former scientist, her change in circumstances is depicted as 'a move which has surprised many of her friends'.

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Teresa's hair, clothing, speaking style and personality are exuberant, colourful and slightly 'wacky', as if her character explains her interest in Buddhism. Although the other women in the communal house seem to be British and less extrovert than Teresa, they are rarely afforded speaking time within the programme.

Conclusion

Like much factual television during the decade, the term journey is used, both literally and metaphorically, within a wide range of programmes about religion and spirituality. Discoveries made on these 'journeys' may have an impact on society as a whole, but more often, they are framed in terms of their impact on the 'self'. When the 'self' speaks, spiritual/religious experiences are presented as something that can 'enhance' normal life, rather than detract from it. Presenters who confess to having a faith, such as Peter Owen Jones, Robert Beckford or Mark Dowd frame their own interpretation and practice as falling within a more 'liberal' or 'tolerant' framework: they are supportive of equality of gender and sexual orientation; open to new experiences; and willing to challenge their own beliefs.

Those whose faith is not made explicit, or who claim to have no faith, such as the celebrities in *The Beginner's Guide...*, Andrew Slorance and Jon Ronson, present themselves as open-minded, tolerant and willing to ask questions of their own spirituality as they spend time amongst believers. They acknowledge there are some things they 'can't explain', even if very often there is little room within their programmes to completely accept the religious/spiritual message of the movements they document.

When it comes to 'ordinary' people, their discourse is never allowed to speak for itself. Narration and editing by media professionals frame their experience, sometimes, according to participants such as Victoria and Joanna Jepson, in order to fit a pre-constructed narrative and omitting key events from the 'real' experience. Those 'real people' who are seen as 'acceptable' and presented well are those who are open to changing themselves, although an acceptable level of change usually means modifying behaviour to the extent that drinking, working or having sex becomes less 'excessive' or life takes on a 'spiritual' dimension alongside normative practices.

Conversion or transformation to the extent that someone, for example, speaks in tongues or professes to believe they can communicate with the dead, is not expected or encouraged. Those who do practice such 'extremes' of spirituality are always 'othered' by the texts and usually seen as either naïve, sinister or brainwashed. If participants in programmes such as *The Monastery*, *Spirituality Shoppe*r or *Make Me a Muslim* have had such 'extreme' experiences, these have not been shown within the programmes, which instead emphasise aspects of spirituality such as charitable acts or silent contemplation.

The literal journeys within programmes adopt a tourist eye when looking at other beliefs and cultures. There is a voyeuristic tendency (Beattie 2004) to linger on moments of intimacy, such as close-up shots of someone receiving healing ministry or closing their eyes in prayer, and rituals are exoticised, and sometimes demonised, when they do not fit our expectations of what is appropriate, as in the case of some animal sacrifices.

Music cues serve to reinforce difference, with instrumentation and rhythms associated with particular countries used to soundtrack coverage of those countries, such as the

frequent use of country music in programmes about America, and percussive music used for Africa. A familiar visual shorthand is used frequently to identify different parts of the world and to identify religions and streams within those religions, such as Mosques and niqabs signifying Islam, or the Virgin Mary symbolising Catholicism.

Discourses of Britain present it as a liberal, tolerant place, accepting of all (as long as their behaviour or attitudes are not 'extreme'), though sometimes needing to focus a little less on alcohol, sex and work and look for something 'deeper'. Religion is seen to be part of our heritage, and something we feel nostalgic about, although the positive impact it may have on our lives is seen to be limited to a vague awareness of 'the spiritual' and a chance to live life a little 'better'.

In the next chapter I will be examining a range of responses to these programmes from viewers of different faith perspectives (and none) in order to discern whether the discourses about religion, spirituality, Britain and other countries present within these programmes are shared by those who watch them.

<u>Chapter Seven: Audiences</u>

Introduction: seeing 'ourselves' and 'others'

In the previous chapters I have shown how guidelines and regulations place restrictions on what can and cannot be portrayed and, in some cases, suggest how things should be depicted in television programming about religion and spirituality. I have examined how programme-makers' views, and the frameworks they work within, shape the way they design programmes in this area. I have described how many programmes adopt a discursive framework of 'tolerance' and exploration. This is strongly related to ideas about 'Britishness' and liberalism, suggesting that religious and spiritual groups are only 'British' if they practice the same liberal, inclusive values and behave in ways that are not seen as deviant or unusual. 'Othering' of religious and spiritual practice is a regular feature of the programmes, although, at the same time, broadcasters are aware of their responsibilities to represent the diversity of the nation (see Chapter Four).

Considering this, this chapter will explore the response of audiences to these programmes in relation to the categories of 'ourselves' and 'others'. I use 'ourselves' here to refer to an audience member's belief system, ethnicity or nationality, and 'others' to refer to the media, those of other faiths, nationalities and ethnicities or 'vulnerable' others, such as children. The chapter is divided into three sections: 'ourselves'; 'others'; and 'dialogue between ourselves and others' which focuses on interaction between members of different faith groups or nationalities, between 'the media' and audiences, and between participants featured in programmes and those discussing them.

As outlined in Chapter Three, audience discussions occurred in a range of environments. A list of pseudonyms and the online environments they were taken from can be found in Appendix Six, along with details of focus group participants. The original spelling, capitalisation and punctuation of online discourse has been maintained.

'Ourselves'

As discussed in Chapters Two and Four, issues of diversity are a significant concern for public service broadcasters, with television providing, for many, the only 'window' into minority groups and different faith communities (BBC 2005b, van Dijk 1987: 124). However, the industry's own research (see Chapter Two) indicates that members of minority religious/spiritual and ethnic groups are often unhappy with the way they are portrayed (or even excluded) from television discourse. In this section, I look at how audiences respond to portrayals of their own faith group, exploring the themes of diversity and representation, identity, and connections with lived experience.

<u>That doesn't look like me: diversity and representation</u>

My audience research uncovered concerns over lack of, or inaccurate, representations of beliefs and practices. These concerns can be found across audience responses[1], from those of all faith positions. Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jews and Pagans were all critical of their lack of visibility within the media, with Sikhs and Hindus in particular comparing their depiction to the portrayal of Islam:

> **Praya:** In my experience, the BBC could not care less about the feelings of or
>
> requests from the Hindus. They simply ignore them... The BBC also ignores the

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[1] Although less so in the Twitter and focus group discussions, as these were often more focused on the programme being watched during, or immediately preceding, discussion.

significant Buddhist population in Britain. I remember well when you [another

user] mentioned the absence of any program or discussion to mark the Vesak,

which is one of the most significant in the buddhist calendar. That was perhaps

5 years ago. NOTHING has changed since. But the coverage of Islam has

increased by leaps and bounds. Everyone now knows when Ramadan falls and

has a rough idea abiut it, thanks to the BBC. How many know about Vesak?

U41: BBC have learned how to pronounce the muslim places of

worship.....mosques but yet CAN NOT say the name of Hindu Temples -

Mandra's , or the Sikh Gurdawara's… BBC involve and cater much more for the

muslims, why? Is it because of fear? or because of pressure?

However, some argued that given the perceived nature of media representation of

(and public hostility to) religion, it might not be to the advantage of these groups to

feature heavily:

Cachen: The indigenous population is indifferent and even hostile to religion. I

don't think it will be to the benefit of either Sikhs or Hindus to increase their

profile and have the contempt that some muslims evoke in the country.

The majority of discussion, in all contexts, came from Christians[2], Muslims and

Atheists, and those of no defined or an uncertain faith position (including those who

identified as Agnostic). It is unclear why this is: it could simply be because other faiths

are fewer in number within the British population (National Statistics 2004) or because

they are represented less in the media themselves and thus feel less impetus to

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[2] The Christians and Muslims seemed to come from a range of traditions/denominations within those faiths.

discuss programmes about the 'major' faiths[3]. The BBC Religion and Ethics message boards had several sub-topics for minority faith groups[4] but discussion in these was often about practice, faith and experience rather than about television.

Many felt their beliefs (or those of friends and family) were presented stereotypically and often in a sensationalist manner. Some were unhappy about the airtime given to particular figures or movements who were not deemed to be representative, discursively constructing the 'extremes' and 'freaks' as something 'other':

> **Jane:** They'll get the most extreme priests/vicars they can find, and put them in a room of skeptics, and edit it accordingly to portray the priests showing homophobic behaviour and saying list of "you-shouldn'ts" all the time… I was horrified! If Christianity was truly like that, I would not be a churchgoer myself.

> **Poisonphoto:** My Best friend is a Muslim and he hates the way other Muslims are being portrayed in the Media… He has told me that too many uneducated freaks are now claiming they are Muslims; they are however, getting the Genuine, law abiding, tolerant and peaceful Muslims a Bad reputation.

In some instances, groups purporting to represent large numbers of believers made public statements such as press releases, open letters or official complaints in response to particular programmes. These included the Church of Scientology's video response to *Panorama*'s 'Scientology and Me' (Smith 2007, Wright 2007), the West Midlands Police/CPS investigation into *Dispatches*' 'Undercover Mosque', supported by some Muslim organisations (MPACUK 2007, BBC News 2007a), and the protests against the BBC's showing of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, which were encouraged by

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[3] Of course, it is possible that their lack of visiblity, especially within environments such as the broadcasters' own websites, blogs and forums, contributes to their under-representation!
[4] Although these are somewhat problematic: for example, 'The Eastern topic' covers a wide range of faiths and traditions.

groups such as the Evangelical Alliance (Hilborn 2005, BBC News 2007b), which also criticised *Dispatches*' 'In God's Name'[5]:

> Dispatches has a reputation for being selective and sensationalist, so perhaps I shouldn't have been shocked. But as someone at the heart of the Christian community, I simply didn't recognise the claims it made… about a growing band of Christian fundamentalists trying to impose their will on society. Stephen Green, a key example given of this fundamentalist movement, is an extremist. The vast majority of Christians who watched last night would, like me, have recoiled in horror at some of the statements he made. The kind of fundamentalism shown by Stephen is not growing in the UK.… Dispatches is a hugely influential programme, so next time it tries to tackle modern Christianity, I would invite its producers to take an honest look at the full story rather than predicting a burgeoning trend on the actions of the eccentric fringe. (Edwards, Evangelical Alliance 2008)

> Today's joint statement from the CPS/West Midlands Police will justifiably reinforce the distrust with which many Muslims regard sections of our media. It is of course right that hate speech must be vigorously combated. Documentary makers have an important responsibility, however, to do their research properly and carefully identify those who are actually inciting hatred. They must take great care to avoid unfairly stigmatising whole institutions and groups of people. It is deeply regrettable that Hardcash Productions, who were the producers of the Undercover Mosque documentary appear to have

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[5] None of the complaints against these programmes were upheld by Ofcom. 'Undercover Mosque' and 'Scientology and Me' both garnered sequels that reinforced the original message and emphasised the broadcasters/programme-makers' legitimacy, whilst the protests against the *Jerry Springer: The Opera* broadcast were criticised in a number of programmes (see Chapters Five and Six).

resorted to some underhand methods in order to engage in hatemongering against some mainstream UK Muslim institutions (Bari, Muslim Council of Britain 2007)

Both of these accounts draw upon notions of documentary as 'influential' and argue that programme makers 'have an important responsibility' - even though they claim 'Dispatches has a reputation for being selective and sensationalist'. The discourses of 'media effects and 'moral panics' are drawn upon with these letters, as they express concern about the 'hatemongering' of the programmes and criticise them for misrepresenting their 'mainstream' faiths.

Across the environments I studied, people routinely expressed criticisms of the way their beliefs were presented by claiming a 'bias' on behalf of the media, broadcasters or programme strands against their faith group. They also perceived that other faith groups (usually referred to as homogeneous groups as opposed to one's own, more diverse community) received preferential treatment[6], echoing Riggins' notion that 'the Self tends to make finer distinctions among its own members who are perceived as constituting numerous subgroups' (1997: 5):

> **Peyne:** To be fair, I didn't watch it[7]. I still find it disgusting though. Amongst all the politcall correctness in this world. Christianity still seems to be a fair target. On Christmas day of days. I'm fine for free speech, but when it doesn't work both ways it simply not on (imagine the uproar if a documentary criticised islam on the day of eid)?

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[6] Even when, in several cases, they did not watch the programmes they were criticising.
[7] *Who Wrote the Bible*, broadcast on Christmas Day 2004 on Channel 4.

> **Zkovic:** The whole thing was very anti-pagan in a way. Or at least, they biased their material towards sexual practices, fighting and the darker aspects of the culture. It's like a documentary on Christianity concentrating on the Inquisition and "holy wars." (on *Pagans*)

> **AK:** The Jews would not tolerate this kind of madia sorry media! and public abuse of their community.The programme producers would have been forced to make a grovelling apology by now. (on 'Undercover Mosque')

These responses are typical of many that accuse a programme or broadcaster of discrimination, claiming their belief system has been portrayed unfairly, and that other belief systems receive preferential treatment to their own.

In some instances, there was support for people within one's own faith group who were perceived as being treated unfairly by the programmes. For example, this forum user didn't believe Gary (in *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed*) was "debunked" by the programme:

> **Hydra:** Personally, I think he DOES have a gift, but if it's to the extent that's being claimed, I have no idea, as far as I concerned, the sceptics didn't debunk him, because no one can be 100% right all the time.

Sometimes programme-makers were commended for the ways in which they presented people's own faith group. This was usually when programmes offered support for a particular group or perspective, or when they allowed a level of discussion and revelation of spiritual experience:

> **Michael:** As a secular Jew and a holocaust survivor I want to congratulate Mr. Richard Littlejohn on his programme about Antisemitism in Britain. Thank you so much it was music to my ears. (on *The War on Britain's Jews*)

> **JB:** the nuns were great. they came out with some lovely wise words and offered a quiet strength, showing grace and acceptance. and to state the obvious it was a reminder of how much people need god... (on *The Convent*)

The programmes that were generally well-received tended to be within historical or arts genres, although the more polemical and provocative histories[8] on Channel 4 received mixed responses. Christian groups generally liked their portrayal within BBC's 'reality' programmes *The Monastery* and *The Convent*, and in Peter Owen Jones' programming, although *The Retreat* wasn't as popular with Muslims. Opinions were split, but more negative than positive, on Channel 4 reality series such as *Make Me A…* and *The Beginner's Guide….* Investigative documentary and current affairs programming was occasionally praised for highlighting deviant elements of one's own faith group but more often criticised by members of the groups portrayed.

Although much rarer than posts criticising or praising media representations, occasional posts acknowledged the role of a user's own faith or national group in causing harm or offence (echoing Gilroy's (2004a) notion of 'postcolonial melancholia'), sometimes praising the media for acknowledging this:

> **PW:** I have long felt that we (Britain and the USA) blundered into Iraq with little if no understanding of Muslim sensibilities… As a practising Christian I am deeply saddened at the extent of the atrocities committed during the Crusades… This programme (and the series as a whole) may be challenging and

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[8] Such as *Christianity: A History, Who Wrote the Bible?* or *Tony Robinson and the…*

uncomfortable viewing for us, but I would encourage Christians to watch them with an open mind. Thank you Channel 4 for an intelligent, balanced and relevant series.

<u>This is who I am: identification</u>

People chose to identify themselves in a number of ways. Some shared their own faith position and experiences, whilst others did not[9]. Most who did reveal this through some statement of disclosure. In online environments, this was often direct:

> **LH:** I am an athiest gay woman. But watching the people with Muslim faith on this show, makes me question all faiths. I think that women and men on this program searching for a partner in this manner, with choice is amazing. Allthough i have no belief in any religion, people that have, that choose to follow there beliefs to the word are commendable.

In face-to-face focus groups there was more hesitancy or qualification, perhaps because participants were mindful that they did not know one another or each other's faith background[10]. For example, Rebecca and Leah both identified as 'Atheist' on their forms but in the discussion were less overt about this stance:

> **Rebecca:** I was brought up CofE but I wasn't actually in church, but then when I was about 15 I went to church for about a year but I'd never gone to church before that cos I could see it was like a social club, it was like a show. These people are good people but…

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[9] Many of the 'general' or 'official' forums did not allow avatars and signatures. On those that did, users would often choose an avatar or signature that reflected something else about their identity or interests such as a favourite pop star, or a link to a blog.
[10] I didn't specifically ask them to reveal their own position and experiences, but within the discussions participants chose to share something of these.

> **Leah:** They are. I went to Sunday School as well. I hated it, I think that's why I'm not…

People from countries other than Britain usually revealed their nationality where discussion occurred in a predominantly British environment such as the Channel 4 Forums, but were less likely to do so on a platform like YouTube. Echoing Van Dijk's (1997: 33) argument that privileged groups are able to control dominant discourses due to their access to processes of production and circulation, Britons rarely disclosed nationality, perhaps taking it as a given. The exceptions to this were when they had some form of perceived 'other' status such as being a British Muslim, or when identifying themselves as being opposed to an 'other'[11]. For example, several people, particularly on forums, identified as British as a form of opposition to the 'invasion' from 'foreign' interpretations of religion (most frequently Islam). Programmes such as 'Undercover Mosque' were seen as revealing a 'truth' about the agenda of such groups:

> **Loopier:** Did these people not say those words? Are those people saying those words not Muslim. If they did NOT say those things were they impossters? I couldn't see a break in any particular sentence. Do you also know that if these words of total domination of GREAT BRITAIN were not spoken we would not be posting on this forum. This is Great Britain if you don't like the way we live or our laws, go forth and multiply in country that will put up with your nonesense.

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[11] Whilst Britain was usually discussed in terms of being 'secular', it was occasionally conceived of as 'Christian', usually either as a reaction against multiculturalism or, occasionally, as a criticism of secularisation, as in this case: **HedonisticXian**: 'I do find it amazing that the very belief system that made this country great and upon which all western civilisation is built (i.e. the biblical framework and the Creator's commands) are now so derrided by so many people who are ignorant of the Christian heritage of this nation. What made Britian Great? I would say it was definitely that she bowed to the Great Creator God who rules in earth and heaven, and she was blessed because she honoured God in her law making'.

On personal front. I will not put up with it and i will fight for my right to be
British.

Often a counter-perspective would be offered from those (usually Muslims) who
considered themselves to be British, despite being 'other', or those who questioned
why they were being 'othered':

simmi: As for OUR country, muslims have just as much right as any other
people from other sects of religion. We uphold the economy of this country, we
work hard, we "give" to this country. I dont see with what right you are calling
Britain "your" country....??? If you were born into this country, then so were
many of these "muslim" people.

People from other countries often had to legitimise their own perspective by showing
they understood the difference between their experience and that of Britons. For
example, an American poster on the Richard Dawkins forum suggested a reality show
for Atheists would work in America. He was derided by many (mostly Western
European) users and had to defend himself by acknowledging his difference:

AmericanBoy: I think I was abundantly clear in saying that I think this would be
good for the U.S.... in the U.S. many christians are very clear that they don't
think you can be a moral person without god in your life, nor could you live any
sort of purposeful or meaningful existence as an atheist.

Likewise, a number of commenters on the 'Africa's Witch Children' programmes
identified as Nigerian, and expressed shame about the religious activity in their home
country, and support for the British workers:

Viola: I am Nigerian and the incidence of these new generation churches
cannot be underestimated. Iam quite ashamed though that a foreigner had to

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bring this problem to fore... tell me, is Nigeria still in the dark? I wonder. I feel

pity for children who have to go through this horrible ordeals and to be

branded witches, how low can that society sink?!!!

<u>I remember when: connections with lived experience</u>

Much audience research has been interested in the relationship between the media

and lived experience (for example Hermes 1995, Radway 1987, Gauntlett and Hill

1999). Audience members making connections to personal experience were also

common within my study.

Across all environments, disclosure of a belief position was often accompanied by

revelation of lived experience, sometimes in the form of a programme reminding

people of something they had experienced:

> **TOM:** Having spent some months in a Hindu monastery, for me it was
>
> personally rewarding to see a place of sacred contemplation and silence again
>
> (on *The Monastery*)

> **Amy:** ...recently I've been involved with Buddhism... so I felt an affinity with
>
> their finding out if it was for them... when Pom said she felt like coming home...
>
> that's what I felt like after reading up on Buddhism. (on *The Retreat*)

> **Londonexile:** Watched programme about religious divorces within the
>
> Orthodox Jewish community. Got progressively angrier and remembered why I
>
> walked away. (on 'Divorce: Jewish Style')

In some cases, this was used as 'evidence' of how 'false' a particular practice was:

> **Serena:** There is a [scientific] explanation for that [glass moving] I've tried it
>
> and its potentially, nothing to do with the spirit world whatever.

RubyCaroline: I'm an Atheist former evangelical, and I can still speak in tongues. Great party trick!

Keith: I had experiences in the spiritualist church as a teenager… you realise that there's no-one actually telling you, you're just cold reading people… But no-one's done it for him [Gary in *GYPP*]. No-one's said you're just massaging people and giving them a bit of bedside manner.

Some talked about the way that a programme had affected them on a more personal or emotive level, often within the context of their own faith paradigm:

Gail: God's sense of humour here. Just when I thought too many things about our society have slipped into dark places, and that reality tv ranked among the major pieces of evidence for this (so decided not even to risk being upset by watching one in a monastery) - just then, here's evidence of God shows how grace can touch us. Most of my friends did watch *The Monastery* and I'm frankly moved by what I'm hearing from them all.

Paul: I mean I'm not a religious person, I'm more of an anti-religious person but if I was going to be drawn to anything… the Burning Man thing was, most religions seem to me to be very exclusive, and here was a religion that kind of welcomed difference, welcomed you. I mean as a gay man with a Hindu partner, I'm kind of cast aside in many ways anyway but this was a religion that kind of included everyone and that was kind of refreshing to see, it was nice (on *ATW80*).

With some programmes, there was a resolve to investigate situations further, such as those who, upon seeing 'How to Find God' professed they would join an Alpha

course[12]. After the broadcast of *The Monastery*, Worth Abbey reported an increase in interest and set up a website in response (Buxton 2009), while donations to Stepping Stones Nigeria increased from under £60,000 in 2007-2008 to over £270,000 in 2008-2009 and nearly £400,000 in 2009-2010 (Stepping Stones Nigeria 2009, 2010) following the two *Dispatches* documentaries.

Indeed, more than any other programmes, the '…Africa's Witch Children' documentaries provoked a huge emotional response, with people talking about their feelings (including being moved to tears) the second most common kind of response (after feeling sorry for the children) and offers of help being the third. Some respondents even felt the need to justify why they couldn't offer financial help:

> **Jules:** If it wasn't for the fact that I am unable to work and already have direct debits set up with three other children's charities, I would willingly support Gary in his work.

> **Gregg:** I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO MOVED. I want to help. Not with money, but I would do anything to pick up those children and show them love.

I have shown in this section that there are a number of ways in which people articulate their responses to programmes. Connections with personal experience are sometimes made. Occasionally, particularly where children are presented in a programme, their discourse contains expressions of emotion and personal affect. Often, there is a need to qualify one's own status by reassuring other users of agreement with particular sentiments, such as non-Brits who distance themselves from practices in their own countries, or believers who distance themselves from the 'extremes' of faith groups.

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[12] Alpha also claim a rise in interest after ITV's *Alpha: Will it Change Their Lives?* (2000) (Alpha Friends 2007)

Although there was occasional praise for programmes deemed to present one's own

faith position in a positive light, the discourse from 'ourselves' was dominated by

criticisms, either of a lack of visibility within programming, or because people

perceived their faith and practice to be misrepresented, stereotyped, or criticised and

ridiculed unfairly. Despite criticisms being similar in nature from members of all faith

groups, people routinely perceived 'other' groups to receive fairer representation than

their own. Considering this, I will now explore further how people discuss 'others'.

'Others'

As well as discussing one's own faith position, audience members referenced a number

of 'others', ranging from 'the media' or specific broadcasters and programme strands,

to members of other religious groups or nationalities, to those perceived as

'vulnerable'.

Tajfel, building on work on ethnocentrism by Sumner (1906) and Levine and Campbell

(1972), discusses the way 'positively valued differentiations from others' might

contribute 'to the continuation of the group as an articulate social entity' and to

individuals' self-image and self-respect… 'this amounts to saying to oneself, "We are

what we are because *they* are not what we are"' although this process might occur less

frequently, or even reverse 'in social conditions which present much less of a drastic

social division between minorities and others' (1987: 248-249). As I will show, in some

contexts, people attempted to differentiate 'ourselves' from 'them' whilst in others,

there was much more dialogue between the two.

<u>We know how they see us, here's how we see them: discussion of 'the media'</u>

Members of Ofcom's (2005) focus groups identified BBC One as the provider most likely to offer religious programming. Their experience of religious programming was of a predominantly Christian nature (ibid: 14), and people from all groups felt that programmes 'were not reflective of their faith as they experienced it in contemporary Britain' (op. cit)[13] and needed to better reflect multi-faith society (ibid: 17-18). The BBC's research revealed that members of all faith groups perceived Channel 4 to be 'sticking its neck out' in terms of its religious provision, and that regional programming on the BBC was often more diverse and representative than mainstream output (BBC 2004b).

In my 'offline' focus groups, before screenings, participants were asked what they believed the programmes would be like, based on the channel they were broadcast on. The BBC, particularly BBC Two and BBC Four, was generally perceived to be less 'biased' and more 'politically' correct, whilst 'sensationalism' was associated with ITV, Five, Channel 4 and BBC Three:

> **Andie:** BBC's gonna be a bit more politically correct, I reckon

> **Leah:** BBC Four's gonna have more of a historical aspect

> **Ben:** Be a bit more balanced

> **Keith:** Was that [*GYPP*] on Channel Five?... BBC Three? Oh, same difference.

> **Andie:** With Channel 4 it could be about anything, absolutely anything

> **Leah:** Could be quite sensationalist on Channel 4

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[13] Although it should be noted that this was before the mid-2000s rise in 'reality' programmes about religion.

Despite the broadcasters' public service commitments to diversity and impartiality, they were frequently accused of bias:

PaganLove: The BBC only falls over backwards to please Muslims and sometimes Christians, the rest of are trampled over by them.

GW: To be fair i wasnt expecting much more from Channel 4, which in my eyes has an anti-Christian adgenda

MR: Is Aaqil Ahmed a Muslin ? All his programs seems to be very pro- Islam

Jason: Fair - yes it was fair if you love Israel and hate Muslims! - it was great! However for the unbiased many, it was nothing short of propaganda

A thread on the Channel 4 Forums entitled 'Is *Dispatches* biased?', had, by the fifth post, become an argument[14] between those who believed it was 'obsessed' with, and biased against, Islam and those who thought it was fair, with people adopting different 'decoding' positions (Hall 1973) according to their own faith:

Muscular: Dispatches seems to be obssessed with "RADICAL MUSLIMS", "ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS", and "MUSLIM TERRORISTS" .... but then again so is the rest of the British media… why the obsession with MUSLIM nutters ?... Yet of course there are plenty of Christians in the UK spouting homophobic and sexist doctrine at every step, but this is seen as no big deal. These people are clearly not representative of Christians as a whole, and no one asks the entire Christian community to account for it…Thanks to the news media, most of the UK hates or fears muslims.

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[14] And it only took until the second post for someone to claim the BBC was more biased.

Neo: I'd have thought the reason why Dispatches topics are Islam orientated is obvious. Christians bark but don't bite; Muslims do both, and not just in the Western world against Westerners. (And Hindus and Buddhists do neither.)

Such was the level of perceived bias against one's own faith position and in favour of others' that the same programmes could provoke quite contradictory responses. For example, the following exchanges from discussion of *Christianity: A History*:

Xanadu: Continuously the programme adopted the usual tactic of giving salacious graphic depictions of Christian misddeds and atrocities, attributing them to Christianity, while passing over the atrocities of Muslims.

Tim: Not only was this episode biased in one direction by a Christian theologian but it also failed to show a balanced view of paganism in this country.

CW: I don't know why I am shocked when I watch such programmes as they are always biased towards Christians.

Jim: However, I have a major problem with the series in that Channel 4 would never produce a series that questions / undermines Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism etc in such a way. Why pick on Christianity?

In such comments, which made up a substantial proportion of the online response (particularly on the Channel 4 forums and blog), those who identified as Christian frequently felt their beliefs were being attacked in a way those of other religions would not be. Jim's 'Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism etc' statement is typical of responses that categorise 'other' religions as a homogenous group (see also BBC 2004b, van Dijk 1997), despite the media portrayals of these religions varying quite considerably, a

clear echo of Riggins' argument that 'Outsiders do tend to perceive Others as a homogeneous category' (1997: 5).

Dispatches' 'Unholy War' (see pp. 189-193) had two threads dedicated to it on the Channel 4 Forums: 'Unholy War: Let's demonise the Muslims' and 'Unholy War: Biased against evangelical christians'. In each, the opening poster complained about the bias shown their religion, taking a negotiated decoding position (Hall 1973), being enraged at the portions of the programme criticising their religion yet choosing to ignore or underplay the criticisms of the other faith:

> **Aniseed:** Dispatches latest chapter in it's 'Let's demonise the Muslims' series seemed to have been spun out of a separate investigation on the targeting of UK Muslims, for conversion, by evangelical Christians… One can only imagine how this would have been spun by the program makers if it had been Muslims targeting Christians… Imagine the outrage if it had been a Muslim saying all Christians would go to hell as the evangelical preacher stated regarding Muslims?

> **Bailey:** I watched the dispatches show entitled unholy war tonight, and was disgusted by the biased attitude towards evangelical Christians… much of the first part of the show seemed to be a vendetta against evangelical christians… by a presenter who was clearly anti-christian.

Similarly, *Make Me a Muslim* received comments such as 'can you imagine the outrage if a Christian version of this programme was made?' (Affi), and when *Make Me a*

Christian aired, some users[15] protested that Channel 4 would not treat Islam in the same way.

There were clear expectations about the perceived biases of particular broadcasters, genres and programme strands. Reality television[16], in particular, attracted disapproval, often seen as something deliberately created for controversy, although sometimes acknowledged as able to 'do good' (Hill 2009, Morreale 2007, Buxton 2009):

> **IntheCity:** I don't think that the 'reality tv' format was appropriate for a programme on a complex culture… Would have been far more worthwhile sending a camera crew into the muslim community to find out about how they live and why they adopt (or don't) the teachings of islam. (on *MMAM*).

> **fizzy:** Well said. As soon as I saw the advert for this program I thought it just typical of Channel 4. 3 weeks of being Muslim; a 'Gay', a Taxi Driver, a Christian & Muslim couple.... I thought it all rather 'silly'.

> **Amy:** *Wife Swap* is like watching a car crash sometimes but when someone genuinely has an insight into something they've never thought to try before I think it's wonderful.

Whilst many people claimed to enjoy documentaries, they were generally perceived as having some form of bias or agenda, although this wasn't always seen as a bad thing, providing it was made clear:

> **Woof:** I'm a bit cynical about TV documentaries, I'm afraid.

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[15] Sadly, most of these comments were on the Channel 4 forums which were deleted before the data could be retrieved.
[16] Largely understood in terms of the 'life experiment' or 'makeover' strand rather than docusoaps or other formats.

Conga: I love them. You get to learn things from a vastly skewed point of view!

Anon1: I personally don't believe that a completely objectivist documentary *is* possible: That we're outsiders looking in… immediately frames the piece from that perspective… I think it's worth admitting a stance to at least make clear the maker's perspective.

These comments show that audience perspectives are complicated and often contradictory. On the one hand, there is a desire for 'neutrality', on the other an acceptance for presenters and programme makers to adopt a particular standpoint, as long as this is made explicit. What they claim not to like is programmes that have a bias but are not explicit about this bias. However, they will often adopt the 'dominant' reading of a text if it is not presenting their 'own' group negatively. For example, almost everyone commenting on the '…Africa's Witch Children' documentaries accepted the programme's message of the practices of 'abuse' from the African Christians and 'salvation' from the charity workers.

Whilst audiences frequently complain about their 'own' group being portrayed stereotypically, they do not always make the connection that 'other' groups may have the same complaints.

What are they talking about? Discussion of personalities and presenters

Those involved in presenting or narrating programmes were often a subject of discussion. Again, people's perceptions of presenters varied, often in accordance with their own perspective on religion/spirituality rather than any criteria of what makes a 'good' presenter or broadcaster. For example, Robert Beckford was criticised by evangelicals for being liberal, and by non-Christians for being a believer. Criticisms

tended to centre on the belief that, because of his theological standpoint, he did not deserve airtime:

> **Wesley:** Dr Beckford is back! This time hes spending Christmas Day trashing the authority, inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible… he links evangelicalism (of all strands) with anti-Islamic fundamentalism and calls the Bible responsible!... Now personally I have no problem with a documentry attacking the Bible. I believe in freedom of speech. However to do so on Christmas Day is grossly insensitive and inappropiate on the Christian Holy Day. Then for this to be the work of a fellow Christian just makes me livid! Maybe Dr Beckford is a lovely person who knows the Lord. However he is an appauling journalist, theologian and academic… I have no doubt his 'work' will cause huge wounds for the Christian faith in this country. He may well have already doomed people to hell by the confusing message he sends out. I say we all pray for Dr Beckford and for him to recant his heresy!

> **Moby:** I got the impression that Christianity to Beckford was an unspritual, unsupernatural affair that could be summed up with by material actions to help the poor and anyone who felt oppressed, as long as it didint come with a theology he didnt like… The more I hear liberals, the more I see that they are not actually open to different interpretations at all, but only to ones that fit what they feel.

Moby and Wesley justify their standpoint by claiming that it is not they who are unable to criticise their faith or interpret the Bible in new ways, but Beckford himself. Beckford's status as an "appauling" academic, theologian and journalist is based on his ability to critique the Bible. These Christian users assert their disbelief in Beckford's

spirituality[17], yet for Atheist Paul Rai, Beckford's mention of his own faith in *Christianity: A History* was a cause for complaint.

When presenters were commended, it was almost always because they had presented something audiences thought of as 'fair' or in some way 'balanced', although even when these responses dominated discussion (as, for example, in the Twitter and survey responses to 'How to Find God'), there were always dissenting voices:

> **Nixon:** I thought… that Littlejohn is hardly someone to speak on such a subject after all his rants in the past. Then, I watched the programme, and have to agree that not only was the programme well made, informative and unbiased, Littlejohn actually did a good job.

> **Serena:** At least when Jon Ronson does stuff like this, he, you get the impression that kind of you do get a more balanced [view]… he never ever took the pee out of whoever he was talking to.

> **Anon2:** The narrators [Ronson] tone was very leading and sinister, trying to set up Alpha as if it's some kind of sect/cult, which it clearly isn't. Not impartial – like BBC programmes but typical Channel 4 sensationalism.

The focus groups all agreed on what they did and didn't like in interviewers and presenters. They valued understanding where someone 'was coming from' and a

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[17] When I interviewed Beckford, I asked about the impact on his own faith: 'I think that it's been quite profound in that I no longer separate church from the rest of my life because I go to a Pentecostal church which is apolitical and anti-intellectual, you're teaching black theology which is both political and intellectual… so I think the films are bringing historical criticism and my own spirituality, working together'. I asked if his theology had changed since he'd been making documentaries: 'Not really because I'm still Pentecostal at the heart of what it means, the intellect can't comprehend what God's about… the fundamentals are still there. Probably how I understand the texts, but I've always studied theology… I've always thought about the text… it's made me just as committed to struggle because the films have always engaged with that struggle'.

sense of openness and inquisitiveness. They disliked it when people came across as patronising or 'lightweight'. Their response to the narration and questioning of Vanessa Engle[18] in *Jews*, for example, was very unfavourable:

Andie: You just wanna slap her!

Leah: I've never seen a more patronising, belittling programme in my life!

Andie: I was quite surprised that the BBC did that because I'd have expected something…

Leah: Channel Five or something

Another focus group had almost identical criticisms of Emeka Onono of *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed*:

Serena: Lightweight

Laura: Patronising

'Lightweight' interviewers were perceived as having an 'agenda' and setting out to patronise or belittle their subjects. In contrast, the focus group who disliked Onono in *GYPP* had this to say of Peter Owen Jones on *Around the World in 80 Faiths*:

Paul: A lot less bias, more informative, I liked the humour that he interjected it with, made it more viewable.

Serena: It was personal, rather than biased, wasn't it?

Paul:…It allowed you to make your own mind up about stuff.

Serena: …[Onono] closed everything down whereas this he [Owen Jones], I don't know, he asked more questions than he answered, didn't he?

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[18] Who positions herself as an Atheist Jew (Billen 2008)

> **Keith:** Well, he did make his own views very clear with the nods to camera about the Spiritualists and the wise earthy Navaho and stuff.

Whilst Keith is sceptical, the others applaud what they perceived as a more open discourse, and distinguished between 'personal' and biased views, because Owen Jones spoke about his own faith position and about how experiences within the programme were affecting him. In contrast, they didn't know who Onono was:

> **RAD:** Do you think… having a personal dimension adds to that, do you think it's important?
>
> **Serena:** Well belief and faith is all centred around that so yeah I'd say it's essential really.
>
> **Laura:** Cos otherwise how do you know? I mean the other guy, we knew nothing about him but he was quite he felt a little bit sneering… whereas with this guy we knew that he believed in God, the way that he believed in God, the sort of church he belonged to… I felt like I got to know him through the programme whereas the other guy, couldn't tell you anything about him.

The role of celebrities in programmes was seen as somewhat cynical or superficial, although the criticisms varied according to the celebrity, with Peaches Geldof, Dominik Diamond and Ann Widdecombe attracting much scorn:

> **Animator:** Why the fuck would you send an absolute dumb arse like Peaches Geldof to find out the truth about Islam?

Sometimes a level of surprise, respect or appreciation was expressed, but this usually maintained a veneer of criticism:

> **Liz:** At times I liked Peaches, she seemed quite sweet, even if I am envious that as usual, people get jobs because of who they are and not necessarily their

abilities. However she seemed a bit dumb and patronising. I mean what is her goal in life, to be rich and go shopping?

These comments indicate that presenters of programmes, as the visible 'face' of television discourse, are often those whom criticism and praise are aimed at. When the presenter has a perceived openness and willingness to question things, regardless of their own faith position, this is well received. The most common complaint seems to be that some presenters are 'patronising'; humouring their subjects rather than being receptive and interested.   Audiences seem to value the honesty of a presenter as long as that honesty is combined with a level of 'respect' for their subjects.

What I know about you: discussing 'other' faiths

As one might expect, discussion across all environments largely concerned people's views on other faiths. Most of the time, users interpreted programmes to suit their preconceived ideas and prejudices, and so there was a lot of discussion about the wrongs of religious others, particularly within forums, on YouTube and in blog comments, where discussion would regularly deviate from talking about the programme concerned and become a debate about wider faith issues.

Atheist (or non-declared) commenters often made comments about 'religion' as a whole. There were also many criticisms from non-believers and members of other faith groups about Muslims, Christians and Jews in particular, and believers made similar generalisations about the non-religious. Believers and non-believers alike tended to accuse the 'others' of hypocrisy and a lack of tolerance, open-mindedness or intelligence:

Banana: what is it about religious types that you have to get cross about things before you've even seen them?

SpaceFungus: Oh my oh my you a-theists are such a cock-sure arrogant lot. Ever heard when rationality becomes irrational. THAT is scientism, and old Dawk is the preacher for it. That's why he is so screwed up, agoin round about evangelisizing for 'science-'ism'...

Sam1980: These Christian fundamentalists' views drip of hypocracy. They claim that the religion of Islam is built on hate, yet they fail to acknowledge their own hatred towards other people based on those people's faith, sexual oritentation and so on. What happened to Chritian virtues such as loving thy neighbour and tolerance? A bunch of fruitcakes. The whole lot of them.

Constructions of 'the other' often echoed media discourses about faith groups and were often couched in anti-Semitic, Islamophobic or anti-Christian rhetoric. Words such as 'fundie', 'Bible basher', 'god botherer', 'Zionist', 'creationist' and 'Jihadist' punctuated criticisms of religious groups, along with racist stereotypes and references to recent world events, echoing van Dijk's (1987) argument that majority groups reproduce a range of discourses and stereotypes in their portrayal of 'others' (see also Miles 1989: 11):

Sheikh: The propagation of the 'victim culture' by Jewish/Israeli groups has reached the level of obscenity in that those who were grievously sinned against now seek to sin against others with impunity - and without rebuke or criticism from any other group... Search your memories - have you not seen reports of young english men being shot by Israeli soldiers for having the temerity to try

and prevent the bulldozing of houses which contained entire Palestinian families?

> **Stoner:** lol @ muslim school. muslim bitches be crazy. its funny when thr R 2 of them talking to the camera with head scarfs i cant tell whos talking

Although most discussion was about Christianity, Atheism, Judaism and Islam, NRMs and smaller faith groups were also routinely criticised or ridiculed, as were those with 'flaky' spirituality. With fewer members of those communities within more 'general' forums and sites, these criticisms often went unchallenged.

Ofcom's (2005) respondents, whilst 'rationalising' the need to treat all belief systems equally, expressed 'discomfort' when Scientology, Voodoo and Satanism were discussed, and 'a strong sense that these three belief systems should be scheduled carefully to avoid exposing the vulnerable to them' (ibid: 26). In my research, Scientology in particular received strong criticism, with a lot of anger and accusations of its adherents being crazy:

> **justthinking:** That was un-fu**ing-believeable. That Tommy Davis dude is a mad man! Having watched Tom Cruise's little video, I am now convinced they are creating a cult of totally insane individuals! I'm really quite shocked.

> **Tubec:** This makes me want to puke! Scientology is a cult! Not a religion! FUCK YOU SCIENTOLOGY!!!! FUCK YOU AND EVERYTHING YOU STAND FOR!!!

When discussing spiritualism or the afterlife, humour was frequently employed, and in the Twitter response to the *Revelations* series (apart from 'How to Find God', which attracted more comments of every kind) the two programmes which attracted the most clearly humorous responses were 'The Exhumer' and 'Talking to the Dead'. As

Davies argues, because death is seen as taboo in our culture and is 'either denied or hidden away' there is a pleasure in joking about it (1999: 263):

> **shedman:** going to watch a tele programme about talking to the dead . Bit like when my missus talks to me

> **OCW:** Watching Channel 4 doc about spiritualists. One of them's reading a newspaper called Psychic News. Obviously its for not very good psychics.

During *GYPP*, the focus group frequently laughed at the scenarios presented by the programme; such as where it was revealed that a patient had Alzheimer's and the scene where Gary claims his spiritual helper, Abraham, is the prophet:

> **Serena:** Oh my goodness, not any old Abraham!

They also picked up on the show's implications that Gary might be gay:

> **Serena:** I thought he had something going on with that manager…

> **Paul:** Yeah. Clearly we're not cut out to be psychic.

'Othering' did not only occur between faith communities, but within them, with members of certain belief groups (particularly Atheist, Christian and Muslim) keen to distance themselves from the 'others' within their own community. These 'others' were usually perceived to be either eccentric, or 'fundamentalists' who were dogmatic or intolerant. For example, Anna, Riri and Rius criticised Christians in *Wife Swap* and *Revelations*, whilst in an exchange with Jon Ronson[19], Atheist iamroman distanced himself from users of the Richard Dawkins forum:

> **Anna:** It's making me very angry… oh dear… I want to say things that I really shouldn't say!... Do you realise what a bad light you're portraying yourself in?

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[19] About users of the Richard Dawkins forum being critical of 'How to Find God'

> **Riri:** I'm not comfortable with the speaking in tongues thing that they
>
> emphasized… my version of Christianity is much more mundane
>
> **iamroman:** @jonronson that lot are NUTS. they worship at the altar of Richard
>
> Dawkins and make living human sacrifices.

Audiences often see it as important to distance themselves from others in their faith group whose behaviour/beliefs they disagree with, and complain about the lack of nuance in presentations of their own faith. However, when they discuss other faiths it is often through generalisation and stereotypes. Racist or derogatory discourse is common, as are jokes at the expense of other people's beliefs, or sweeping statements about 'religion' from non-believers. NRMs and alternative spiritualities come in for particular criticism and hostility, with a lot of humour also prevalent in discourse about these beliefs.

In this next section, I will look at how audiences respond to portrayals of 'other' nations and show that a level of stereotyping, hostility and generalisation persists in these discussions.

Foreign affairs: discussions of 'other'nations

Other countries, insofar as they were discussed at all, were generally perceived as 'different' to Britain and Western Europe. As in television discourses, 'they' were perceived as inferior to 'us', or to countries 'we' approved of. Binary oppositions continually marked one nation out as superior to another (Ellis 1989: 19). For example DocKing asserted how some countries were more acceptable 'others':

> Why is the Indian community so successful and the Pakistani community
>
> not???? Hint-One has a chip on their shoulder while the other has not!!!!

Responses to the 'Africa's Witch Children' programmes were framed in colonialist discourse, presenting the continent as 'savage', 'barbaric', 'poor' and backwards (see Carver 1982, Ellis 1989, Spencer 2006). This was the case even when audience members acknowledged the role of Western countries in the problems Nigeria and other African countries faced:

Sasco: i could understand more if they branded white children witches and wizards,,,destroying your own children is fucking pure savge ,,,in the name of christ,,well keep your christ im off,,sick bastards

les: Somebody, some backward bastard of a priest, thought they were witches… I can't begin to tell you how angry I feel. Now I don't normally get upset about things I saw on television, but I just screamed at the television… I couldn't believe there are people in this world who are so culturally backward… there are some cultures on this planet who need to have some serious words said to them.[20]

Rebecca: You've got to get your head round that they've got a very different belief system to ourselves and that it's a different economic system… [a] very uneducated atmosphere so you believe what you're told don't you and people obviously follow that to the letter, they're unquestioning… you've got to get your head back to that sort of mentality and for us I think that's difficult.

Leah: The influence of television as well in a society that is not as completely absorbed by televisual entertainment as the West… if you've just got one TV in

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[20] les qualifies his position by stating it's not 'all Nigerians' he is criticising, just those in the 'villages' and 'countryside'.

the village and you get just one film a month or something it's gonna affect you more…

However, Leah did observe that SAWC showed a very stereotypical view of Africa and was aware of the 'othering' nature of watching and discussing the programme:

Well we're looking at this from this, with an eye, these are 'Other' people aren't they, these are the 'other', it's not just, they're not, they are from a different culture, a different country and we're sitting round in a very nice flat with a telly and there's some kind of *National Geographic* mentality going on as well. It's easy to judge people when you can completely separate yourself from them as human beings I think.

American beliefs were seen by almost everyone who mentioned them, as being different to 'ours', either unusual, exotic or 'silly' (usually NRMS) or unsophisticated and fundamentalist (usually evangelical Christianity). Discussion of American practice was often presented as an example of what should not happen in Britain:

ab1: who else thinks americans are a prime example that people should be drowned at birth there is no god we dont have to beleive in god abortions is ok and children with bibles piss of u have a go at islamists use are the same fuck u yanks.

When Cherie Blair[21] deviated from the norm of demonising American evangelicalism in Christianity: A History, a number of commenters expressed their anger and reiterated their opinion of American Christianity as being dangerous:

GM: Dear Ms Booth… To speak of the current American experience of Christianity without mentioning the evangelical right goes beyond anything

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[21] She presented the programme as Cherie Blair, rather than Booth.

that can be excused as carelessness. It is a deliberate and disgraceful selection

of the facts, and everything in you that is feminist or liberal should be deeply

ashamed… In America [the church] is overseeing an inexorable rise of hatred –

towards homosexuals, towards the teaching of science in schools, towards

secularism — and this is growing… All of this, you are well aware of. Yet you

chose to whisper not a breath of it in your programme but instead to present

some liberal examples as though they were the sole face of American

Christianity. This is an abuse of your position as a broadcaster.

GM's comment is couched in a form of apparent politeness and formality. Her appeal

to Booth's 'liberal' and 'feminist' credentials apparently seals her argument that

Booth's presentation was lacking and indeed 'an abuse' of her status.

These discussions of 'other' nations show a clear desire for audiences to distinguish

'us' Britons from 'them' and a need to reiterate 'our' superiority over their

'backwardness' (Gilroy 2004a, van Dijk 1997, Lull 2007: 139, Micklethwait and

Wooldridge 2009: 11). 'We' are perceived as being more advanced and more

'sensible' than them. This notion of being somehow 'superior' to others also continues

through audience discourse around 'vulnerable' others, as I will now explain.

Poor things: discussion of 'vulnerable' others

Concern for the 'vulnerable' marks much discussion about television and

religion/spirituality. In Ofcom's (2005) qualitative research, respondents repeatedly

expressed concern about vulnerable groups (including the elderly, children and those

who may be depressed) and cited the potential dangers to these groups as a rationale

for regulation (ibid: 29). Similar concerns marked much of the audience discourse I studied.

Words such as 'abuse' and 'exploitation' were often used in discussions about those perceived to be vulnerable, particularly when those perpetrating the alleged abuse or exploitation were seen to be from faith positions or nationalities other to one's own. On the Richard Dawkins Foundation website, articles[22] on programmes including *Deborah 13: Servant of God* and 'Saving Africa's Witch Children' were even tagged with the key word 'abuse', as were several uploads or video responses[23] on YouTube. Comments were often framed in terms of other 'moral panics' about children's well-being, such as child molestation, and with reference to other stories such as scandals over abuse within Catholic churches, and although some people framed their disgust as being against 'humans' in general many used these examples as proof that 'religion' was bad:

> **grunge:** Deborah's parents are evil retarded cunts. They shouldn't be allowed near kids; they do more damage than a fucking paedophile. Cunts. Moronic retarded cunts. I think I've made my point.

> **lahar:** An absolute obscenity on the entire human race. These people are some of the sickest, deluded, manipulative individuals in the country. The parents are guilty of child abuse at a fundamental level, and should be brought up on charges. One step away from the Westboro/Phelps[24] sickos. One hopes that

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[22] Which appear in the form of blog posts that can be commented on, and are authored by a number of different users.

[23] Where users post videos of themselves talking about their response to something. These videos also prompted a number of response comments which discussed both the 'response video' and the original programme/subject matter.

[24] A reference to the Phelps family of Westboro Baptist Church, a minority Christian group, and subject of many documentaries and news stories throughout the decade.

eventually they will realise their sickness and regret their entire worthless lives to date.

> **AlJoseph:** OMFG THESE PEOPLE ARE SO FUCKING STUPID AND FUCKING IGNORANT Christians i hate to break it to you but the Burning times is over move the fuck on you wonder why people leave your churches you wonder why people have hatred for your church oh and yes i hope every priest that stuck his hands down little kids pants is will be roasting in hell. leave it to the Church to fuck up a already messed up country

AlJoseph's comment is not unusual in its combination of anger expressed through 'shouting' (using all capitals) and swearing, reference to a range of Christian contexts (burning of witches, Catholic sex abuse scandals, secularisation) and assertion that Nigeria, even without the influence of Christianity, was an 'already messed up country'.

Whilst the adults involved in these programmes were demonised, children were seen as passive, easily malleable and duped, a familiar construction of children as lacking in agency (see Buckingham 1999, 2000) in contemporary Western culture where there is a tendency to restrict children's activities and knowledge, and protect them from harm (Buckingham 1999: 132). Children were perceived as being unable to make their own choices, even when, like Deborah, they were teenagers:

> **Woof:** Normally I wouldn't favour following young kids around and asking for their insights or opinions on things like religion, as they're really vessels being filled by those around them… Young children are parrots of their parents/teachers and adults are normally dogmatic adherents.

Children were often seen as innocent, defenceless and cherished, referred to as 'angels', 'babies' or with the prefix 'poor little' (see Davie 2007). This was the dominant response to the *Dispatches* '…Africa's Witch Children' programmes:

> **Latina:** Their not witches or anything of the sort just see baby`s looking for love and a bit of common sense from the adults is in order. God Bless!!! xxxxx

> **GD:** That the most cherished, vulnerable and defenceless members in any society can be ritually abused, abandoned and worse almost beggars belief, especially in the 21st century.

'Vulnerable' adults included those who were elderly, sick or depressed and programmes about spiritual healing, mediumship or courses such as Alpha were frequently discussed in terms of their impact on such people:

> **ShonaG:** @jonronson Interesting that a couple of volunteers are unemployed. Did you feel they were at all motivated by filling a void or boredom?

> **Paul:** I felt there was a preying on vulnerable people, the emotional side of stuff, the woman who, who had spent ten thousand pounds on stuff… (

When discussion about Scientology on the Richard Dawkins forum followed similar lines of concern, one member claimed he wanted to see if they could 'brainwash' him in the same way, whilst asserting his own skill at being 'observant' rather than vulnerable:

> **Aaron:** I plan to join a local 'church' just to see what it's like… If they do utilise brainwashing tactics it will be interesting to try to discern them, I picked up some noticable techniques in my first interview… the Scientologist… would pretend to agree with me, but twist my words to fit what he wanted to hear. In

other words, he attempted to make me think that I already believed in their principles, I wouldn't have noticed this if I wasn't being quite observant.

Another user expressed concern that Aaron might still be putting himself in a vulnerable position, and warned him of the threat that the group presents:

Pag: You have to be damn careful. Once they figure out you're just checking them out, most of their paranoid expectations will be confirmed. It's not pleasant.

Several identified Gary (*GYPP*) and Johnny Vegas as being vulnerable 'others' themselves, in Gary's case blaming the adults around him for mistreating him in his youth:

Paul: I do think under the mental health act, he's [Gary] slightly sectionable. Erm [Laughs] as a former mental health social worker.

Laura: The poor guy was ignored by his parents as a kid, he did something to try and get their attention, he did get their attention and did it more and more and more and now he can't stop. He's been doing it all through his life, so what else is he gonna do?

AJ: I felt sad for Mr Vegas... these kind of groups seek out peoples weak points, loneliness, addiction, poverty, grief ect then creep in like a disease, pulling on all insecurities & promising special salvation from a spiteful god....oooooppps sorry xxx (please note that the above is personal feelings only)

Some people questioned whether there was also a question of programme makers exploiting their 'vulnerable' subjects, as in these responses to *Deborah 13: Servant of God*:

dom: I feel, as i've felt with a number of BBC3/C4 programmes, that there's an element of exploitation here, which is not fair to someone who is only 13 and has quite obviously been totally brainwashed.

Dan: Caught a bit of this in passing… but is it rally right for a 13 year old with strong views to be put up against older adults who apparently want to try and "catch them out". Another BBC Three triumph… At some point (perhaps this documentary, perhaps Jade's kids[25] pictured crying this week on the COVER of OK!) children clearly became fair game for the media. Deeply depressing.

Whilst not so explicitly seen as 'vulnerable', the impact of religion on women and homosexual people was picked up on by many, often echoing the repeated concerns within television discourse about religion and its impact on gender and sex:

Fizzywine: watching a programme about jewish divorces. them women got it baaaaaad.

Angryblack: Channel 4 now - religion is simply shitty if your a woman

Finally, it is worth pointing out that in certain contexts (reality/exploration programming), vulnerability was seen as a good thing. As Morreale says, such programmes work on the 'premise… that these new selves will offer fulfilment, that transformation is commensurate with improvement' (2007: 97). Many people approved of those 'others' who were vulnerable in a way that opened them up to positive change:

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[25] Jade Goody, former *Big Brother* contestant, who died in early 2009.

> **JB:** i think she is very brave opening up her life and being so vulnerable. i so hope she finds it all worthwhile and is able to love herself, and accept that she is loved and worthy of being loved. (on Debi, *The Convent*)

> **Elizabeth:** I was pleased to see Pom stuck with her faith, I thought she might be a bit flaky (on *The Retreat*)

In this section, I have shown that there is a clear concern for 'vulnerable' people, particularly children, replicating the concerns of many programmes (see Chapter Five). Audiences usually distinguish themselves from these 'vulnerable' people and show pride in offering alternative, 'better' ways of living, such as those who commented on Gary and Deborah's parents. Vulnerability is only seen as a 'good' thing when it comes from people who are otherwise 'normal' and need to change negative behaviours, such as 'reality' participants.

They're not that bad really: defending the 'others'

Whilst there was a lot of criticism of religious/spiritual 'others', there were also occasions when people sought to defend them, either against attacks from other participants in the discussion or from what they perceived as media manipulation. Such defences usually came with an explicit othering to distance the 'good' versions of 'them' from the 'bad':

> **Porpoise:** Perhaps the psychics aren't all deliberately being dishonest or engaging in trickery like cold reading though; some (like the dowser woman) seemed so dismayed at their failure that it seems incredible if they didn't actually believe in their own powers. Assuming they knew the programme's

subject and title why otherwise would they agree to appear - if they were consciously out to deceive, surely you wouldn't see them for dust? (on *EoR*)

RPC: Despite their monstrous religious delusion, I think that that these parents, far from abusing their (far too many) kids, actually have some pretty sensible values, and are obviously educating them reasonably well. I'd be delighted if my own kids didn't care who Victoria Beckham was and weren't interested in reality TV. (on *D13*)

Parking Lot: It was not nearly as offensive as I was expecting it to be. Hey, I'm a staunch anti-theist, but besides the biblical bollocks, I wasn't convinced that her upbringing can be considered worse than that of the chav (de)generation that seems to characterize Britain's youth today. … while there are still millions of living children suffering from starving and neglect, I don't think we should be howling 'child abuse' at well-meaning but deluded families when new-age, secular, anti-intellectualist, dipsomaniac members of the ever-growing underclass are doing an even worse job of raising their spawn. (on *D13*)

Each of these responses offers some form of defence, though with heavy qualification. RPC and Parking Lot also temper their defence of Deborah and her family by showing a cultural elitist perspective, disapproving of popular culture and of a worse 'other'; the 'anti-intellectualist underclass'. Similarly, when Catholic Richard agreed with Hindus and Sikhs on the BBC message board about their under-representation, he did this by demonising another group, and complaining about the portrayal of his own faith:

i agree there's not enough about eastern religions on tv. im a catholic myself, there seem to be only 2 types of programmes about religions, ones portraying christians as nutters, and other ones being apologists for muslims.

As mentioned, the focus groups were unimpressed with some of the portrayals of religious/spiritual adherents. The *Jews* group took what they perceived to be an oppositional position against the programme's discourse, and although the *GYPP* group generally agreed with the show's depiction of Gary's 'gift' as questionable, they still disapproved of the programme's style:

> **Andie:** I just think they made Jews look ridiculous.

> **Leah:** And every time somebody tried to say something sensible they'd cut to a picture of a funny Jewish woman outside a shop… The way they managed to retain their patience says a lot for the Jewish people.

<u>I like what I see: discussing positive portrayals of other</u>

Not all portrayals of 'others' were seen as negative. Many people commented that they'd enjoyed learning something new about people, beliefs and practices they didn't previously know much about – sometimes because of a 'cultural tourist' (Riggins 1997) fascination with the subject, and sometimes because they could find a personal connection with the subject they hadn't expected to:

> **Amy:** I understood things about it [Islam] that I hadn't before, cos I would have been so obsessed with the sort of gender differences in it… now I've had those kind of spiritual experiences and had that kind of seeking… I've had a completely different view of it (on *The Retreat*).

> **Cleanfreak:** Very interesting programme. Was expecting it to be a whistle stop tour of Faiths but Pete still give a good account of what he saw… Not sure smoking Babies will catch on in this Country (on *ATW80*).

Others were impressed when programmes appeared to be balanced:

Woof: I like the fact there are no agendas, proselytising, witch hunts, setups, etc. Nice change for British TV documentaries (on *Revelations*).

Anna: I thought that was very balanced, it was very interesting to see the Sufi… obviously there was bias because every programme's put together… but it seemed a lot less (on *TR*).

As I have shown, there are a range of responses to 'others'. Whilst many audience members adopt a 'dominant' reading of texts, accepting their presentation of others as negative (as in the case of programmes such as SAWC) or as fascinating (as in programmes such as *TR*), there are also times when they take a more 'negotiated' or even 'oppositional' stance, by perceiving the television producers or presenters as negative 'others' and questioning the way programmes have constructed their subjects, as in the case of those who criticised *Jews*.

Dialogue between 'ourselves' and 'others'

As I have shown, in most environments there were occasions where different faith groups and nationalities who had perceived each other as 'them' rather than 'us' engaged in discussion. On YouTube, corporate websites/blogs and large general forums this type of discussion tended to descend into arguments with users exchanging heated criticisms and sometimes insults. However, on smaller forums, in personal blog comments and in focus groups, a greater degree of mutual respect, politeness and interest was displayed.

In this section, I look at two further types of encounter between 'ourselves' and 'others': interaction between the television industry and its audience; and interaction between 'audiences' and programme participants.

<u>Serving our public? The industry and its audience</u>

In this section, I look at the way that industry professionals attempt to interact with audiences in a range of contexts. Media professionals are aware of the high level of feeling within audience responses to depictions of religion. Mark Thompson, BBC Director General (2004-present) claimed that 'religion is alive and well in my in-tray. No subject… creates hotter debates or calls for more difficult decisions' (BBC 2005b: 2) , whilst broadcaster John Humphrys described a huge response to his radio series on Agnosticism: 'In almost half a century of journalism I have never had such a response to anything I have written or broadcast. The letters arrived, quite literally, by the sackful. I had learned a lot from the interviews. I learned even more from the response to them. It felt a bit like putting my finger on the religious pulse of the nation' (2007: 36).

In Chapter Four, I reported Aaqil Ahmed and Michael Wakelin's discussion of the level of feeling religious (and Atheist) audiences have towards media depictions of religion and spirituality. Reviews by Ofcom and the major broadcasters have also suggested that the industry is keen to understand how audiences respond to representations of religious/spiritual belief and practice and to engage in dialogue with these audiences (see Chapters Two and Four). However, although they acknowledge the importance of dialogue with people from differing faith groups[26], those consulted in industry research, both as 'expert' representatives and as members of the 'public' have tended to come from the six major world religions (and Britons with no religion) rather than from NRMs or minority faiths (e.g. Ofcom 2005, BBC 2005b, Channel 4 2007b).

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[26] And no doubt heightened by newsworthy reactions such as the Christian protests against *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, Sikh responses to the play *Behzti*, Muslim reactions to *The Satanic Verses*, the *Jyllands Posten* cartoons, and documentaries such as 'Undercover Mosque', and Atheist and Humanist pleas for representation on *Thought for the Day*.

Although the role of groups such as the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC) declined during the decade, there were many opportunities for dialogue between industry and audiences through focus groups and surveys and through online interaction in blogs, forums and live chats. Prominent figures within broadcasting, including Ahmed, Wakelin, Rea, Bookbinder, Thompson and Duncan also spoke to faith groups at numerous events, posted blogs and videos on official websites and gave interviews, as well as sometimes responding personally to comments via email:

> **Duncan:** For the record, I am a practising Christian on what might be called the Evangelical wing… But I am clear that I'm not there to promote one point of view over others… Channel 4… is a place for exploring, defending and celebrating diversity… Tolerance and understanding of others – fundamental New Testament values – can only be built on knowledge and respect… This in my view is one of television's most important responsibilities. Television can use its unique and ubiquitous place in people's lives to build a wider trust in society (addressing Christian movement Faithworks).

> **Quotes attributed to Wakelin:** Hi Sanjeev, Thank you for raising the question of wide disparity in coverage by the BBC. I think you are correct in your conclusion. The simple fact of life is that it is always the creaking hinge that gets the oil. Muslims perhaps make the most noise, certainly they appear very frequently in the news bulletins, often for the wrong reasons, and they appear far more united and determined in pressing for their rights. The result is not surprising, albeit unjust (an email cited by Sanjeev on the BBC Religion and Ethics Eastern board).

What is interesting here is Duncan's emphasis on diversity, tolerance and representation, and his attempts to appease a Christian audience by stating his own credentials as an Evangelical Christian and citing the New Testament. The rest of his speech emphasises Channel 4's public service credentials and its social role. Wakelin's alleged email is much more candid in its response to criticisms of a lack of coverage of Sikh and Hindu issues, perhaps because he wasn't aware Sanjeev would make its contents public, whilst still acknowledging a need for greater diversity.

But industry figures have also noted other factors which underpin audience criticisms of programming. Speaking of religious audiences' criticisms of BBC programmes, Alan Bookbinder argues that this was often due, not to faults in the programming, but to the faith of the critics:

> What struck me most at the time was how fragile many people's faith appeared to be. So fragile that it could be deeply bruised by a TV programme that did little more than assemble the main ideas in Biblical scholarship… the louder the voices of protest, the more fragile their faith seemed. And the more uncomfortable they appeared to be with doubt and debate (Bookbinder 2003).

As well as these more formal responses, some sought to 'interact' with audiences in online chats via chat rooms, forums and social networking sites. During the broadcast of his *Revelations* documentary, 'How to Find God', journalist Jon Ronson invited his Twitter followers to discuss the programme live, and answered questions and engaged in dialogue throughout the broadcast:

> **Ronson:** I'm here if anyone wants to talk during it…. am here if anyone wants to ask anything while its on.

Over half of the 829 tweets generated during broadcast were either direct conversation between Ronson and users, or mentioned Ronson using his twitter tag @jonronson in the discussion (see Deller 2011):

> **Matt C:** @jonronson Did making the programme change your own feelings toward religion, or even beliefs? #alpha

> **Tubor:** Loving @jonronson 's Revelation film on c4 now. Intriguing.

> **DaveD:** @jonronson missed the beginning - did Nicky Gumbel 'sanction' your film? (also, they need a better logo!)

> **Ronson:** @DaveD No Nicky G didn't sanction it

Because of Ronson's presence, and perhaps because of a sense of performativity within the Twitter environment (Marwick and boyd 2010), there was a great deal of humour in the interaction and a lot of the discussion was very positive about the programme:

> **sonicboy:** @jonronson did that birthday cake come from a skip behind sainsburys[27]

At the end of the showing, Ronson remarked on how much he'd enjoyed the conversation:

> **Ronson:** Hey, thanks everyone that was lots of fun #alpha

In a similar way, following the broadcast of the series *A History of Christianity* (BBC Four 2009, repeated on BBC Two), the BBC religion message boards hosted a live Q&A with presenter Diarmid MacCulloch. Users would post messages for MacCulloch and he would respond. Users engaged a number of politeness strategies (see Harrison

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[27] A reference to the freeganism of one of the participants, shown 'bin diving' earlier in the programme.

2000) in their discourse with MacCulloch, addressing him as 'Professor' and frequently

opening their questions with a form of thanks:

> **wh:** Professor MacCulloch, thank you very much for the whole series, which I
>
> think is a tour de force.

> **Doris:** Professor MacCulloch, thanks you for your program, and even more
>
> thank you for the book, which provides a great overview of the whole.

Even where users disagreed with or challenged MacCulloch, or one another, a degree

of politeness dominated the conversation, with comments framed by terms such as

'many thanks', 'with regards' and 'respectfully', and often with users being careful

themselves from others that they (or MacCulloch) disagreed with:

> **Nature:** You shouldn't see this as a fundamental attack on your faith - Prof
>
> MacCulloch describes himself as a friend of Christianity and generally speaks
>
> favourably of it. This is an attack on the specific individuals, who *despite*
>
> being Christian, acted in this manner.

Where users felt their questions were a little too personal, they sometimes inserted

markers of humour such as emoticons (see Herring 1994, Baym 2000). Likewise,

MacCulloch's responses to users, whilst employing humour and colloquialisms, were

polite:

> **MacCulloch:** Questions posed by [username] deserve a considered answer, and
>
> I will take this first when I'm back this afternoon. Thanks very much to
>
> everyone for your interesting observations.

Interestingly, in the days following MacCulloch's participation in the discussion, the level of politeness between users declined, with a greater degree of argument, criticism and hostility emerging:

> **Jan:** But besides all this, the battle lines are being drawn-up in the long War against God, of which you are just a dispensible pawn in Satan's army… If you were rational you would probably say, if these Christians want to believe in heaven or hell let them get on with it.

> **Nightwork:** Yes you [Jan] have, all without the need for or providing any evidence at all of your religious dogma or salvation other than by simply proselytising your mumbo jumbo at any opportunity.

There is a clear degree of performativity present in both of these examples, with users clearly wanting to engage Ronson and MacCulloch through humour, politeness and compliments. Criticisms of presenters are usually made in environments where they are not perceived to be present[28]. However, the same degree of politeness is not exercised in dialogue between different users, especially in environments such as YouTube or forums, where interaction is more anonymous than in focus groups or (to an extent) Twitter.

Is that me you're talking about? Dialogue with participants

On some occasions, participants from documentaries or reality programmes engaged with audience discussions on blogs and forums. This was particularly evident with T*he Convent* and *Make Me a Christian*, with some participants entering the discussion across several environments. On two Christian forums, the first participant from *TC* to enter discussion was Debi:

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[28] This does not discount the possibility of them 'lurking' and seeing these comments of course.

Kathy: Felt very, very sorry for the lady who had to choose between her parents at 5 and said goodbye to her mother - what an awful thing to have to bear as a child and live with as an adult.

Debi: Thankyou for your kind words Kathy, YES, it has been hard to bear but I have come to a new place now thanks to my time with the Sisters and my time in THE CONVENT. I know I risk some harsh comments because I left my child but your comment makes me feel there is some hope people may understand. I am lifted by your perspective and understanding. Thankyou. xx Squishes and love

Once Debi arrived in this Christian parenting forum, she was generally welcomed by its members, who frequently used hug emoticons and talked about her experience touching their hearts. During the programme's run and immediately afterwards, Debi turned to its members for support, revealing her anxiety about watching the programmes:

I am going through a horrendously difficult time with worry and anxiety about the next three programmes. We do not get to see any of them until the public do… I didn't see the programme until Thursday night and then spent all day friday crying with absolute shame… Can I be so bold and ask the members to pray for me at this incredibly stressful time and just those few message of support have done so much to lift me and give me a little hope. Perhaps I could use this site to get some useful critism and advice over the coming traumatic weeks ahead.

There was a lot of support for Debi on the forum, with people also expressing their concern for the other three participants and the nuns, and often sharing their own anxieties and experiences:

> **Luthor:** Debi ~ please don't be ashamed of anything you shared or said on that programme I thought you were very brave & gracious & I'll be honest your story brought tears to my eyes ... Praying God will bring you through the current time while the programme is airing & ease your anxiety (I know what you mean, I can worry for England!)

> **Eleanor:** Hi I just seen the 1st programme and half way through the second. I think you were very brave to do that programme and I sure God will bless you for it. I got 3 children and I cann't even leave them for a day without feeling homesick. It must have been an amazing experience to have so much time to be with God. Our modern lives are so hetic I just want to have some time to slow down myself and hear God. Remember ' the plans I (God) for you is not to harm you but to give you HOPE and a future. ' Jermiah. God loves you so unconditionally. God is love. Dear God Thankyou for this amazing woman. She is so inspiring and has bless me and others. Amen

On this forum there was a general consensus that two of the participants, Angela and Victoria, were being 'rebellious' but there was usually a sense of concern expressed for them and a hope they would 'find meaning':

> **Kathy:** I feel sorry for Angela and Vic - I feel they are missing out - and their friendship has made me re-look at some of my own - (past ones not present ones) - and helped me understand why I missed certain things. I hope they still

get something out of this - but I wonder if years from now they might just have an ounce of regret that they held back? (Kathy)

Scott: Debi, I think your patience with Angela and Victoria was saintly - I don't think I would have managed to bite my tongue. Many of us here would give a great deal to have the opportunity to spend that much time seeking God, uninterrupted by family and work demands, and to see that time squandered makes my blood boil I have to keep reminding myself that a selection was made in order to make the programme interesting and watchable... I just pray that God will get a chance to work in life of both of them as he has certainly worked in yours.

Scott's response was one of the more critical, and other posters challenged him on this, reminding him that the programme was edited and stating that they believed Angela and Victoria did go through changes:

Eleanor: I was actually moved by the final journey of Angela and Vic - I thought Angela's Psalm was beautifully honest and vulnerable. And I sort of indentify with them - I find it very hard to let go and let other people help me - almost impossible. I think their "rebellious" behaviour is part of that - and not meant to be horrible at all - just a way of coping. I think in their own way they made enormous steps - I think they would have got further on their own without their friendship - but conversely I also think that they may not have stayed for the full 40 days if they didn't have each other to "escape" into.

This prompted Scott to reconsider his position and consider how his own experiences had shaped his opinions:

I know I shouldn't judge them harshly and I understand that what we see on the show is a tiny fraction of what went on. Although I love my family dearly, my heart deep yearning to have the freedom to live in community is sometimes overwhelming and I'm afraid that coloured my view of Angela and Victoria.

On an 'alternative' Christian forum similar comments were made, with some users identifying with all four women, including Victoria and Angela, although here, Angela was generally held in warmer regard than Victoria:

Turner: I found the programmes fascinating because I could identify with most of the women - Angela in particular. In fact, I found the first episode so near the mark at times I had to stop the tape!

Thinking: This [Victoria] is a woman who has chosen to go on a documentary and talk about the fact that she is in a three way relationship in the first place. To imply to the camera that she sleeps with the other man, but give the impression to her mentor that she doesn't, strikes me as disengenuous.

Both Debi and Victoria entered into the discussion here – Debi first:

Hello everyone, stumbled accross this site whilst couldn't sleep. My Name is DEBI IRELAND, I was the CRYING ONE !!! in THE CONVENT.. First of all, Brill comments and fantastic observations, it's really great to hear some interesting and challenging debate on the programme [Debi went on to answer users' questions about production]… it is nice to see that some of you regard the programme as a serious documentary and interesting that others see it akin to a religous BB[29]. The four of us that went in do not get to see the films beforehand so like you, we all seeing it for the first time. Personally I need a

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[29] *Big Brother*

couple of vodka's and red wine before I can stand to see myself crying on every

clip. I can assure you I am not like that in REAL ? life.

Again, she was welcomed and her self-critical points were refuted:

Cerys: I don't think of you as the crying one but as the one who engaged most

with the experience and dealt with some pretty deep stuff and crying was part

of dealing with all that stuff. I think Angela's fear of crying was hindering her

moving on. Tears have there uses and it isn't weak to cry. Sometimes it can be

the strong thing to do.

Sponge: I agree with Cerys that you are the one who comes across as genuinely

engaging with what was on offer… as for 'self-obsession' I'm afraid it's Victoria

that has me shouting at the television about that…!

Later, Victoria posted, although only once, to share her take on the programme and

challenge its presentation of her in the form of a long, slightly formal response:

Dear [members]… I have been reading your thread with interest over the last

month. I am glad that you found the programme stimulating for debate and I

am pleased that so many people have found healing and hope through the

sharing of our stories. It has been a very challenging journey for me and my

family, made worse often by the prejudice and gossip of ill-informed viewers

and press. I undertook the journey with the utmost commitment and desire to

find within myself my own relationship with Love, with the Spirit… One of the

most crucial elements of this journey was the coming to terms with the deep

grief I have carried since losing my child in pregnancy in 2003… It was therefore

a great shock to see that it was infact not even mentioned in the final

programme. Similarly, it was upsetting to see how the focus was on my

'rebellions' rather than on the dedication with which I followed the spiritual journey… At no point did I recklessly reject the incredible opportunity that I had, but similarly, I did not go in there to prove my obedience or to gain popularity… I would like to add here that at no point did I mention sex, and I have been deeply angered and hurt by the Press attacks on my apparent disregard for my husband, and the gossip pertaining to my apprent promiscuity… Be careful to judge our entire journey, or our persons, by what is shown… Peace be with you all, Love Victoria x

Victoria was also welcomed, but there was much more hesitancy, with some users feeling the need to justify, rather than apologise for, their perceptions of her:

Sponge: I said above that it was you who had me shouting at the television about self-obsession, so I ought to try and explain that… You say that you didn't reject what was on offer. It seemed to me (and I'm more than ready to be corrected) that you wanted to take from what was on offer that which you found most useful. What the nuns seemed to be trying to say, which I would agree with, was that isn't how it works… That said, despite the praise given to the programme makers earlier, you were obviously chosen as 'the rebellious one', so it doesn't surprise me that it is how you feel it was edited. And I agree that it was very unfair not to deal with losing your child in pregnancy until the last programme when it was clearly so important to you. But your post doesn't take make me want to take back my comment about self-obsession, I'm afraid.

When interviewed, both Victoria and Deborah and her family spoke of the way that interaction with people who had watched their programmes had impacted them:

Victoria: Internet stuff, it's a paradise of the opinionated… there were a lot of conversations with people… once you look it's like Pandora's box… you aren't that kind of person, but you discover that everybody in the country thinks you are that person… It actually did me much better than any counselling… If everyone thinks you're a terrible person then you're free from worrying what anyone thinks of you! Because you know it doesn't matter, because you know you're not that person.

So yeah, there was a lot of internet stuff… maybe two or three letters or emails from people that were positive, generally people were really 'yes I oppose the church as well' and all the rest of it, and I've gone the other way!... [but] there was a lot of damage, a lot of repairing to be done, relationships with people… I couldn't get a serious review[30] because they were all 'this is obviously a load of baloney, this couldn't have been written by the person that was on the programme because she didn't have any spirituality, she didn't have a spiritual journey', instead of being able to see that the programme was biased. The truth of the television. It's shocking. I mean we had people who were close to us who we'd seen the week before the programme, and knew that we were happy and they'd phone us up and say 'Oh you're getting a divorce' and we said 'but you saw us last week' 'Oh but I saw it on television'. 'Yes but that's not real'!

Deborah: We've had like thousands and thousands of emails back, people have been saved through watching it and we've also had a lot of Atheists say horrible things about me as well so it's been a sort of mixed reaction.

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[30] Of the poetry book she published, written during her stay in the convent.

Andrew: There were about a third who hated her, or hated us, or hated it, about a third who were 'wow it was amazing, you're such a witness to us, such a testimony' et cetera and about a third who were asking questions or wanting help or, so I think the result was fairly balanced in some ways but it doesn't portray anything like accurately who she is, or who she was.

Matthew: I think it was the fact that everyone said the family was brainwashed was what mostly upset me… I wanted them to see the truth of it and they couldn't see it and I knew it was no good me trying to explain it.

Deborah, Ruth and Andrew expressed that they were keen to reply to people who commented about them on their blogs, on forums or via email, although Ruth and Andrew said they vetted some comments so Deborah didn't see them. Deborah argued that responding to people often helped changed their opinion of her or her family:

Deborah: Sometimes you'd have somebody who'd write something really horrible and you'd write back and say 'thanks for your opinion', something really nice, 'have a great day', send it off and they'd send a nice one back, something really nice so it softens them from being so hard and then they're actually quite nice people.

Ruth: I think people think the internet is anonymous, they can say what they like, they can vent their anger or whatever. But when they realise that there's someone on the other end reading it [laughs].

The interaction caused several people to reflect on the nature of 'them' and 'us' and about how comfortable they felt with their observations 'being heard':

Leela: Is anyone else having difficulty posting in this thread now that we know one of the women from the program is participating in the discussions?

Matthew: I was really cross for a while about some of the stuff I read but then I realised that when I watch TV with friends, I'll make comments about people that are on TV and I don't go on the internet but then I realised it's kind of the same thing and obviously when it's happening to you, you realise it but when you laugh at things like what somebody's wearing on TV or whatever. Now when I do it I think that's really bad, they're real people.

The presence of programme participants in interaction sometimes changes discussion, with support being offered for them. However, the level of this support often varies according to the portrayal of the participants, as in the case of Debi and Victoria. Both those in the 'audience' and those who have participated in programmes find these interactions uncomfortable at times and recognise the difficulties of negotiating an understanding of the 'real' situation and that presented on television within discussion. Whilst there are perceived benefits to these interactions, some, such as participant Victoria, find them difficult, particularly if they feel their 'voice' is being misrepresented, or if they feel they are unable to speak freely, as in the case of audience member Leela.

Conclusion

Audiences respond in a number of diverse ways to programmes depicting religion and spirituality. However, what emerges most strongly from all these forms of audience discourse is a distinction between how people perceive themselves, and how they perceive 'others'.

There are criticisms in most groups and environments about the way one's own faith position is presented, with accusations of broadcasters relying on stereotypes and generalisations, and there being a lack of diversity within television portrayals. Many audiences perceive other groups to receive preferential treatment to their own and do not always recognise that 'other' groups may have similar concerns about their own portrayal.

In the focus groups in particular, there was more sympathy for people of different faith perspectives than in other environments, perhaps because of the individuals participating, or perhaps because of the environment being less anonymous and allowing for longer conversation and more immediate interaction than in asynchronous environments such as forums or YouTube. Audiences frequently express concern for 'vulnerable' others (Ofcom 2005, Jenkins 1992, Critcher 2003), replicating the concerns of television programmes for these groups discussed in Chapter Five.

The kinds of programmes audiences seem to appreciate most are those where they perceive a level of 'openness' or at least an admittance on behalf of the presenter or narrator of their own position on the subject. However, it is very difficult (perhaps impossible) to create a programme that all audience members will perceive as having a level of openness or objectivity. There is a potential conflict here between audiences wanting both objectivity and an openness about subjectivity, and some audience members were very critical of presenters, programme makers and commissioning editors whose faith (or lack of) might have 'influenced' their decision making. Audiences desire a level of 'rationality' and 'balance' whilst also acknowledging it is almost impossible for programmes to achieve 'neutrality'.

Where programmes use a degree of warmth, humour or a willingness to experiment and question on behalf of the presenter, these are often received warmly, as are those which celebrate art or architecture, particularly if one perceives this is presenting one's own faith in a positive manner.

For the most part, audiences accept dominant discourses about the positive and negative aspects of faith that are present in the programmes: criticisms of fundamentalism; a concern for the 'vulnerable'; a distrust of particular practices such as talking to the dead or speaking in tongues; a cynicism about NRMs; a desire for 'moderation' and 'tolerance'; and a sense of Britain as being 'superior' to 'other' nations.

However, there are areas where there are discrepancies. Some believers will often discuss the impact of their faith on their lives and will frequently mention God and what they believe He would want; something curiously lacking from much television discourse. There are a range of positions even within faith groups on the subject of spiritual practice and doctrine, some rejecting the discourses of programmes, some accepting them (for example, Christian and Muslim responses display a range of opinions on the importance and interpretation of the Bible and Qur'an).

However, in both audience and television discourses about religion/spirituality, there is a sense of a dominant discourse of 'moderation', 'tolerance' and of wanting what is 'best' for Britain. Even racist and offensive commentary is often couched in terms of 'not being racist', but of being 'common sense' or explaining that 'they' can be acceptable, as long as they become like 'us'. There are a lot of disagreements, particularly on forums, between users of different faith positions, but even within

these arguments there is a tendency to distance oneself from the more 'extreme' members of one's own faith group, and a desire to present oneself as 'reasonable'.

Those involved in the media industry are very aware of the criticisms audiences make. The key concerns for audiences are about a lack of diversity within portrayals (or even a lack of portrayals at all, in the case of smaller faiths), or of being 'persecuted' and unfairly criticised. However, my interviews with media professionals indicate a lack of programming ideas about some faith groups and reluctance to 'tick boxes' for the sake of it (see Chapter Four). They also have to abide by the Broadcasting Code, which limits, in some ways, the kinds of presentation of faith that they are allowed to show.

In the final chapter, I draw together my findings and analyses from across this study and discuss what these different discourses reveal about the relationship between religion, spirituality and factual television at the start of the twenty-first century.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

Introduction

In this thesis, I have discussed the construction of mainstream factual television discourses of religion and spirituality in the years 2000-2009, suggested some of the reasons why this might be, and explored the discourses of audience 'reception' and of those involved in production and commissioning.

In this final chapter, I summarise my findings, and discuss what my research suggests about discourses of religion/spirituality and Britishness in the early twenty-first century, as well as suggesting some areas for future research. I begin by summarising the ways factual television portray religion/spirituality, 'Britishness' and 'otherness', along with the ways audiences respond to these portrayals. I consider why these programmes may have been constructed in the way they were. I then look at how television discourses of religion/spirituality, and those of audiences and industry professionals, relate to wider theoretical debates about these themes. Finally, I look briefly at what occurred on television in the first two years of the 2010s and suggest areas for future research and explain the contribution my own work has made to the study of media, religion/spirituality and culture.

By combining a range of methodological approaches and research contexts, I have attempted to provide as detailed an account of the decade's programming about religion/spirituality as possible. Considering the television programmes, audience discussions, industry documentation and interview materials as 'discourse' has enabled me to consider the way discourses of religion/spirituality operate within, and across, different contexts and together serve to construct notions of 'unacceptable' and 'acceptable' forms of belief, practice and identity. The triangulation of methods

has enabled me to provide a more wide-reaching overview of the television texts and their contexts than a single-method approach would have allowed.

Representation of religion/spirituality

A diversity problem?

One of the most striking things I discovered during my research was the lack of diversity within mainstream factual television portrayals of religion/spirituality, despite the public service commitments of all four broadcasters, and audiences' apparent demand for and interest in this. Christianity and Islam were by far the most prominent religions featured, followed by Atheism and Judaism. Buddhism and Hinduism were mostly featured in terms of 'other' countries: even when British Buddhists/Hindus were featured, an 'othering' of their faith took place by positioning them as beliefs situated very strongly in the cultures of 'other' countries (see Chapter Six). Sikhism was featured very rarely, particularly in programmes about Britain. Minority belief systems also suffered from a lack of visibility, and again, when featured, their 'otherness' was frequently highlighted, either through their associations with 'other' countries (e.g. Voodoo or Scientology) or with Britain's past (in the case of Paganism). A sense of Agnosticism[1] was a driving element in programme narratives, where belief and disbelief are both subject to questioning and investigation, but as a position it was rarely discussed or explored.

The term 'spirituality' was most frequently used to highlight spiritual practices within existing belief systems (e.g. in *Spirituality Shopper* or *The Monastery*) rather than seen as a concept in its own right, something that was rather surprising given the emphasis

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[1] By Agnosticism, I am using the conventional understanding of it as an uncertainty about what to believe, rather than as the philosophical standpoint that human reason cannot say whether or not there is a God.

in the literature on the apparent increase in 'spirituality' in Britain (see Chapter Two). Furthermore, outside of mainstream religion, spirituality was viewed with suspicion, often being used for cynical, commercial purposes, as in *Alternative Medicines* and *Trust Me, I'm a Healer*.

All belief systems were referenced by a restricted range of signifiers. Mosque domes, bearded preachers, men at prayer, terrorism and hijabs/niqabs signified Islam (see Macdonald 2011, Richardson 2004, Abbas 2001), and the differences between different forms of Islam were rarely discussed outside of some references to Sufism as a 'mystical' or 'spiritual' side to the faith (e.g. *Sufi Soul*, *The Retreat*, *Spirituality Shopper*, *Around the World in 80 Faiths*). Presenters and academics who spoke 'on behalf' of Islam tended to be moderate/liberal, such as Rageh Omaar, Ajmal Masroor and Tazeen Ahmad. The 'negative' side of Islam was represented by 'hate preachers' shown through hidden camera or online video footage, often accompanied by commentary, thus excluding them from shaping the dominant discourse about what is 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' within Islam.

Christianity was presented in slightly more varied ways, with three key strands being identified: liberal Anglicanism (signified by old church buildings, female or gay priests, usually in clerical robes, and a sense of tradition); Catholicism (signified by Mass, the Pope, Madonna and Child statues); and evangelical/Pentecostal/fundamentalist/ charismatic Christianity (signified by raised arms, closed eyes, speaking in tongues, healing services, and anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality messages). However, these were often conflated despite there being distinctions between them. Other mainstream Christian strands, such as the Baptist or Methodist Churches, were often excluded from discourse, particularly within a British context.

Christian presenters and experts were again most often liberal, such as Robert Beckford, Peter Owen Jones and Mark Dowd. Non-liberal presenters like Ann Widdecombe were chosen for their status as celebrities/public figures and presented programmes about the history of faith, rather than on 'social issues'. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was the church leader given most airtime, although other Anglican and Catholic clergy featured in 'talking head' roles. Clergy from other denominations were rare. Prominent Christian 'figures' who were often portrayed more negatively were usually featured as interview subjects or shown through third party materials such as promotional videos. This group included Nicky Gumbel, Benny Hinn, Stephen Green and a number of American and African Pentecostal preachers.

Even though presentations of Islam and Christianity were simplified and lacked diversity, they were nuanced in comparison to other faiths, which were represented through an even more limited discursive repertoire. There was little discussion of distinct forms within faiths, with blanket terms such as 'Hindu' or 'Pagan' serving to homogenise them. As with Christianity and Islam, most belief systems were referred to across programmes using common signifiers. For example, Hinduism was represented by colourful flowers and statues and Buddhism by Buddha statues, Richard Gere and meditation. Richard Dawkins, advocacy of evolution and the 'Atheist bus' stood for Atheism, Judaism was represented by men in Orthodox clothing, kosher food and the Holocaust, with Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks acting as its most prominent 'voice'. Paganism was referenced by blood, sex and animals, whilst 'auditing' machinery, sinister music and Tom Cruise signified Scientology. All of these faiths were presented as exotic, either because of their associations with 'exotic' countries, with rich (and 'crazy') American celebrities or with history. None were portrayed as

relevant to contemporary Britain, with British adherents of these faiths repeatedly being highlighted as 'different' from 'us'.

A lack of diversity was not simply confined to representations of religion/spirituality. The programmes I studied circulate discourses of a 'Britishness' that is most often represented by (mostly Southern) English voices and places, as opposed to Welsh or Scottish. In terms of presenters and 'experts', white, heterosexual, middle-class and male voices dominated, with disability being rarely featured, except as a 'problem', as in 'Moving Heaven and Earth' or *Trust Me I'm a Healer*. Presenters and 'experts' identify most often as Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Agnostic and Atheist, and as 'liberal' or 'moderate': this liberalism/moderation being particularly signified by a belief in evolution over any of the creation myths, support for equal rights for women and gay people, and being 'pro-choice' in terms of abortion. These people were rarely shown expressing spirituality through activities such as raising hands, speaking in tongues or engaging in scriptural devotion. Instead, if featured at all, their own 'personal' spirituality was signified by: a willingness to debate; a calmness; an inability to articulate a spiritual experience; or a few tears (as in the case of Owen-Jones in *Extreme Pilgrim/Around the World in 80 Faiths*). When there are (rare) exceptions to this, this is usually because of their 'celebrity' status, such as Ann Widdecombe, as previously mentioned. The kinds of celebrities and public figures chosen to feature vary, but journalists, politicians and academics tend to be used for more 'serious' genres such as *Christianity: A History*, and actors, comedians and light entertainment presenters used for more 'experimental' strands like *The Beginner's Guide….*.

Audiences recognise the lack of diversity in television portrayals, with several criticising the 'media' for excluding their faith, or their particular expression of faith from

television discourse, or for portraying their belief in stereotypical or exaggerated ways (see Chapter Seven). This concern over lack of representativeness echoes the findings of many others who have researched minority groups' opinions of their media presentation, including studies by those working within the media industry (Bird 2003, Grimmond 2008, Ofcom 2004/2005, BBC 2005b, Channel 4 2007b).

However, it is worth noting that for many, particularly those commenting on blogs and forums, these concerns are primarily about their own faith position, and there is a tendency to stereotype other belief systems in similar ways to the television programmes, or to consider other beliefs receiving preferential treatment to one's own. Perhaps because of the nature of the environments, the focus groups were more reflexive in their discussion of 'other' beliefs[2] and considered representation of 'other' beliefs to be problematic, not just presentation of their own faith position.

God bless Britain?

Discourses about Britain were remarkably similar across genre, channel and programme, as well as within industry and audience discourses. The nation was presented frequently as mostly secular, with a Christian past. Visual signifiers of city streets, alcohol, sex and 'work' (often indexed by suits or mobile phones) represented contemporary Britain, whilst countryside churches or graveyards signified its Christian past. When its Pagan past was referenced (rarely), this was often through familiar sacred sites such as Stonehenge or exaggerated reference to blood, sex and animalism.

However, the presentation of the past was complicated, with neither past (the 'exotic' Pagan past, or the 'quiet' Christian one) being seen as having much to offer contemporary Britain beyond a sense of nostalgia or perhaps a slight readjustment of

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[2] With the exception of Scientology, which was widely criticised and mocked in all contexts.

priorities. In terms of 'our' priorities, Britain's relationship with sex, alcohol, consumerism and work was portrayed in what might appear to be contradictory ways. In reality/lifestyle programmes these are often seen as things that need to be overcome as part of the transformation of the self (Hill 2005, Hawkins 2001, Braitch 2007, Morreale 2007, Redden 2007), so that participants might enhance their lives with something 'deeper'. However, across formats, participants deemed to be 'too' religious were often discussed in terms of their lack of 'normality', such as Sister Susan in *Am I Normal?* not meeting her longing through a man, or the criticisms of the abstinence movement in 'The New Fundamentalists'.

The programme most often cited by both audiences and industry professionals as a positive representation of the 'journey' into the religious/spiritual is *The Monastery*. This programme includes all the key signifiers of 'good' religion/spirituality: countryside; stillness/silence; discussion; candles; old stone churches; clerical robes; 'ordinary' Britons whose lives are 'too' dependent on sex and work or who have 'difficult' pasts. The level of transformation expressed throughout the series is subtle, with the men claiming to have been 'changed' but these changes are difficult to articulate, and often result in seemingly minor lifestyle adjustments.

However, television discourses about life in contemporary Britain are not as contradictory as they might first appear, as the dominant discourse throughout the majority of programmes appears to be of 'moderation'; some 'normal' practice (e.g. drinking, having sex) combined with some 'spiritual' practice (e.g. sitting in stillness, performing charitable acts) seems to be a desirable state. Many 'journeys' end with a vague sense of 'something' changing, but very few of those featured articulate this in terms of a firm commitment to a radical lifestyle change, instead being hesitant in their

discourse and expressing the 'change' more in terms of a 'feeling' or a desire to improve their lives rather than an encounter with God or another spiritual entity.

Indeed, God (or any other supernatural being) is surprisingly absent from much of the discourse around religion/spirituality, with programmes, audiences and those in the industry all preferring to talk about groups of believers, religious/spiritual figures, sacred texts or religious/spiritual practice rather than any form of deity. In television discourse, religion and spirituality are usually discussed in terms of their wider role in society, nationhood or politics, or as part of individuals' lifestyle choices, rather than considered as containing potential 'truths' or as transcendent experiences.

When compared to 'other' nations, Britain was predominantly held up as heroic. Saudi Arabia, America and African countries were seen as trying to import their 'dangerous' ideologies and practices over here and therefore presenting a 'threat' to our liberal, tolerant society, or else they were seen as abusing their 'own' people, as in the case of the 'Africa's Witch Children' programmes, where Britain took on the role of heroic intervener. For example, both Saudi and American influences on schools are denounced; the former for promoting 'fundamentalist' doctrine or being 'anti-Western', the latter for promoting creationism or sexual abstinence. Whilst Saudi Islam is seen as 'sinister' and offering threats that are sometimes linked to terrorist violence, African and American forms of Pentecostalism are seen as dangerous because they are 'unenlightened' and threaten intelligence and civil liberties such as gay rights or the right to abortion.

Britain, in contrast, is positioned as a rational, scientific place, which welcomes ethnic minorities, supports the rights of women and gay people and protects its children in a way these 'other' countries apparently do not. Audiences frequently shared in this

perception of Britain as superior to other countries, with those from other countries often having to justify their position or agree with the dominant discourses about how 'bad' certain practices were in order to be heard. Occasionally Britain was presented as having 'lost its way' but even here, there was a lament for a lost 'Britishness' rather than any consideration of the nation as being problematic in the way America or Nigeria might be. It is difficult to tell what this 'lost Britishness' might be, although such discourses replicate wider nostalgic discourses prevalent within British culture.

Not all 'other' countries were presented as a threat, of course. 'Journeying' programmes looked at 'other' cultures with a tourist gaze, exoticising them, and emphasising their difference in terms of dress, architecture, music, food and other practices. This 'otherness' was offered to Britons as either an opportunity to 'enhance' one's own experience or as something to laugh at. For example, presenters such as Peter Owen Jones, Hardeep Singh Kohli or Jayne Middlemiss would frequently make jokes and humorous asides about people or practices they considered 'other', cameras would linger on certain motifs such as people's bemused expressions or 'funny' objects, and music would often be reminiscent of that used in comedies. When countries were seen as part of enriching one's own life experience, footage would be of nature, sunsets and grand architecture. Terms such as 'peaceful', 'natural' or 'spiritual' would be used to signify something positive. When 'other' groups were not 'other' enough, as in the case of the Aboriginal 'baby smokers' who had converted to Christianity in *ATW80*, this was portrayed as disappointing, as if they had not been sufficiently 'other' to impress 'us'. There was never a decision to move to another country and leave Britain. Rather, any positives people took from their journeys were

to enhance their 'home' life, such as respecting nature more, or taking more time to be still in one's routine.

Acceptable and unacceptable forms of religion/spirituality

Television discourses about religion/spirituality use key signifiers for 'good' and 'bad' forms of religion/spirituality. The 7/7 bus, the 9/11 twin towers attacks, speaking in tongues, Scientology 'auditing' and faith healers are all part of the repertoire for 'unacceptable' forms, whilst candles, stone churches, meditative music, sunrises and nature all form part of the discourse of 'acceptable' religion/spirituality. The signifiers for acceptable and unacceptable forms often work along the lines of binary oppositions, with 'natural', 'personal' or 'traditional' forms often seen as more positive than 'technological', 'communal' or 'new' forms.

There are several ways which religious/spiritual practices are constructed as unacceptable. Their 'threat' can come in many forms: a threat to national security or individuals' lives in the form of terrorist attacks; a threat to people's wellbeing through emotional, physical or sexual abuse; or through extorting money from people; as a threat to education, to liberal values or human rights; or even, in the case of practices such as speaking in tongues or raising hands, they might be a threat because they are not 'normative' practice and may be 'embarrassing'. However, such practices are usually associated with another negative consequence, such as the conflation between charismatic Christian worship practices and anti-abortion rhetoric to legitimise the 'unacceptability' of the worship expression.

Audiences often share these perceptions of what is 'good' and 'bad' in belief and practice. Those who are not members of a faith draw on the 'problematic' aspects of

that faith in their criticisms (e.g. criticisms of Islam are couched in discourses of 'Mullahs', terrorism or treating women badly). Even those who adhere to a faith often distance themselves from its 'bad' aspects, such as Christians who criticise speaking in tongues or creationism. It is difficult to know precisely where these discourses of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' belief and practice originate, but they occur across environments in this study.

That certain aspects of religion/spirituality can be seen as problems (Hjelm 2006/2011) whilst others are more desirable is largely due to the environment within which these programmes are created. A number of factors influence production, from the role of religion/spirituality within British society, the personal faith position of those involved in production processes (many of whom profess liberalism, such as Diarmaid MacCulloch, not a believer, but a 'friend of Christianity' or liberal Anglican Peter Owen Jones), and the guidelines producers have to work to in accordance with the ITC/Ofcom Broadcasting Codes (see Chapter Four). These codes place restrictions both on the claims that can be made for faith practices and on the criticisms that can be made of faiths and their adherents, reflecting the arguments by the likes of Foucault (1972/1976), Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (1997) that powerful groups (here those involved in creating policy and guidelines) often regulate discourses, often to the exclusion of minority or dissenting voices.

However, the power relations are complex, and these different discursive environments, along with wider social discourses about nationhood, society, religion and spirituality all influence and replicate each other. For example, wider societal concerns about 'vulnerable' people are replicated in broadcasting guidelines, which in

turn are reflected in programmes, and in audience discussion; each context potentially influencing the others.

The construction of certain beliefs and practices as 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' is highly problematic, though. For example, it is simplistic to argue that because practices like wearing niqabs or channelling the dead seem uncomfortable to some, they are therefore worthy of ridicule, scorn or suspicion. Any potential positive benefits of such practices such as a sense of comfort, or being 'closer to God' are rarely given as much prominence within the discourse as their status as 'problems'. However, given the contexts in which these programmes are made and received, it is, perhaps, difficult to see how there could be any other dominant discourse than one of 'moderation', as problematic as it is.

Religion/Spirituality, television and Britain

As I discuss in Chapter Two, there are a number of theoretical perspectives that informed this study. In this section, I look at how my findings contribute to these discussions and to understandings of how 'discourse' operates; firstly in terms of debates about religion/spirituality within the West (and particularly Britain) and secondly in terms of debates in Media Studies about representation, factual television and audiences.

<u>A very British take on religion/spirituality?</u>

Not all theorists agree on the role of religion/spirituality in Britain. Supporters of the secularisation thesis, such as Steve Bruce and Callum Brown, argue that in Britain, religion is in terminal decline. Whilst their studies concentrate on the apparent decline of Christianity, Bruce (1995) argues the same is likely to be true for other faiths.

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Others, like Grace Davie (1994, 2007), argue that the nature of faith/belief is more one of 'believing, not belonging' or 'vicarious religion', where people may wish to identify as having a form of (predominantly Christian) belief, perhaps out of nostalgia, or out of an uncertainty about what to believe, but may not express that in practices such as attending services. The likes of Heelas and Woodhead (2005) Rothenbuler (2006) and Cobb (2005) argue that an interest in 'spirituality' is on the increase, often in a more 'postmodern' pluralistic sense, even if traditional religious faith is in decline. Many theorists argue that world events such as 9/11, 7/7 and the deaths of Diana and Pope John Paul II have increased people's interest in religious/spiritual matters (Davie 1999/2005, Khan, 2000, Brewer 2007, Nicholson 2007).

Those I spoke to from the media industry were broadly in agreement that there was some renewed interest in religion/spirituality following key world events, particularly 9/11, 7/7 and the 2004 tsunami, although audience discussion rarely cited any influence of these events on the beliefs of individuals, although terrorist attacks were sometimes cited as a reason why religion was a problem. Although television discourse frequently referenced world events, there was less discussion of these, other than Catholic sex scandals, or general references to public figures whose religion/spirituality had been 'newsworthy' such as George Bush, Tom Cruise or Abu Hamza in audience discussion. This could be due to much of the audience material coming from 2006 or later, when the key events identified as being 'significant' by theorists and media producers occurred in 2005 or earlier.

Many television programmes position Britain as a mostly secular place, with a Christian past, and often construct its secularity in two seemingly contradictory ways: as positive in the sense that 'we' are allegedly tolerant, rational, scientific and liberal; and as

negative in the sense that we have lost a sense of something 'deeper' than work, sex and alcohol. What this 'deeper' thing is is rarely defined but usually equates to having some loose connection with nature, the self, the past, 'simplicity' or others; as long as it only changes individuals' lives a moderate amount, as in the case of those in Chapter Six, whose 'journeys' have a result that is often difficult to define and rarely results in life changes beyond a rejection of deviant practices such as 'working too hard'. The portrayal of people 'seeking' some form of spirituality strongly echoes those who believe there is a dissatisfaction with secularism and a desire for a form of 're-enchantment' (Berger 1999/2008, deVries 2001). Wakelin and Ahmed both spoke in interviews about how people are 'meant to be' interested in spirituality, but Ahmed found this difficult to reconcile with the poor reception of *Spirituality Shopper*.

In the audience discourse, particularly online, I found little discussion of people 'searching'. This may be, however, because of the nature of the discussion environments studied, where people who have stronger feelings on a subject are more likely to participate, and the nature of the discourse itself, focused more on discussing the programmes/channels or debating particular issues such as religious dress, evolution or homosexuality. The focus groups (especially the offline ones) contained more acknowledgement of a lack of certainty about one's own faith position, but this was still limited and only Serena described herself as actively searching for faith across a range of spiritualities (although the forms they filled in revealed a much wider adoption of such practices than participants shared within the group environment. See Appendix Six).

When 'Britain' was discussed by audiences, it was largely seen as secular, and occasionally as Christian – 'other' religions were sometimes seen as contributing to the diversity of the nation, but more often were perceived as threatening.

Decoding, interactivity and audiencehood

Media theorists have long been concerned with issues of representation, and with audience responses to representations (Hall 1973, Morley and Brunsdon 1980, Radway 1987). The idea that audiences may take up different 'decoding' positions according to their own identification and experience has largely been borne out by my findings, where nationality, ethnicity and faith position play a key role in determining the way people will respond to programmes. For example, audiences from different faith positions will perceive the same programme as being prejudiced in favour of 'other' groups and against their own faith position (see Chapter Seven). Audiences of all backgrounds shared a dislike for 'lightweight' or 'patronising' presenters and an appreciation for 'openness'.

More recent interest in the relationship between 'texts', 'audiences' and 'industry' has indicated shifts in the way these groups are constructed, with an increased focus on 'interaction', and convergence (Jenkins 2006a/b, Bruns 2008) and there does appear to be evidence within my findings of the way these relationships have become complicated: for example, with the role of 'ordinary' people as participants in both reality shows and in audience discussion about these shows; with the interaction online between those involved in production and 'audiences'; and with the ability of audiences to create their own video responses on YouTube. Television discourses are arguably influenced more strongly by industry guidelines and production personnel than 'ordinary' people, although given that much audience discourse replicates that of

television programmes for faiths other than one's own it may be that audience-influenced programming would be little different.

Audiences tended to perceive programmes as being highly constructed for a particular 'agenda' although in forums, blogs and YouTube, they only tended to be critical of this 'agenda' if they perceived it as criticising their own faith group. Perhaps because of the nature of the environment, the focus groups perceived programmes more critically regardless of their faith position and those onscreen.

Forums (particularly more 'general' interest forums), blogs and YouTube tended to involve a larger amount of personal disagreement between users than Twitter or focus groups, possibly because the former environments are more 'anonymous', and these disagreements would often use inflammatory or emotive language, including swearing, racist insults and 'shouting' (typing in capital letters). When professionals or programme participants entered the discussion, this often changed the style in which audiences communicated as well as their attitudes towards the people involved, with a greater degree of politeness exercised, even when disagreeing with them.

What was most surprising was that, despite being critical of the way their own beliefs and practices (or those of close friends and family) were portrayed, very few audience members perceived television to be as inaccurate in their portrayal of 'other' groups. Audience discourse frequently stereotyped 'other' nationalities and beliefs in a similar manner to the television discourse, such as conflating Islam with hijabs, niqabs and terrorism or Atheism with Richard Dawkins. When users belonged to 'other' groups, they often had to legitimise their 'other' status, such as Nigerian posters who condemned their country's political and religious systems and supported the British charity workers in the '…Africa's Witch Children' programmes.

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Faith in factual formats

Religious/spiritual programming reflects trends within factual television during the decade, adopting documentary's traditional stance of presenting the 'other' (Hawkins 2001, Beattie 2004, Kilborn and Izod 1997), reality/lifestyle's notions of journeying, confession and transformation (Macdonald 2003, Hill 2005, Braitch 2007, Redden 2007), and PSB notions of ethics, education, information and entertainment (Dover and Hill 2007, Hawkins 2001, Stivers 2000). They present a strong sense of 'nationhood' through discourses about Britishness and comparisons between 'us' and 'them' (Ashuri 2005, 2009). Many factual programmes also display a strong sense of genre hybridity (Couldry 2009).

There is little within these programmes to distinguish them from other factual programmes beyond their particular repertoire of signifiers for religious/spiritual practice. For example, current affairs programmes investigate the 'problems' of religion in the same way they would investigate the 'problems' of business or politics, and the 'transformations' of religious/spiritual 'reality' replicate those where the makeover is of one's diet or appearance: a renewed sense of self-worth; a respect for others; an inner 'happiness'; and possibly a mild change in habit/behaviour. In some cases, such as the teenagers in *No Sex Please…* or Martin in *Make Me a Christian*, the transformation even involves a physical makeover.

One of the most surprising findings was that the one thing you might expect to mark programmes about religion/spirituality out from other factual genres, a sense of the supernatural or transcendent, is curiously absent, except for when it is problematised, such as in the case of spiritual healing.

<u>Faith in the future?</u>

It is difficult at the early stage of the 2010s to predict how this decade will differ from its predecessor. Factual television has already undergone changes in the first two years of the decade, with a move away from some reality/lifestyle formats, particularly on Channel 4, although historical travelogues and investigative documentaries remain prominent features of television discourse, and there has been a renewed interest in 'fly on the wall' and 'docusoap' formats as well as the emergence of 'constructed reality' formats. Programmes increasingly encourage interaction through social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook, and viewing online through services such as 4OD or BBC iPlayer is becoming more commonplace. However, there is less encouragement for audiences to post comment within online environments run by the broadcasters, with the BBC Religion and Ethics message board being disbanded in 2011, two years after Channel 4 removed theirs, and 4OD's YouTube channel having comments disabled[3].

In terms of television's portrayal of religion/spirituality, little appears to have changed so far. Christianity and Islam remain the most visible faiths, and presenters such as Robert Beckford, Ann Widdecombe and Rageh Omaar have continued to make programmes, albeit more on the BBC than on Channel 4 since Aaqil Ahmed's move to the corporation. In keeping with general factual television trends, there have been fewer 'experiment' programmes like *The Monastery*, but religion/spirituality remain key themes for history and current affairs, for example in *The Life of Muhammad* (BBC Two 2011) and *Dispatches*' 'Britain's Witch Children' (2010) and 'Lessons in Hate and

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[3] This is partly due to cuts in online services due to lack of funding, so may not simply be about broadcasters trying to retain control of these environments.

Violence' (2011). Perhaps the most visible change is the development of *4thought.tv* on Channel 4, replacing the daily *Three Minute Wonder* strand at 7.55pm on a weekday. *4thought.tv* and its accompanying website features a different 'thought' each day from people of differing faith perspectives. However, audience concerns over lack of diversity, stereotyping and marginalisation remain.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored discourses of religion and spirituality on mainstream factual public service television in 2000-2009. Although, given the wide-ranging nature of the study, it is impossible to discuss every programme, audience response or industry perspective in detail, I have attempted to provide as indicative a range of examples as possible.

This study has potential implications for broadcasting policy and television programme-making by highlighting the lack of diversity within television portrayals, not just in terms of the amount of faiths featured (or not) but in the way faiths are often presented in stereotypical and limited ways; thus contradicting PSB commitments to diversity.

It contributes to the study of religion and society by presenting the media as a key site where debates about the role of religion/spirituality in society take place. It reveals a number of ways that discourses about religion/spirituality and Britishness on television, in audience discussion, in the narratives of those working in the media and in industry documentation, reference academic concerns about these themes, such as notions of secularisation and 'spirituality'.

It adds to Media Studies literature both by looking at the under-researched areas of factual television, British identity and religion/spirituality as well as taking an under-used approach of combining discussions of media texts along with audience and industry perspectives. Given the longitudinal nature of the study, such an approach was important to provide as wide-ranging an account as possible, something a study that focused in on one aspect of the process would not have been able to provide. I believe this study makes a significant contribution in terms of its diverse research approach and offers something that studies which focus solely on audiences, texts or institutions at the expense of the other contexts cannot.

In terms of an understanding of discourse, this study has attempted to show how multiple discourses are in operation with regards to the production and 'reception' of programmes. Whether these are academic discourses (e.g. discussions of secularisation), 'official' discourses (e.g. policies), other mediated discourses, the discourses of faith groups, or those of individuals, all contribute to the way these programmes are created, understood and discussed. The relationship between these multiple discourses is complicated and whilst there may be instances where they resist or challenge one another (for example audiences rejecting television portrayals of their faith group), there are many ways in which they reinforce and inform each other, drawing upon, shaping and recirculating knowledge and ideas about religion/spirituality, identity and nationhood.

There are many questions raised by this study which would prove fruitful for further research, such as why there is such a lack of diversity of representations in television discourse, how the guidelines on religion/spirituality in the Broadcasting Code and other documents were constructed and what the impact of 'new media', such as

mobile phones, social network sites, video sharing sites and digital/satellite television has had on television's portrayal of religion/spirituality, its production and 'reception'. Whilst my focus has been on factual television, there is still much scope for further study on the representation of these themes within other forms of media, including (but not limited to) fictional television, comedy, news media, children's programming, radio, social networking sites and magazines. There would certainly be merit in comparing the portrayal of religion/spirituality and key news events within this time period in these other forms of media with their presentation in the programmes I have discussed. Likewise, an exploration of how specialist media, such as that aimed at members of faith communities, present similar issues and themes would also be a valuable area of future study.

A number of different discourses about religion/spirituality and nationality emerge within this study, but throughout all environments there is a dominant discursive construction of Britain as a liberal, tolerant place where religion and spirituality are simply one lifestyle choice among many, acceptable as long as they are practised in ways that do not challenge 'British' values.

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A Country Parish (2003), BBC Two, Tiger Aspect

A History of Christianity (2009) AKA *Diarmaid McCulloch's A History of Christianity*, BBC Four, Jerusalem Productions/Open University/BBC

A Jihad for Love (2007), More4, Halal Films

A Seaside Parish (2004-2007), BBC Two, Tiger Aspect

Abused and Catholic (2003), Channel 4, 3BM

Afghanistan: Lifting the Veil (2002), Channel 4, Hardcash Productions

Age of Terror (2008), BBC Two, BBC Productions

Aliyah: The Journey Home (2008), BBC One, BBC Productions

Alpha: Will it Change Their Lives? (2001), ITV1, Moore Television

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Alternative Christmas Message (2006), Channel 4, Chameleon Productions

Alternative Medicine (2007), BBC Two, Open University/BBC

Alternative Therapies (2008), BBC Two, Open University/BBC

Am I Normal? (2008), 'Spirituality', BBC Two, Liberty Bell

An Islamic History of Europe (2005), BBC Four, BBC Productions

An Island Parish (2007-present), BBC Two, Tiger Aspect

Apparitions (2008), BBC One, Lime Pictures

Are Christians Being Persecuted? (2010), BBC One, BBC Manchester

Around the World in 80 Faiths (2009), BBC Two, BBC Religion

Ashes to Ashes (2008-2010), BBC One, Monastic Productions

Big Brother (2000-2010), Channel 4, Endemol

Big Ideas That Changed the World (2005), 'Christianity', Five, Mentorn

Big Ideas That Changed the World (2006), 'Islam', Five, Mentorn

Bodyshock (2008), 'The Girl With Eight Limbs', Channel 4, Zig Zag Productions

Brat Camp (2005-2007), Channel 4, Twenty Twenty Television

Britain's First Suicide Bombers (2006), BBC Two, Chameleon Productions

Britz (2007), Channel 4, Arte France/Daybreak Pictures/Stonehenge Films

Carols from King's (1978-present), BBC Two, BBC Religion

Castaway 2000 (2000), BBC One, Lion Television

Children of Abraham (2004), Channel 4, 3BM

Christianity: A History (2009), Channel 4, CTVC Productions/Pioneer

Clash of the Worlds (2006), BBC Two, Ten Alps/CTVC Productions

Conning the Conmen (2007), BBC Three, BBC Birmingham

Coronation Street (1960-present), ITV1, Granada

Crucify Me (2005), Five, Ginger TV

Cutting Edge (2008), 'Baby Bible Bashers', Channel 4, Firecracker Films

Dan Cruickshank's Adventures in Architecture (2008), BBC Two, BBC

Danish Cartoons AKA *Why Democracy?* 'Bloody Cartoons' AKA *The Mohammed Cartoons* (2007), BBC Two, Steps International

Deborah 13: Servant of God (2009), BBC Three, Special Edition Films

Did Darwin Kill God? (2009), BBC Two, BBC Manchester

Digging For Jesus (2005), ITV1, Flame TV

Dispatches (2001), 'Beneath the Veil', Channel 4, Hardcash Productions

Dispatches (2005), 'Holy Offensive', Channel 4, Angel Eye

Dispatches (2005), 'Women Bishops', Channel 4, CTVC Productions

Dispatches (2006) 'Debate: Muslims and Free Speech', Channel 4, Granada

Dispatches (2006), 'The New Fundamentalists', Channel 5, Juniper TV

Dispatches (2006), 'What Muslims Want', Channel 4, Juniper TV

Dispatches (2007), 'Afghanistan Unveiled', Channel 4, Hardcash Productions

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Dispatches (2007), 'Meeting the Taliban', Channel 4, October Films

Dispatches (2007) 'Undercover Mosque', Channel 4, Hardcash Productions

Dispatches (2007) 'Unholy War', Channel 4, Chameleon TV

Dispatches (2007), 'Young Angry and Muslim', Channel 4, Chameleon Productions

Dispatches (2008), 'From Jail to Jihad', Channel 4, Ten Alps

Dispatches (2008), 'In God's Name', Channel 4, David Modell Productions

Dispatches (2008), 'It Shouldn't Happen to a Muslim', Channel 4, Quicksilver

Dispatches (2008), 'Saving Africa's Witch Children', Channel 4, Red Rebel Films

Dispatches (2008) 'Undercover Mosque: The Return', Channel 4, Hardcash Productions

Dispatches (2009), 'Pakistan's Taliban Generation', Channel 4, October Films

Dispatches (2009), 'Return to Africa's Witch Children', Channel 4, Red Rebel Films

Dispatches (2009), 'Unseen Gaza', Channel 4, Ten Alps

Dispatches (2010), 'Britain's Islamic Republic', Channel 4, Steve Boulton Productions

Dispatches (2010), 'Britain's Witch Children', Channel 4, Oxford Scientific Films

Dispatches (2011), 'Lessons in Hate and Violence', Channel 4, Hardcash Productions

Divorce, Sharia Style (2008), Channel 4, Faction Films

Doctor Who (1963-present), BBC One, BBC Wales

Does Christianity Have a Future? (2011), BBC One, BBC Religion

EastEnders (1985-present), BBC One, BBC Drama

Easter from King's (2010-present), BBC Two, BBC Religion

Easter in Art (2005), Five, Kultur Films

Enemies of Reason (2007), Channel 4, IWC Media

Everyman (2001), 'Chained Wives', BBC Two, Flame TV

Everyman (2001), 'The Hallelujah Kids', BBC One, BBC Religion

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Everyman (2003), 'The Buddhists of Suburbia', BBC Two, Endboard Productions

Evil (2005), Channel 4, CTVC Productions

Extraordinary People (2003), 'The Man Who Paints the Future', Five, Real Life Media

Extraordinary People (2005), 'The Boy Who Lived Before', Five, October Films

Extraordinary People (2007) 'The Man Who Dreams the Future', Five, October Films

Extreme Pilgrim (2007), BBC Two, BBC

Flesh and the Devil (2004), Channel 4, Carlton/HBO

Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed (2009), BBC Three, BBC Productions

Ghosthunting with… (2006-present), ITV2, Antix

God Bless You Barack Obama (2010), BBC Two, Fresh One Productions

God Gave Rock and Roll to You (2006), Channel 4, ZigZag Productions

God is Black (2005), Channel 4, Diverse Productions

God Is Green (2007), Channel 4, Ten Alps/CTVC Productions

God's Next Army (2006), Channel 4, Lumiere Productions

God's Waiting Room (2007), Channel 4, Century North

Hajj - the Greatest Trip on Earth (2003), Channel 4, Lion Television

Hallowed be thy Game (2005), Channel 4, SFX Sports Group

Heart of the Matter (1979-2000), BBC One, BBC

Holiday (1969-2007), BBC One, BBC

How to Build a Cathedral (2008), BBC Four, BBC

How to Look Good Naked (2006-2011), Channel 4, Maverick

Indian School (2008), BBC Four, Lion Television

Inside Hamas (2008), Channel 4, Stampede Productions

Iran and the West (2009), BBC Two, Ten Alps

Islam Unveiled (2004), Channel 4, Hardcash Productions

Israel and the Arabs: Elusive Peace (2005), BBC Two, Ten Alps

Jerry Springer: The Opera (2005), BBC Two, Avalon Productions

Jesus Camp (2006), More4, Loki Films/Maverick

Jews (2008), BBC Four, BBC Productions

Karma Babies (2007), BBC One, BBC Manchester

Keeping Faith: Rosh Hashanah (2007), BBC One, BBC Religion

Keith Allen Will Burn in Hell (2007), Channel 4, Associated-Rediffusion Television

Kumbh Mela (2001-2002), Channel 4, Lion Television

Life on Mars (2006-2007), BBC One, Monastic Productions

Living With the Enemy (1998-1999), BBC Two, BBC Productions

Louis Theroux: the Most Hated Family in America (2007), BBC Two, BBC Productions

Louis Theroux: the Most Hated Family in America in Crisis (2011), BBC Two, BBC Productions

Magic of Jesus (2005), Channel 4, Objective Productions

Make Me a Christian (2008), Channel 4, Wildcard

Make Me a Muslim (2007), Channel 4, Wildcard

Making Slough Happy (2005), BBC Two, Optomen

Mary Magdalene – Saint or Sinner? (2008), Five, CTVC Productions

Martin Luther King: American Prophet (2008), BBC Two, BBC Productions

Masterchef Goes Large AKA *Masterchef*, (2005-present) BBC One/Two, Shine/Ziji Productions

Mel B: Voodoo Princess (2001), Channel 4, Tiger Aspect

Miracle on the Estate (2008), BBC One, BBC Religion

Miracles of Jesus (2006), BBC One, Jerusalem Productions

Mum, I'm a Muslim (2002), Channel 4, Real Life Media

My Big Fat Moonie Wedding (2007), Channel 4, DoubleBand Films

My Brother, The Islamist (2011), BBC Three, Grace Productions

My Favourite Hymns (1998-2005), ITV1, Granada

No Sex Please, We're Teenagers (2004), BBC Two, RDF International

Operation Muslim Vote (2005), Channel 4, Princess Productions

Opus Dei and the Da Vinci Code (2005), Channel 4, CTVC Productions

Pagans (2004), Channel 4, Granada

Panorama (2000), 'Power to Abuse', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2001), 'Koran and Country', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2002) 'Suffer the Little Children', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2003), 'Sex and the Holy City', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2004), 'Can Condoms Kill', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2004), 'Covering Up', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2005) 'A Question of Leadership', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2006), 'Sex Crimes and the Vatican', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2007), 'How I became a Muslim Extremist', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2007), 'Scientology and Me', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2008) 'True Brits', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2009), 'Muslim First, British Second', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2010), 'British Schools: Islamic Rules', BBC One, BBC Productions

Panorama (2010), 'The Secrets of Scientology', BBC One, BBC Productions

Pilate: The Man Who Killed Christ (2004), Channel 4, October Films

Preachers to Be (2005), Channel 4, Cicada Productions

Priest Idol (2005), Channel 4, Diverse Productions/Jerusalem Productions

Rageh Omaar's Tsunami Journey (2005), ITV1, CTVC Productions

Revelations (2009) 'Commando Chaplains', Channel 4, Darlow Smithson Productions

Revelations (2009) 'Divorce: Jewish Style', Channel 4, Otmoor Productions

Revelations (2009) 'How do you Know God Exists?', Channel 4, Juniper Productions

Revelations (2009) 'How to Find God', Channel 4, Renegade Films

Revelations (2009) 'Muslim and Looking for Love', Channel 4, Crescent Films

Revelations (2009) 'Muslim School', Channel 4, Rise Films

Revelations (2009) 'Talking to the Dead', Channel 4, Ronachan Films

Revelations (2009) 'The Exhumer', Channel 4, Matchlight

Reverend Death (2008), Channel 4, World of Wonder

Sally Morgan: Star Psychic (2007-2008), ITV2, Fox TV

Science and Islam (2009), BBC Four, Southern Star

Secrets of the 12 Disciples (2005), Channel 4, Carbon

Secrets of the Jesus Tomb (2008), Five, CTVC Productions

Seeing Salvation (2000), BBC Two, Jerusalem Productions

Seven Wonders of the Muslim World (2008), Channel 4, Crescent Films

Shariah TV (C4, 2005-8), Channel 4, CTVC Productions

Singing with the Enemy (2007), BBC Three, Endemol

Singlebritishmuslims.com (2007), BBC One, BBC Manchester

Some of my Best Friends Are… (2004), Channel 4, Lion Television

Something About Mary (2007), ITV1, CTVC Productions

Son of God (2001), BBC One, BBC/Discovery Channel

Songs of Praise (1961-present), BBC One, BBC

Spirituality Shopper (2005), Channel 4, Optomen

Strictly Kosher (2011), ITV1, ITV Studios

Sufi Soul (2005), Channel 4, Electric Sky/Songlines

Sunday Schools: Reading, Writing and Redemption (2008), BBC Four, Green Bay

Testing God (2001), Channel 4, Mentorn

The 1900 House (1999), Channel 4, Wall to Wall

The Art of Eternity (2007), BBC Four, BBC

The Art of Spain (2008) BBC Four, BBC

The Battle for Britain's Soul (2004), BBC Two, BBC

The Beginner's Guide… to Evangelical Christianity AKA *Johnny Vegas' Guide to… Evangelical Christianity* (2007), Channel 4, Remedy Productions

The Beginner's Guide… to Hinduism (2006), Channel 4, Remedy Productions

The Beginner's Guide… to Islam (2006), Channel 4, Remedy Productions

The Beginner's Guide… to L Ron Hubbard (2006), Channel 4, Remedy Productions

The Beginner's Guide… to Voodoo (2007), Channel 4, Remedy Productions

The Beginners Guide… to Yoga (2007), Channel 4, Cicada Productions

The Bible: A History (2010), Channel 4, Pioneer

The Bible Revolution (2007), Channel 4, Jerusalem Productions

The Big Questions (2007-present), BBC One, Mentorn

The Church of England: The Power and the Glory (2003), BBC Four, BBC

The Convent (2006), BBC Two, Tiger Aspect

The Cult of the Suicide Bomber (2005), Channel 4, Many Rivers Films

The Empire Pays Back (2005), Channel 4, Diverse Productions

The End of the World Cult (2007), Channel 4, Firefly

The English Church (2002), BBC Two, RDF International

The Fundamentalists AKA *Fundamentalism* (2006), Channel 4, October Films

The Genius of Charles Darwin (2008), Channel 4, IWC Media

The Glories of Islamic Art (2006), Five, Alpha TV

The Heaven and Earth Show (1998-2007), BBC One, BBC Manchester

The Hidden Story of Jesus (2007), Channel 4, Juniper TV

The Life of Muhammad (2011), BBC Two, Crescent Films

The Liverpool Nativity (2007), BBC Three, BBC

The Lost Gospel of Judas (2006), Channel 4, National Geographic

The Lowdown (1995), 'The Hallelujah Kid', BBC One, BBC

The Man With 80 Wives (2006), Channel 4, Talent TV

The Manchester Passion (2006), BBC Three, BBC Manchester

The Monastery (2005), BBC Two, Tiger Aspect/Jerusalem Productions

The Monastery Revisited (2006), BBC Two, Tiger Aspect

The Muslim Jesus (2007), ITV1, ITV Productions

The Mystery of the Shroud (2002), ITV1, CTVC Productions

The Nativity Decoded (2008), Channel 4, Carbon

The New Ten Commandments (2005), Channel 4, Optomen

The Passion (2008), BBC One, Jerusalem Productions

The Passion: The Films, The Faith and The Fury (2006), Channel 4, ZigZag Productions

The Private Life of an Easter/Christmas Masterpiece (2006-present), BBC Two, Fulmar Television and Film

The Protestant Revolution (2007), BBC Four, IWC Media

The Quest for the True Cross (2001), Channel 4, Jerusalem Productions

The Qur'an (2008), Channel 4, Juniper TV

The Real Da Vinci Code (2005), Channel 4, Wildfire Television

The Real Vicars of Dibley (2002), BBC One, Tiger Aspect

The Retreat (2007), BBC Two, Tiger Aspect

The Root of All Evil? (2005), Channel 4, IWC Media

The Second Coming (2003), ITV1, Red Productions

The Secret Family of Jesus (2006), Channel 4, CTVC Productions

The Siege of Bethlehem (2002), BBC Two, October Films

The Soul of Britain (2000), BBC One, BBC

The Trouble With Atheism (2006), Channel 4, Juniper TV

The War on Britain's Jews? (2007), Channel 4, Atlantic Productions

The Way We Worshipped (2006), ITV1, True North

The World's Strictest Parents (2008-present), BBC Three, Twenty Twenty Television

The X Factor (2004-present), ITV1, Syco TV

Tonight (2004) 'Cleft Palate', ITV1, CTVC Productions

Tony Robinson and the Paranormal (2008), Channel 4, Flashback Television

Transsexual in Iran AKA *Be Like Others* (2008), BBC Two, Wolfe Video

Trial of the Knights Templar (2008), Five, CTVC Productions

Tribal Wives (2007), BBC Two, Diverse Productions

Tricks of the Bible (2005), Channel 4, Objective Productions

Trust Me, I'm a Healer (2006), BBC Two, RDF International

Tsunami: Where Was God? (2005), Channel 4, Ten Alps

Vicars' Wives (2007), ITV1, KMB Productions

What's the Point of Forgiveness? (2011), BBC One, BBC Manchester

When God Spoke English: The Making of the King James Bible (2011), BBC Four, BBC/Jerusalem Productions

Who Really Killed Jesus? (2008), Five, CTVC Productions

Who Wrote the Bible? (2004), Channel 4, Diverse Productions

Wife Swap (2003-2009), Channel 4, RDF International

Wish You Were Here…? (1974-2003), ITV1, Thames Television

With God on Our Side: George Bush and the Religious Right (2004), Channel 4, Lumiere Productions

Witness (2000), 'Going Straight', Channel 4, Gabriela Productions

Witness (2001), 'Surrendered Wives', Channel 4, Lion Television

Witness (2001), 'Vatican Man', Channel 4, Twenty Twenty

Witness (2002) 'Moving Heaven and Earth', Channel 4, Ozscot Films

Witness (2003), 'God Bless Ibiza', Channel 4, Maverick

Witness (2003), 'Inside the Mind of the Suicide Bomber', Channel 4, October Films

Witness (2003), 'Jesus Comes to London', Channel 4, October Films

Witness (2000), 'Living on Light', Channel 4, RDF International

Witness Special (2001), 'Queer and Catholic', Channel 4, 3BM

Appendix Three: Website Screenshots

Fig X3.1 Channel 4's *Faith and Belief* website circa 2007
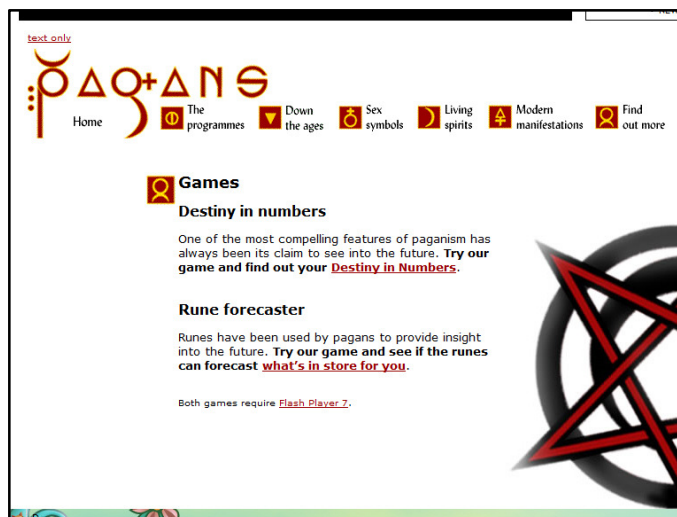
Fig X3.2 Channel 4 *Pagans* website circa 2004
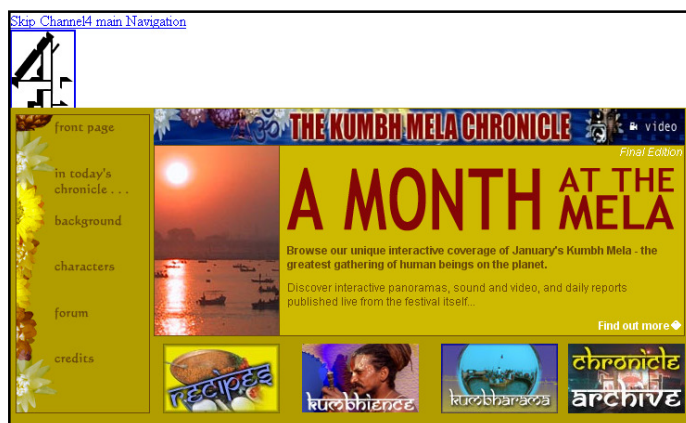
Fig X3.3 Channel 4 *Kumbh Mela* website circa 2001

Fig X3.4 BBC *Religion & Ethics* site circa 2001

Fig X3.5 BBC *Religion & Ethics* site circa 2003
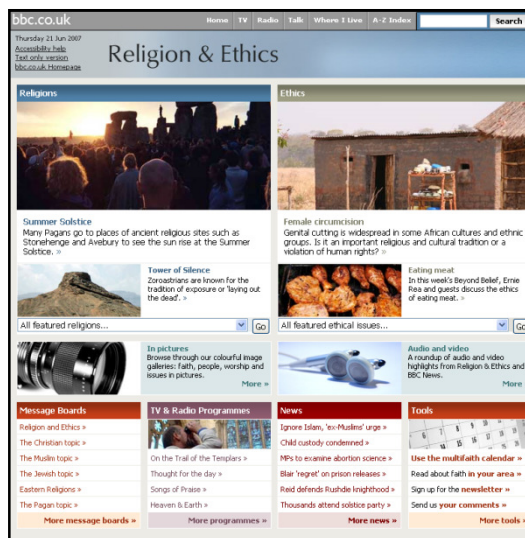
Fig X3.6 BBC *Religion & Ethics* site circa 2007

Fig X3.7 BBC *Religion* site circa 2009

Fig X3.8 BBC *Around the World in 80 Faiths* website circa 2009
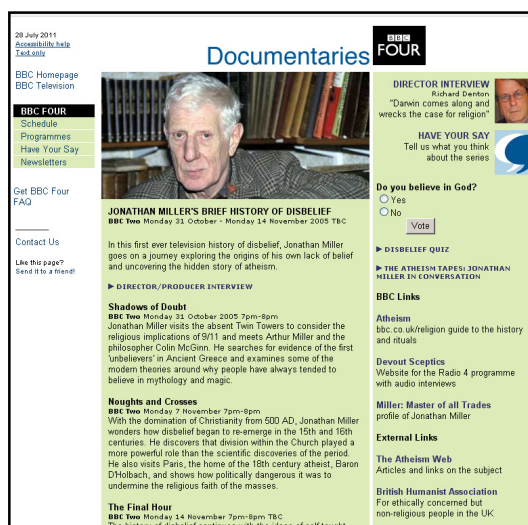
Fig X3.9 BBC *A Brief History of Disbelief* website circa 2005
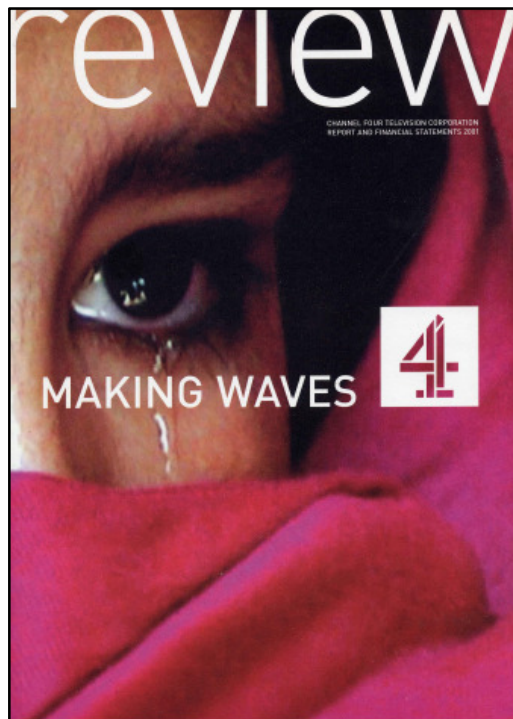
Fig X4.1 *Channel 4 Annual Report 2001*

Fig X4.2 *Channel 4 Annual Report 2001*

Fig X4.3 *Channel 4 Annual Report 2003*

Fig X4.4 *Channel 4 Annual Report 2004*

Fig X4.5 *Channel 4 Annual Report 2004*

Fig X4.6 *Channel 4 Annual Report 2004*

Fig X4.7 *Channel 4 Annual Report 2008*

Foreword

Aaqil Ahmed,
Commissioning Editor Religion & Multicultural, Channel 4

Christianity: A History is the biggest project I have commissioned during my time at Channel 4. It's almost unheard of for a mainstream broadcaster to dedicate eight hours of prime time television to Christianity in this way. I think it's fair to say that it's a big risk, but a risk we really wanted to take.

Why? Because, of the sheer scale of the project and the complexity of the story at its very heart. As with all religions, the history of Christianity is not a simple one. It contains dark moments, compromises and great achievements, and features life changing heroes and villains. We feel that now is the right time for Channel 4 to present these stories in a way that will inform our audience about how this faith has shaped our world, and more specifically, our nation.

Two examples of Christianity's impact on our modern world are the Reformation and the Crusades. Without the Reformation we may not have become a Protestant nation with many of the characteristics, language and structures we take for granted today. And the Crusades? One of our presenters, Rageh Omar, argues in his film that we've forgotten its importance in the west, but that in the Muslim world, the brutality of the Crusades still resonates in the hearts of many Muslims and in the rhetoric of Al Qaeda.

So, **Christianity: A History** is not just another television series – for me it's more important than that, it's a lesson about today's world and an attempt to shed light on the history of a faith that continues to shape the destiny of all of us in some way or other. We hope it does that and that it makes just a few of us think about how we got to where we are today.

Contents

Episode 1: Jesus The Jew

Writer **Howard Jacobson** talks of Jesus's Jewish background, the continuing rift between Christianity and Judaism, and why, despite not believing in God, he thinks knowing religious history can release us from the burden of history.

Timeline

6 BC
Quirinius becomes Governor of Syria and conducts census

c8–4 BC
Birth of Jesus

c28 AD
John the Baptist begins his ministry; he baptises Jesus and is later arrested and beheaded

c29
Jesus begins ministry, preaching: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'

c30–36
Crucifixion of Jesus

c32
Execution of John the Baptist

c37
Conversion of Paul

c46–57
Paul's three missionary journeys

c55
Paul writes his letter to the Romans

c64
Nero blames Christians for the Great Fire of Rome Martyrdom of Paul

66–73
Great Jewish Revolt

70
Jerusalem falls and the Temple is destroyed

132–135
Final Jewish revolt, Judea and Jerusalem erased from maps, and region renamed Syria Palæstina

269
Anthony becomes a hermit – his life and actions lie at foundation of monastic movement

303
Diocletian orders burning of Christian books and churches

The Judaism in which I grew up was not so much liberal or orthodox as befuddled. We were proud of being Jewish without knowing exactly what it was. No bacon in the house, no Christmas tree, but we didn't keep the Sabbath and rarely visited the Synagogue. Yet we feared the cross as any vampire might. Because we'd been made outcasts in Christ's name, we were alarmed by every aspect of Christianity, no matter that what the first Christians said, they said as Jews, *to* Jews.

No one denies that Jesus was a Jew, but even the most charitable Christians believe he was on an errand to turn Judaism into something else. But the truth is he wasn't starting a new religion. He was a devout Jewish teacher committed to reawakening Jews to their Jewishness.

His Jewishness was systematically dismantled by the early Christians for whom it became essential, if they were to sell their new faith to the Roman world, that its Jewish origins be obscured. And the first stage in that re-telling of the truth was to turn the Jews into Christ killers.

Every historian knows that the Romans were largely responsible for the death of Jesus because they feared he would incite rebellion. Why would Jews have wanted him dead? Why would they have put a crown of thorns on his head and ironically titled him 'King of the Jews'? But in order to r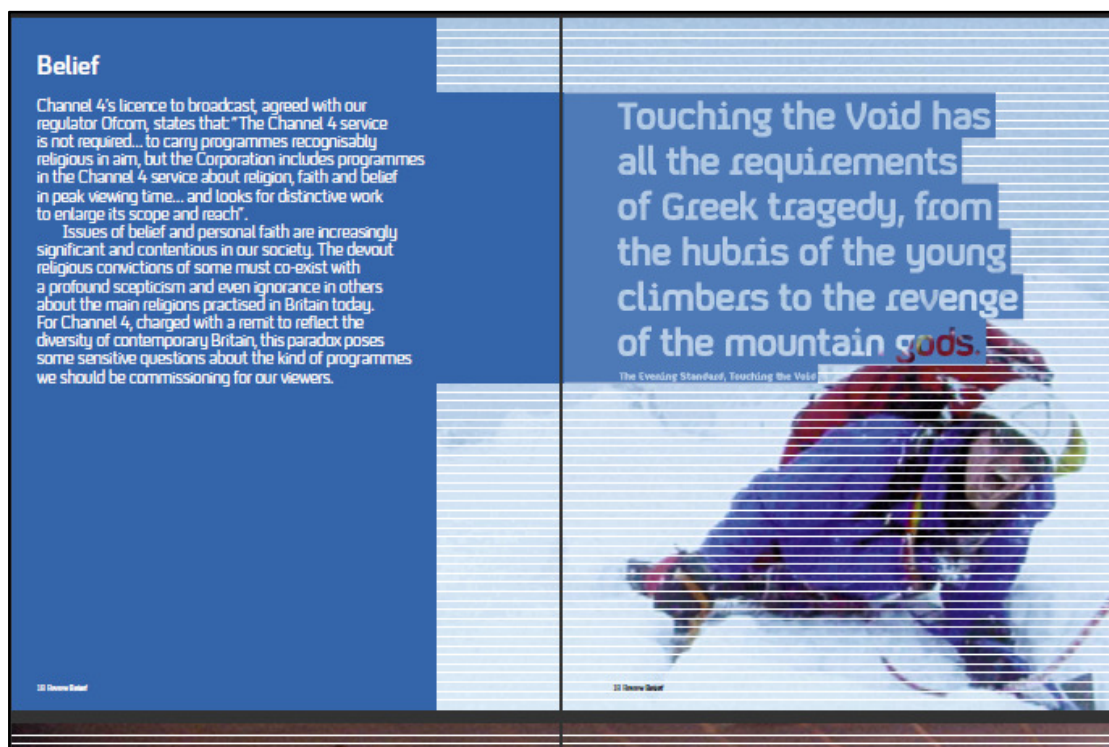escue Jesus from his Jewishness, the story had to go that Jews had killed him. The disowning was *theirs*. And in the popular imagination that fiction persists.

In 1965, the Second Vatican council removed the imputation of Jewish guilt and dropped a prayer for Jews to be redeemed through Christ. The Church, it seemed, at last accepted its responsibility for the libelling of Jews. To Jewish consternation around the world, Pope Benedict XVI has recently restored this prayer. So with every advance in scholarship and tolerance there is a theological setback.

The point of the programme *Jesus the Jew* is that knowledge is everything. Insofar as you can know what happened, don't tell lies about it, don't distort it, don't trust things, read for yourself. When I discussed this with a Cardinal in the film, in particular the verses in the Gospel of St John that describe the Jews as children of the devil, he said the Gospel of John was actually a Gospel of love and people should 'relativise' the meaning of these verses, but ultimately there was nothing we could do about the language because the Gospel was the word of God.

> "The only way you lighten the burden of history is to know it."

But I believe that the Gospels are not the word of God, and not even reliably the word of Jesus. They were written many years after Jesus's death by people who had probably never met him. There is all the difference in the world between what the historical Jesus might have said and what later Christian propagandists *wanted* him to have said. Even believers must read critically.

Though of course I knew when I started to make this documentary that Jesus was

Fig X4.8 *Christianity: A History Press Pack* (2009)

Appendix Eight: Focus Group Transcripts

This appendix includes two sample focus group transcripts, one offline and one online. For details of participants, see Appendix Six.

Focus group #3. Programmes: *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed / Around the World in 80 Faiths*: 'United States of America'. **Participants:** Laura, Keith, Serena, Paul

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RAD: So we're gonna be watching two programmes today. The first is called *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed*, which was shown on BBC Three a few weeks ago and the other is one of the episodes of a series called *Around The World in 80 Faiths* which was shown on BBC Two earlier this year. Now have any of you heard of either of these programmes before?

LAURA: Heard of the second one (others all echo this)

RAD: And have any of you watched episodes of it?

SERENA: No.

KEITH: Er, I saw one.

RAD: Right, and do you remember which one it was?

KEITH: It was the Indian one.

RAD: Do you remember anything about it?

KEITH: Er, lots of lovely buildings [laughter].

RAD: And so before we actually watch them, what do you think your expectations are of, knowing what channels they're on and the titles, what do you think they might contain? [Firstly] *Gary, Young Psychic and Possessed*?

KEITH: Was that on Channel Five?

RAD: BBC Three

KEITH: BBC Three? Oh, same difference.

SERENA: I expect it'll be like something like *Most Haunted* or something like that. [**KEITH**: yeah] a bit…

KEITH It's gonna be a bit sensational.

PAUL: Yeah.

KEITH Sensationalist, that's the word.

RAD: And *Around the World in 80 Faiths*. We're gonna look at the American, the North American episode, what do we think?

SERENA: Well that won awards, didn't it, that one, the chap who did that one? So it's going to be quite [pause] in depth, I would have thought, factually astute.

PAUL: Without bias, I think.

RAD: Do you think, one's BBC Three, one's BBC Two, do you think the channel will affect the style and the content of the programmes?

PAUL: If it was ITV, yeah [all laugh] but it's not.

SERENA: BBC Two will reach a wider audience, I think it will. BBC Three I tend to associate actually with dafter stuff to be honest. If it's more solid they tend to move it on to one of the other sort of main channels, BBC so…

RAD: OK. So we'll watch one, talk about it, then watch the other one and have a bit of a longer discussion after the second one.

Discussion during programme

[**PAUL** requests a bit be rewound for clarity].

[Video stuff with sceptics].

SERENA: To be fair the stuff about [having a good reaction from] some kind of therapy can be true of chemotherapy too, I've seen it.

[During section with Gary and his manager, muffled discussion - speculation over whether they are gay]

[Laughter at old man who can't remember what he's being treated for; laughter and shaking of heads at Alzheimer's reveal].

SERENA: That's just so awful!

PAUL: The irony.

KEITH: Well, he didn't know!

LAURA: laughs

[Abraham picture]

SERENA: God, he looks like Catweazle.

[Reveal of him being the prophet]

SERENA: Oh my goodness, not any old Abraham!

[PAUL laughs]

[He's not ready for speaking directly]

PAUL: Not if he's got a 3 phone!

[PAUL asks for Gary's age]

[At the revelation he was 13 in the spiritualist church when he began, lots of 'ohs' and 'rights'.]

[Gary says Emeka can see Abraham working]

SERENA: Oh, channelling. Oh, I've seen that done. It's really weird.

[Laughing at Abraham's voice throughout channelling section]

PAUL: Even the dog's disbelieving.

PAUL: there's a William Hague thing going on as well.

LAURA: Yeah!

[Laughter]

SERENA: Well that wasn't very convincing. I've seen an American Indian type thing being channelled and that was a lot more dramatic and the [inaud] took a big slump at the end. That was, he wasn't acting well enough there, more convincing himself.

[Laughter at stripper reveal]

SERENA: That's an odd mix! I thought he had something going on with that manager but obviously I'm…

PAUL: Yeah. Clearly we're not cut out to be psychic.

[Laughter]

[Stripper psychic describing her dancing]

PAUL: what does she do with her crystal ball?

[Emeka asks about being gay, Gary denies]

SERENA: I don't believe you!

PAUL: My gaydar says different

SERENA: He's really blushing now.

[Psychic talking about Emeka's nan and getting it wrong]

LAURA: There's always a reason!

SERENA: There is a [scientific] explanation for that [glass moving in a seánce] I've tried it and it's potentially nothing to do with the spirit world whatever. Um, it's erm, well, the scientific explanation is we all, you can't keep your hands completely still so even when you point like one finger, one finger wouldn't be enough to move that but combined energy, so none of you's actually pushing the thing anywhere, I've done it with [names] at [local pub] and I have to admit, I think they were quite convinced but… it's just I don't know, it was fun, it was entertaining, but, if you'll excuse me, complete bollocks. It was. So I went straight home and Googled and it was just that, it, there's

got to be something. I've done lots of these different things out of interest and I could tell a few sort of nightmarish stories and so… but that's just, it makes total sense that between the lot of you the energy is enough to get things and once… it gains its own momentum.

PAUL: If it moved without anybody touching it that.

SERENA: Yeah that'd be impressive, yes, I'd give you that.

PAUL: I remember an exercise we did years ago when I went to a [training day with] social services and I can't remember where they got it from but you move a person sitting on a chair, kind of four people stood round and you had to put your hands on top of each others' and you put your finger underneath and you all lifted the person with your finger and your collective energies.

SERENA: Right, that sounds vaguely familiar now.

PAUL: And we were all completely blown away then. Individually you couldn't lift the person, but the power of putting yourself together with others, rather like that. But the thing didn't move on its own. In my head when these things happen, the glass does move on their own, not when people are touching it.

SERENA: Not when people are, yeah. Well, it does feel like it's moving on its own when you're doing it, but… um.. no.

['The lights are switched off to give him more energy' – everyone laughs].

SERENA: I want a large lump of ectoplasm, come on.

[More laughs when Emeka says he hasn't seen anything]

PAUL: Yeah, cos you're not a [inaud].

SERENA: You didn't BELIEVE enough that's what it was.

[Sceptics letter saying they want to ban event]

SERENA: That's a bit harsh.

[He says he doesn't need extra publicity].

SERENA: I think he may be right there. I'm sure I've heard of him before on some of

these, uh.

[At the fete]

PAUL: Perhaps the stripper's coming in a minute

[*Bad Psychics* man says people can get addicted, especially vulnerable people]

SERENA: You could say that about any kind of religion though

[Disclaimer]

SERENA: I'm amazed that's legal actually, to be able to do that.

PAUL: Disclaimer innit.

SERENA: It's weak.

PAUL: He can do what he wants.

SERENA: I don't know if that's strictly. Hmm.

[Study for Psychical research elicits laughter]

[One patient believes he removed stone]

PAUL: That's how she did it, she fell over when she was skiing!

SERENA: Oh, for crying out loud.

PAUL: Was that her GP?

RAD: Yes I think so

PAUL So there couldn't be a conflict of interests could there? Can you not wee

gallstones out as well?

SERENA: No that's kidney ones but they can break down. I mean… As far as I

understand she'll have stopped eating fatty foods, cut out caffeine.

PAUL: Maybe there was a misdiagnosis in the first place.

SERENA: They can settle down. Mine settled down for a year when I cut out fat.

PAUL: So it's still there?

RAD: Yeah.

SERENA: Do we know what her symptoms were?

RAD: I don't think she said, I think pain but I don't….

SERENA: Cos the pain comes when it spasms, not the stone itself, if it's a tiny one,

when it gets stuck in a duct that causes problems.

[Discussion of who doc was and if was surgeon or not (ie Dr not Mr)]

[Gary describes what Abraham sees]

SERENA: What utter rubbish! The tissue doesn't get damaged, the whole thing just

spasms.

[Emeka: I wasn't expecting Pam to chip in]

SERENA: Well then you were very silly, weren't you? [If you don't shrink it] then it'll

get stuck in one of those ducts and she won't be pleased with you!

[Gary has moved]

PAUL: is anyone else thinking the same as me? Substantially nicer, substantially

bigger.

SERENA: Ye-es.

KEITH: 32inch TV in the corner.

Programme ends.

SERENA: To be fair, when it comes to conventional medicine it doesn't work a lot of

the time but we don't sit here taking the pee but [pause] I just [pause]. Maybe it was

the… thirteen, going to a spiritualist church, it's so compelling, you're an 'in-person' if

you get to go into the closed circle this kind of thing or if someone tells you you've got

abilities, that kind of thing. Thirteen's so impressionable I'm not surprised he feels

that, you know, he's got something. Think his mother was right about the attention.

PAUL: There's a sense of family and community at that age as well. Caught at a

vulnerable age but the whole thing about him sort of having senses and feelings when

he was two [laughs].

SERENA: Well you will, um, I'm sorry.

PAUL: I just weed myself when I was two, but erm ,yeah that's that's kind of, yeah.

SERENA: My niece at four was telling us about 'granny this' and 'granny that' and my mum died years ago, she never met her, but she was clearly just projecting stuff that she wanted, I mean there's a granny thing and some things were right, she picked up on some things she just happened to stumble across that were right but nah, you listen more closely, you, actually was, it was just her imagination.

RAD: Was that what you expected it to be?

SERENA: No.

LAURA: yeah, I think it probably was. There was a lot of montages and stringy music, wasn't it? And there was about five minutes of science in the whole thing.

SERENA: Yeah, well yeah.

KEITH: [Inaudible]

PAUL: [Inaudible] The music was quite emotive, erm it kind of almost started to become a little bit deriding, it was almost taking the piss out of the guy and I… um.. I mean… we… I think the viewers should be allowed to have their own thoughts without the programme maker kind of steering you in but we all know that's what happens anyway.

SERENA: Yeah, I suppose you've got to come from some sort of angle.

PAUL: Yeah. You [can't be] …completely unbiased.

SERENA: But it wasn't as scientific as you might have hoped.

PAUL: I do think under the mental health act, he's slightly sectionable. Erm [laughs] as a former mental health social worker.

SERENA: I was wondering actually.

PAUL: There were some kind of really big delusions there, but again over time, you know if we can learn to believe in something so strongly it actually becomes a part of [inaud] and I believe that he believes it and stuff, but some of his body language at certain times and some of his the way that he kind of verbalised things suggested an element of doubt so there was erm, there's a word incongruence that I'm looking for, that's the word, there's a bit of incongruence, bits where he actually laughed at himself, that made me feel really awkward because it was almost like he was joining in with people laughing at him. What's that about, erm, hmm?

RAD: What did you make of Emeka, the narrator, the presenter? What did you make of his kind of dialogue and his observations?

SERENA: Lightweight.

LAURA: Patronising.

PAUL: I felt he wasn't with massive bias, erm, until about halfway through and then he started to go down a little bit and then it was all about kind of you know, again the viewer needs to decide rather than be geared into that direction, but I've heard worse.

SERENA: He sounds like he's trying to do a Jon Ronson thing and then just sort of like freaked out but… [inaud] 'I can't let anyone actually think that I think this' it's, at least when Jon Ronson does stuff like this, he, you get the impression that kind of you do get a more balanced, like he did that series on Channel 4 years ago *For the Love Of…*

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where he did various different things from moon landings not being real to God knows what else and he never ever took the pee out of whoever he was talking to, or the divide and I'm just thinking that this guy's definitely lacking something, he's sort of….

PAUL: It can ruin a good interview, you know, if the interviewer's kind of got an agenda or a sense of bias. They can manipulate things the way they want and the way they see. Having said that a male stripper friend of mine was interviewed by a psychologist on TV and she was really mean to him and questioned his morals and [name]'s a highly intelligent guy, highly intelligent and one of my closest friends and he's a wonderful guy and this woman was really manipulating and questioning and he came out of this and said you know she was really horrible and you could see it happening. Now if she had gone in there with an open mind, the interview might have been substantially different.

SERENA: Her research wasn't meant to be based around the morality?

PAUL: No no, so again I think as an interviewer you've kind of got to keep an open mind about stuff. You might have your own thoughts and your own ideas but clearly he's got agendas to disprove what this guy was on about, to discredit him. Which is fine, we're all entitled to do that, but as an interviewer, I think he should have kept an open mind.

SERENA: To me it seemed like he was scared that there might be anyone thinking that he…

PAUL:…subscribed to it, yeah.

RAD: Do you think that there was a clear agenda in the programme then?

PAUL: Exposing [**SERENA**: Mmm] was one of the things that I felt, but yeah, discrediting was up there too, there was lots of reference about, you know, people had dissociated and kind of made disclaimers saying we want nothing to do with this guy. They, that was made quite clear so yeah, there probably was an agenda.

SERENA: What, sort of pretending to be balanced?

PAUL: Mmm.

SERENA: Mmm.

RAD: Do you think other channels might have handled the topic differently?

KEITH: I don't think many would have covered it at all.

LAURA: Seemed like a long time spent on a small thing. They could have cut about twenty minutes because there wasn't much to say. The poor guy was ignored by his parents as a kid, he did something to try and get their attention, he did get their attention and did it more and more and more and now he can't stop. He's been doing it all through his life, so what else is he gonna do? Is he gonna turn around and go 'actually if I think about it, I might be able to make that voice go away and maybe I've been making it up all this time just to get people's attention?' He can't say that now, can he, cos he'd look pretty stupid [laughs].

SERENA: Well he's been in that church, the spiritualist church generally since he was thirteen, as you say, it's gonna be…

LAURA: I did feel sorry for him when his mum said 'well there he was, trying to get attention' I just thought 'well why didn't you give him some attention you horrible thing?' [laughs]

PAUL: Plus he's now got a mortgage to pay, and her [**LAURA:** [laughs] Yeah] and the whole thing was kind of summed up at one point for me where it said something about all I'm trying to do is make a living.

SERENA: Mmmmmm.

PAUL: The people that I've kind of had dealings with that, that are passionate to this degree about what they believe in aren't focussed around the money, they're focussed on kind of the other benefits that it brings, rather than the financial aspects. So that kind of brought up, and the last five minutes for me, I just want… I thought, is this a Victoria Wood sketch? [all laugh] I don't know if anybody remembers there was an interview with a couple who'd won the lottery. They'd won the lottery, they were this poor couple who lived in the backstreets of Manchester or whatever and said 'Oh we'll never change if we won' this seventy year old couple 'we'll never change if we win lottery, will we Ken?' 'No' cue them winning the lottery and they're there in their posh wigs and dressed up to the nines in diamante saying 'oh yeah we keep us old house on, we use it as an ashtray' (all laugh) and it's kind of weird, the transition between before and after. this guy lived in, let's face it a house that wasn't particularly - well there was no kind of design, not that I'm a snob, well I am actually sometimes… but you know, it was a man house, with two men, albeit of questionable sexuality and then cue to him living in a much larger house with kind of nice features in it, nice flooring and obviously…

KEITH: Nice flooring.

PAUL: Yeah lovely flooring, I really liked it, I want it in my house [all laugh] but significantly more expensive, nice car parked on the drive. Now call me cynical but the comparison between those two scenarios.

SERENA: Was deliberate and I was wondering, it crossed my mind there may not be a mortgage there looking at two grand of...

PAUL: Probably, yeah exactly.

SERENA: And I think that's what we were supposed to think as well somehow.

PAUL: Yeah yeah I think you're probably spot on on that one, so the whole thing in the end made me feel rather uncomfortable anyway.

SERENA: Mmm.

PAUL: What I do find bizarre is that within a minute or so of it coming on I kind of thought I know what this is gonna be all about, I know what it's kind of gonna do so in one respect it was what I expected but all it served to do was reinforce my negativity perception regarding the whole.

SERENA: It just…

PAUL: Yeah.

SERENA: I don't think it's a coincidence, I mean plenty of them do this psychic healing, he's not on his own but it's not a coincidence he only happens to be twenty whereas I imagine that if any others were approached that were older it would be just no, no need.

PAUL: Some of his terminology as well, I mean I made a few notes not having to go through them all but there was one where he was rubbing a woman's back and going Oh yeah I'm just numbing down the pain receptors. What the buggery bollocks does that mean? [all laugh] I mean I've had nigh on twenty years of physio sessions, right…

SERENA: Pain receptors are all up here [points to brain] aren't they?

PAUL: Yeah, yeah! But the fact is if you are manipulated physically then you'll feel a short term benefit.

[inaud]

SERENA:… is known for that, yeah, absolutely.

PAUL: I've got a permanently knackered back and I know that if it gets manipulated for an hour or two I feel great I… I felt there was a preying on vulnerable people, the emotional side of stuff, the woman who, who had spent ten thousand pounds on stuff, I actually felt for her because I think she was very real, I don't think she was kind of attention seeking, I think there was a real issue there.

KEITH: Well, she was clearly depressed.

PAUL: Well, there was a clear depression thing going on, I would support you on that but actually I think you know the fact that she was significantly overweight wouldn't help her back in all honesty, and the fact that she was taught to look at her posture, that made complete sense. We all slouch sometimes, I know I certainly do, and your back can really start to ache. If you start to sit up straight and align your spine you can start to feel a bit better, so I think for me there was no real evidence at all anywhere throughout that entire documentary that gave him any credibility at all.

SERENA: No.

PAUL: There wasn't anything. Not one shred. Lots to discredit him.

[All: Mmm]

SERENA: I'm not sure, there's not really anything. Science doesn't lend itself to… and I've had plenty of, technically I suppose it's still, technically [had back problems]… but I didn't spend that much money because I didn't have it but as you know as you're getting better you have to wait for that recovery, but there's still that bit of you that wants to explore any, once the doctors give up you don't want to give up on it so you do start trying all these different things and things like the power of touch, I mean I've tried absolutely everything from aloe vera, I'm a bit ashamed at some of the things I've tried to erm, oh my God, umm, acupuncture. Didn't actually work. Well it did work for increased energy levels. All kinds of weird and wonderful things right down to hypnosis and I don't mean just hypnotherapy, so past life regression and [inaud] as well, which, my brain got nowhere, stuck, in the life it was, it wasn't happening.

KEITH: So no-one famous then?

[All laugh]

SERENA: I haven't been anybody.

PAUL: She was Abraham!

SERENA: I've never been anyone else before, I got stuck in my teenage years, it's quite helpful to do like a weird form of therapy but it didn't help with the pain, oddly enough, but I lost weight afterwards (all laugh) but all these sort of bizarre things but

that girl they had saying at the beginning about having a degree in psychology and yet opening your mind up to those things, I've got one of those and I wouldn't day that it opened my, if anything it shuts everything down.

KEITH: Well you see things for what they are, don't you? I mean I had experiences in the spiritualist church as a teenager and so [**SERENA**: Right] when you realise that there's no-one actually telling you, you're just cold reading people.

SERENA: I know, I'm with you.

KEITH: But no-one's done it for him. No-one's said you're just massaging people and giving them a bit of bedside manner.

SERENA: Yeah.

PAUL: Because they've got difficulty disproving what he's saying [**KEITH**: Mmm]. We all know that it's a load of cods but actually prove that it's a load of cods, that's the difficulty because I think that's where he's allowed to get away with exploiting vulnerable people because nobody can actually prove that he's talking cods. I think that's part of the difficulty.

SERENA: Well, it's like he said I mean I can I can that's where I sort of like split, because part of me thinks that I'm sure there are more things on heaven and earth blah blah blah blah blah, I just wouldn't pay twenty quid to find them! [All laugh] You know. Or if I do I just think well OK this is my equivalent of I don't know, going to…

PAUL: Massage or something.

SERENA: Yeah that kind of … you know sometimes you would… you know by opening yourself up to that stuff you do sometimes close yourself down to other stuff so you have to be you have to have that sense of balance I guess, but yeah, like you said no-one's shown him the alternative kind of yeah you might have some kind of spirit in your head but like you said there's the cold reading going on and you've got people feeding off each other with the best of intentions, er, and you see what goes on in some of the spiritualist churches, I don't know, it's kind of nice but, but it's just an entertainment, it's just an hour and a half instead of the usual hour. Suspension of disbelief is severely needed, let's be honest!

PAUL: For me it was all gong and no dinner.

SERENA: Yes, I know exactly what you mean.

PAUL: And his mouth wrote cheques which his arse couldn't cash.

SERENA: And he'd got cos he's so used to that kind of environment cos they egg each other on terribly.

PAUL: He'll not give it up.

SERENA: No.

PAUL: Until he's probably running out of business and running out of clients. But if he's turning over two grand a week and got a successful business in London he's not gonna give that up.

SERENA: To be fair, your average twenty year old fundamentalist is hooked, but like you say, it's got the money on top of that so… [intake of breath through teeth].

PAUL: But it's giving him that on top of… it's giving him an identity, it's bringing him utility so it's gonna keep on doing it. Feeding was a word I think you mentioned earlier, it's a key thing so… I've seen, I've seen programmes that have been more biased, it wasn't as biased as I first expected but it was, it was…

SERENA: It was very lightweight though, wasn't it?

KEITH: It wasn't as lightweight as I expected from the title [**PAUL** laughs]. I was expecting something really hippy and…

SERENA: I was expecting something, to be honest, more far easy to laugh at if I'm honest [**KEITH**: Mmm] like Yvette Fielding or one of those *Most Haunted* people watch this every week.

PAUL: You need Louis Theroux to do…

SERENA: Oh yes.

PAUL: It would have been great.

SERENA: Yes.

SERENA: After watching that I felt a bit embarrassed… my mum died and you'd go plodding along to the medium and you kind of like

PAUL: There's a morbid fascination about it

SERENA: Yeah yeah but it is kind of nice… that sense of energy with a group of people just being together and this time she wanted with my sister not being well she wanted to go and I was thinking oh god this is getting a bit raucous… and when someone's a bit vulnerable like that you wanna watch it so she said will you go with me and I was right

OK so I'd just come out of hospital and she said you go first so I sat down and there was this guy and oh my God it was just like you're gonna meet someone at work [inaud, mentions working with 20 year olds] I work on the telephones so sort of like they're all youngsters. You're gonna meet this person and by the end of the year you'll be settled down with them with a baby. It'll be dead easy, you'll just flip it over the shoulder and you'll be right back… and I was just sort of sat there thinking 'right I've just had a hysterectomy'… I didn't say this to him [**PAUL:** I would have] and I looked at him and said, oh, I thought I would be a bit past it. I thought give him enough, feed him something and see what he comes out with, thought I'd be… and you could see him trying to work out roughly how old I was [all laugh]. And I said 'no that's very charming and some people say I look younger than I am but at 38 now I can guarantee that unless they've done something in there that they were lying about, it ain't gonna happen' and I just like, I just came out with my sister without too much information and she wasn't very happy and I was just able to use that to discredit the silly bugger, but erm it rankled. I just said to her 'never again, I'll just read your cards, I'll get more from that', but yeah that was just I could have punched him at the time because it wasn't an operation I particularly wanted.

RAD: I think in any of these things if you're talking about something as emotive as marriage or children or family you have to be so careful.

[**SERENA** talks about not putting hands on table at another one to foil a cold reader seeing if she was married. **PAUL** recounts an encounter with a woman once telling him the nationality of his father (Irish Canadian) – 'bizarre']

Around the World in 80 Faiths

PAUL: I did actually wanna watch one of these but I missed it.

PAUL: Pause a second, you know that outfit there, the ones with the green…

KEITH: The rubbing ones?

PAUL: Did you go on the camping meet?

RAD: To the cave?

PAUL: Do you remember? Exactly the same.

RAD: It might be, the African one…

PAUL: [Recounts story of African choral people encountered in cave] It was incredibly bizarre, really atmospheric, you had to be there, didn't you Ruth? It was really stunning and it almost made me cry and I wanted to get closer but you didn't want to get really close because you didn't want to invade their space.

RAD: Yes.

PAUL: And also you weren't quite sure if they'd put you on the fire and beat you up with a stick but it was it was, yeah, I'm sure the outfits were absolutely the same.

RAD: Might be from their country that they're from or the same church denomination.

PAUL: Did anyone find out what they were doing?

RAD: Someone from the other group said they were Christians of some kind and they were doing like a fasting thing or something. I don't know if they'd come over just for that or lived here, I don't know.

[Peter Owen-Jones mentions vicar risking his life]

SERENA: Must be the snakes one… and it is.

PAUL: She IS psychic! Pay your mortgage off? You could set up together, I could be your agent.

[POJ explains man been a serpent handler for 40 years]

KEITH: Oh blimey.

SERENA: When they started [inaud] thought it was a bit extreme…

[Laughter at POJ's VO that serpent handling is legal in one state… and this isn't it]

PAUL: Yeah, that just about sums it up - unclear what? A face? Oh my God! [inaud] bunsen burner!

[Snake handler: In the name of Jesus Christ. POJ: I don't think I'd do it in any other name! All laugh]

PAUL: Excellent. Wasn't he [the man on the film] behind the iron bars in *Silence of the Lambs?*

[Child sings]

PAUL: [Britain's?] got talent! [laughter]

[SERENA makes some comparisons with Billy Graham]

PAUL: [He's] incredibly charismatic

[on prostate healing]

SERENA: Did he say prostrate? [laughter]

[Laughter at choice of Jingle Bells in spiritualist meeting]

PAUL: Jeremy Kyle!

[Some laughter at spiritualist session]

LAURA: I hope there's more to the afterlife than flinging tables around!

[All laugh at POJ saying flipping tables around was mad]

SERENA: It didn't prove anything, having established what, it's 160 years ago or something, do you need to keep on pulling it?

[Medium: he's happy he's very happy]

PAUL: He's dead!

[Lodge ritual]

PAUL: Oh gosh you have to share it as well. Wow not good.

PAUL: Is this the polygamists? It still happens doesn't it?

SERENA: Oh yeah.

PAUL: I was having an argument with [name] who says it doesn't and she said she'd give me a thousand quid if I could prove it did.

[Conversation about prosecuting polygamists in UK]

PAUL: I think Louis Theroux did something… that was really interesting.

[Muffled discussion about US drama *Big Love*]

[Jesus appearing to Joseph Smith]

SERENA: Well that makes more sense than the usual him travelling the world before

he died.

[People see Mormons as sex crazed, inaudible response denying this]

PAUL: Too knackered!

[On same sex marriages being outlawed]

SERENA: Yes that's awful isn't it?

[All: Mmm]

[inaud comments and laughter about pyramid]

PAUL: There's super smash robots inside!

[POJ: No I'm opposed to drinking nectar that has no alcohol in - lots of laughter]

[Howls of laughter at discussion of Egyptians and mummified cats]

LAURA: What if he's still alive? Look at the disgruntled expression on that cat's face!

Wonder what it died from.

[laughing at POJ saying it was interesting]

LAURA: Oh God, that was just [laughs].

SERENA: Oh, it's [the last faith] not science!

RAD: Well I suppose that's [science] not really a faith, although some people believe in it.

Programme ends.

PAUL: I enjoyed that. It was more informative for me, there was less, a lot less bias, more informative, I liked the humour that he interjected it with, made it more viewable.

SERENA: It was personal, rather than biased, wasn't it?

PAUL: Yeah, yeah.

SERENA: Yeah.

PAUL: But it was, the actual there was loads and loads of facts, loads of information which was really presented in a nice way. [**SERENA**: yes] It allowed you to make your own mind up about stuff.

SERENA: His liberalism definitely comes through in how he presented that, which I thought the other thing, despite science not being a religion was definitely that persepctive. I'm not sure how you would do it without an open mind, given the subject but it was erm it [*GYPP*] closed everything down whereas this he, I don't know, he asked more questions than he answered, didn't he?

PAUL: And there was a question mark over the stuff at the end of each section, again allowing you to make your own mind up, whereas the other guy in the other documentary was…

KEITH: Well he did make his own views very clear with the nods to camera about the spiritualists and the [**SERENA**: yeah] wise earthy Navaho and stuff, its… it was a bit easy for me, where were the hard targets like the scientologists?

RAD: Presumably they wouldn't allow them after their last experience with the BBC.

KEITH: Yeah.

[**RAD** explains *Panorama*]

SERENA: Vaguely rings a bell now. The law wasn't involved was it?

RAD: I can't remember but I do know that the scientologists weren't exactly happy so I'm guessing they…

RAD: Did you, was there anything unexpected that you didn't expect in that?

SERENA: In terms of religion, or the way he presented it?

RAD: Either, anything.

SERENA: The last stuff, I must admit I'd come across most stuff in there but the last thing [Burning Man] I hadn't, erm.

LAURA: I did think initially the Burning Man thing was his excuse to get the BBC to pay for him to go to Burning Man festival! [Laughter] But the bit at the very end justified it I think, you know with the burning down the thing. I thought, you just, that's licence fee payer money!

PAUL: As a bit of an aside, I mean I'm not a religious person, I'm more of an anti-religious person but if I was going to be drawn to anything, in the last five or ten

minutes, the Burning Man thing was, most religions seem to me to be very exclusive, and here was a religion that kind of welcomed difference, welcomed you. I mean as a gay man with a Hindu partner, I'm kind of cast aside in many ways anyway but this was a religion that kind of included everyone and that was kind of refreshing to see, it was nice I always have a perception that religion is very exclusive always.

SERENA: See that's where I get, it's the fundamentalist religion that's very exclusive. I think Hinduism's quite an open faith [PAUL yeah] if you've got, it's just a general wave across at the moment, I guess we see that in Islam of course or perhaps in people's attitudes towards it a bit more but yeah I…

PAUL: Mmm.

RAD: Did it confirm or challenge any of your already existing perceptions about America or religion in America?

PAUL: For me no. I've always believed that again, the constitution is that anyone can believe what they want to believe and actually I think that's fantastic. I'm an atheist but I think that's fantastic. Who should dictate to anybody else what you should believe in? The fact that there's fourteen billion religions knocking about, great. I you know, it's not for me to dictate to others so I kind of liked that aspect.

SERENA: It's been a while since I've read anything around it but yeah I come from a I suppose I come from a CofE sort of background with various other Christian denominations, but I certainly, yeah, to be pretty honest this sort of pretty much aside from the last part of what I came to associate with the Bible Belt.

PAUL: The tongue-in-cheek humour was good, you know, I liked that and I think sometimes you get a difficult situation or something that's difficult to manage and by interjecting humour you can kind of lift it a little bit and yeah I liked that, it was nice, he's got a good sense of humour. I think it's needed sometimes, so yeah, that was also good. Generally the tone was much higher. It was yeah, it made you think more. The last documentary, they were completely different and you know they were obviously screened by different people as well but the motives were different.

SERENA: Well he's a religious minister to start off with isn't he, so I suppose he was coming at it from a spiritual...

RAD: Do you think that makes a difference having somebody that is religious themselves as to the other narrator who never laid his credentials on the table, you didn't know what if anything he…

PAUL: We didn't know who he was or where he was from. I think it was nice that this guy had got his own kind of way of doing stuff and was able to step back to try and look at other ways and I think that was really nice. It wasn't biased, it didn't feel biased at all and that was quite refreshing because you'd expect somebody to be kind of a little bit, erm, judgemental. He wasn't, I liked that.

SERENA: But you knew, he's a Reverend, isn't he so you, you hope you get an idea of where he's generally coming from whereas the other guy, by the end I think you get an idea of where he's coming from or where his producer, director or whatever is coming from but [sigh]. To be fair there was a lot more covered.

PAUL: Yeah.

RAD: Same length of time, though.

SERENA: Really?

PAUL: But how much more did they, got squeezed into that, I mean there was a lot more.

SERENA: To be honest that really felt much longer and a lot more meaty than the other programme.

LAURA: It was a lot more personal that one, wasn't it? And uh…

KEITH: Yeah, you knew him better by the end [all: yeah] than the other guy.

RAD: Do you think that its, programmes about belief and whatever, do you think having a personal dimension adds to that, do you think it's important?

SERENA: Well belief and faith is all centred around that so yeah I'd say it's essential really.

LAURA: Cos otherwise how do you know? I mean the other guy, we knew nothing about him but he was quite he felt a little bit sneering towards, especially towards the end, like he was properly distancing himself whereas with this guy we knew that he believed in God, the way that he believed in God, the sort of church he belonged to, which sort of, I felt like I got to know him through the programme whereas the other guy couldn't tell you anything about him.

PAUL: Couldn't pick him out in a line-up.

LAURA: No.

SERENA: Yeah.

LAURA: And that's, his programme was like that, you couldn't pick that out it's the sort of bland stuff you turn off after five minutes.

KEITH: Well, it's a BBC Three documentary, isn't it?

LAURA: You wouldn't bother with it.

KEITH: You don't watch *Kizzy, Mum at 14* do you? [laughter]

RAD: Were either of the programmes, either in terms of style or in terms of format of the documentary, are either of them the kinds of things you would normally watch?

KEITH: I initially wanted to watch *80 Faiths* but his sort of friendly, no-tie vicar sort of thing really did put me off initially. He wasn't actually as bad to sit through as I thought he might be.

LAURA: He's a bit Hugh-Fearnley Whittingstall, isn't he?

KEITH: Yeah.

SERENA: Were you expecting somebody more fundamentalist and more?

KEITH: A bit more limbless, CofE, rubbish, you know.

SERENA: I do know exactly what you mean, yeah, I do.

KEITH: Vicars playing guitar, that sort of thing.

SERENA: Yeah but that sort of goes with the [inaud] your average sort of mainstream CofE these days it seems to me is more fundamentalist anyway, where I was watching to see if he, with that gay wedding I was thinking I will definitely see…

KEITH: Which way is he gonna jump?

SERENA: Yeah, yeah we are gonna, because when he was smiling I was sort of wasn't sure if I'm reading that right, I wasn't sure if he's uncomfortable with what's going on here but yeah, I, it's the sort of thing I wish I had watched it now. I mean I'd read about it.

RAD: I'm sure they will repeat it again[1].

SERENA: Yeah.

PAUL: My being an atheist takes it, kind of takes a strong programme to draw me in and when I saw them advertised, erm, I don't know which particular one it was and I thought, yeah must watch that. I didn't because something obviously came up, but for me as an atheist to watch anything remotely involving religion it has to have kind of an angle so yeah, it was something I would have liked to have watched, and I enjoyed it, whereas the last one was kind of yeah we all know where that's going but this one I went into them both really with a completely open mind but this one took me along many different roads whereas the last one was kind of one [inaud] road. But yeah I liked it, I enjoyed it very much.

RAD: In terms of how television presents the religious, the spiritual, what do you think television's role is, whether it's the BBC, or ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, or maybe the

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[1] They didn't.

specialist channels, what do you think the roles are of television to present religion and spirituality, how do you think it should do it, what do you think it should show?

SERENA: It should be representative of the society you're reflecting. I mean BBC gets criticised a lot for this, doesn't it, you get, some of them are so dire as well, what's it called on Radio 4 in the mornings?

RAD: *Thought for the Day*?

PAUL: *Thought for the Day.*

SERENA: Thank you yes, and some of them are, well who is this representing, exactly? I dunno and then your sort of guitar-playing no-tie vicar but erm whereas there I guess the programmes are sort of defending themselves about the kind of spread they do. Christianity gets an awful lot of, they usually get slapped around the place for not doing enough *Songs of Praise*-y type stuff but I guess they do all in some respects, should be, we should get something that's reflective of the society that we're in. Whether or not that would go down well with…

RAD: So what kinds of programming, services and ceremonies or a travelogue like this or a variety?

PAUL: A variety, because we live in a world of variety, in just you know, an hour, well I won't include the last one because it didn't take me into another world, well it did but [all laugh] erm, but seeing things in other countries, things we don't get to see and I think it's a duty and responsibility of programme makers to say right here's an accurate reflection of what goes on in this particular part of the world. Here's how it is, then make your own mind up if you think you know you wanna see more or research more.

I don't like it when things are so biased because they will then show only footage that meets what they set out to do and, that's kind of not fair. You know this guy presented stuff in a way that's kind of, I liked, I'll go home now, look at Burning Man stuff on the internet [**KEITH** right] I might find.

RAD: [My friend] went to Burning Man.

PAUL: Really? Cool.

SERENA: I think it kind of depends because that kind of thing as you say is informative, it opens things up, um, for people generally, but if you're talking about showing worship and ceremonies like songs of praise that kind of thing then I would say I mean th's not so informative I don't think, it's there for people who already believe and can't get out.

KEITH: It's the chance to be in a choir isn't it?

PAUL: Yeah, they're converted.

SERENA: Yeah, its, I suppose it, *Songs of Praise* is trying to convert [inaud] but it's the people that can't…

PAUL: It's a celebration I guess, I mean the people that are in there.

SERENA: Comforting I guess, I mean your average person who is part of the church but can't get to church, rather than get a recording of the sermon, but that gives more of a sense of congregation than perhaps you normally would do, I don't know.

PAUL: But something like that if I switched on and it was on I'd have, eugh, I'd switch channels in a second, but something like this I'd sit and watch because it's interesting, because it's another part of the world and I get excited by watching things like that.

SERENA: Because that's informative [**PAUL**: yeah] On *Songs of Praise*…

PAUL: You don't want some old dear singing Come all Ye whatever it is I dunno, I don't do hymns.

LAURA: Yeah but…

PAUL: That doesn't excite, it doesn't stimulate.

[Inaudible as they all talk over each other]

PAUL: I tell you the one thing on that, the gospel thing, I can't, God, give me Whoopi Godlberg, when she did *Sister Act*, 'I Will Follow Him' and the sense of community, I know that was religious based but it was fantastic, I thought it was energetic but you lack a…[inaud]… I got forced to go to Sunday School as a child and I think it kind of scarred me, it was horrible.

SERENA: It would. I used to take myself along, I know, I was a strange child.

PAUL: It was vile. I used to go round the back eventually and smoke. I like being a rebel, but it was boring, and again these documentaries give you an opportunity to witness how other people do it and you know we're very privileged you know, fifty years ago we wouldn't have had this, even less.

RAD: Thinking about the media in general… are there presentations of religion or spirituality in there that have challenged you either because you thought that's

interesting, or you thought I really don't like that, or you've thought I've never seen that before?

[Pause]

SERENA: I was listening to something on Radio 4 recently that had, erm challenging what it was challenging the perception I guess in some ways, I can't think what it was now, it was, I say religion, maybe it wasn't as specific, I was guessing Hindu stroke Islam but it was the abuse of women in this country coming over from India and this kind of cloak of but it was a cultural thing.

KEITH: Yeah, that was *Woman's Hour*, I heard it.

SERENA: In that case, yeah, and that kind of, even though I felt I should have known it, it did challenge the idea that it was actually coming from within as opposed to something that we were imposing, so from that perspective, yes but I think I might have seen something else recently.

RAD: Or has there been anything that has just stood out?

SERENA: You mean in things like soaps?

RAD: Anything.

SERENA: Well they're really going for it in *EastEnders* at the moment aren't they with the whole gay Muslim storyline?

PAUL: Oh, that one again [laughs]

SERENA: I think it's really...

PAUL: Is it?

SERENA: The Muslim one is I think they're really going for it.

PAUL: Yeah yeah good point.

PAUL: I watch *Emmerdale* because I'm kind of an *Emmerdale* freak and Ashley's been kind of questioning his old belief systems and his value base after his little son died and it got swapped round and that was quite interesting because it opened up the whole what are my beliefs based on kind of thing erm he's gone back to it now with [inaud] lovely but erm yeah, I thought that was quite good.

SERENA: Cos I think it's kind of a misconception that faith is supposed to be there as a sort of teddy bear, supposed to paper over the cracks. Faith is supposed to be there to challenge you, not to make you feel better, it's there to sort of make it more real, so yeah I did see some of that storyline and I agree with you there.

LAURA: I went on the BBC website remember on Easter Sunday what was it about, about Ken in *Coronation Street*, which I don't watch but I read about it on the BBC.

KEITH: Oh, I had to watch it, my mum watches it.

LAURA: He said something about religion's made up so you can feel better cos like he made an atheist comment [**KEITH:** On Easter Sunday] so there was a storm of protest about, that, people tutted or something. It got quite high up on the BBC website that Christians were annoyed that he'd made anti-God sentiment on Easter Sunday.

SERENA: That is quite amusing that cos the bloke himself isn't at all which is kind of, he the guy who plays him, you'd think he's sort of.

LAURA: Well he looks like a vicar doesn't he?

SERENA: He had a small daughter that died, about two or three and he talks about sort of visions and stuff like that to do with which is really weird for someone who's sort of like best mates with Jeffrey Archer it doesn't really equate.

KEITH: Ken Barlow and his visions!

[All laugh]

SERENA: But I suppose the character is one that's supposed to be Mr Educated and therefore is an atheist…

PAUL: The thing is, religion [is] so incredibly different for everybody, it's whatever it is for you. Why do we try to box it? We're obsessed with boxes, from a sociological perspective. It's an individual thing and you take from it whatever suits you and whatever works for you, you don't have to try to live everything by the letter and that's just…

SERENA: Fundamentalists would hate you.

PAUL: But I've got too many examples where it kind of gets proven.

SERENA: But it is that sort of fundamentalist attitude.

PAUL: But I've met really unhappy people that live it by the letter and you think, God, balance!

SERENA: Might be a guilt thing going on.

PAUL: Yeah, yeah. A Catholic thing?

SERENA: To be fair, I associate it with most of Christianity, not just Catholicism.

RAD: I don't think it's exclusive to Christianity either.

SERENA: Probably not, yeah.

PAUL: I think the Jews are quite good at it yeah.

RAD: The Muslims have got a fair line on it too.

[All laugh]

SERENA: I guess it's part of the human condition in that case but it just seems, yeah.

PAUL: Probably the most extreme, or one that sticks in my mind is a 52 year old mate of mine who's never had sex with anybody. He's gay and he's never had sex with anybody because his religion would condemn it and he's spent his entire life in torment. I've known him twenty years and he identifies as being gay but he can't proceed with anything because he'll be, in his mind, kind of cast aside and you just think wow, this guy's wasted his entire life. He struggles massively with it, the conflict is huge and you just kind of think…

SERENA: Yes there is something frightening about something that makes you deny yourself that much.

PAUL: Yeah.

SERENA: Then you get people, I mean you get these people, does it come under religion, Christianity? I'm pretty sure it does that think they can cure [homosexuality]… I saw a programme about it.

RAD: There are streams in America.

PAUL: Westboro Baptist Church?

RAD: Westboro Baptist Church are a law unto themselves aren't they?

KEITH: Yeah.

PAUL: They're off their trolley. Did you watch that documentary on that?

RAD: Which did you watch, the Keith Allen or the Louis Theroux?

PAUL: Keith Allen, who really gave them a run for their money. [SERENA asks about them] Westboro Baptist Church is, uh, Google it, YouTube, really.

SERENA: Right.

PAUL: God hates fags. Erm, absolute. Sending kids out with boards. They were coming to the UK but they've been banned han't they? Not been allowed in.

SERENA: So specifically hinged around the idea of homosexuality?

RAD: Well it's a very small, it's about 20, 30 people isn't it?

PAUL: Yeah, and they all live on a little commune.

KEITH: Can we call it a cult?

LAURA: It might be the ones, was it Louis Theroux?

RAD: Louis Theroux and Keith Allen, they both did one with them.

LAURA: Well there was one where they gave them a specific date where they were going to get took up to heaven and the date passed and they went back and they could see them all standing there but they wouldn't let them back in.

RAD: That's *The End of the World Cult* which is another…

SERENA: Jehovah's Witnesses had that didn't they? They kept moving the date and then it didn't work. They had to stop it in the end but yeah that's…

LAURA: Stop themselves looking silly.

SERENA: Well they just…

LAURA: They look increasingly ludicrous each time it…

RAD: Why do you think people like Gary and the Westboro Baptist Church and the End of the World Cult let the cameras in?

PAUL: Because they passionately believe in what they do and that's absolutely fine, but please don't tell me that I'm wrong for not subscribing to what you believe in. I think they want to ridicule their people because they're so passionate. I like, I dunno, let me think of an example, I like strawberry cheesecake but I don't need to convert everyone else to loving strawberry cheesecake, if they prefer something else.

SERENA: If you were saved through strawberry cheesecake then you might have to.

PAUL: If what?

SERENA: If you were saved through…

PAUL: Oh saved, oh it's saved me a few times, I've got to admit! The strawberry cheesecake Häagen-Dazs, let's not even go there! [lots of laughter]

SERENA: I think this is this idea isn't there, that God is some sort of quiz show host, going Uh-uh, you've got the wrong answer, you're not coming in, you know, there is that kind of…

PAUL: Exclusivity, yeah. Again, it's just acceptance of difference and I do wanna convert people on some of my beliefs cos I'm passionate about them, but you have to learn to draw a line and these extremist people really want to get more memberships because perhaps it justifies what they do, perhaps it gives them validity, perhaps it gives them utility, perhaps it makes them, perhaps it reassures them around some of their own issues about disbelieving what it is they believe in if that makes any sense at all. Maybe it just reassures.

SERENA: The one that struck me was the Mormons there and everyone else was trying to convert while they were alive and bless them I can remember my mum's friend, her parents were Mormon and my grandfather was a, well he was a Baptist minister but not in the vein that you're talking about, he was actually.

RAD: What, a British Baptist minister, or?

SERENA: Not even what you would get now, he was more, to be honest, to be honest you'd probably see it more aligned with CofE, we're talking pre-war, but he was started working pre-second world war but he, after he died, my mum's best friend's father sort of said, that's why they have all that stuff there, you can go back and research your family tree there can't you, cos they go back over generations, they convert everybody, they just do it posthumously. Can you imagine my mum's face at the

thought of, just yes, so they really are making sure that they've got everybody on side!

[Laughs]

PAUL: Safety in numbers, that's, I think you hit the nail on the head, but if you believe in something passionately, it doesn't… I don't really care what anybody else really believes in something or not, If I believe it that's what matters and [sigh].

SERENA: We could all believe the world is cuboid but it ain't gonna turn cuboid is it?

PAUL: Yeah!

SERENA: That bit seems to escape…

PAUL: Well beliefs are personal as well aren't they? They're not, I don't want everyone believing the same things as I believe, that's what makes me me.

KEITH: If everyone did as they were told then…

PAUL: Yeah. I think some people are a bit bored too and I'm going to be borderline a bit offensive here but the more extreme religious people, I think they need to go out and get a life sometimes, get a real life and kind of not centre it around something that… this is me as an atheist coming out, I can't help it but I just kind of thing people need, the more extreme guys and I'm thinking now of the really extreme guys need to get out and live real life rather than focus around church and God and religion. It's about family, it's about love, it's about friendship, it's about having fun, it's about lots of other things, not to the exclusivity of everything to have religion, it seems a bit sad.

SERENA: But it's a good way of helping the vulnerable isn't it, again, that papering over the cracks. I do consider myself to be spiritual and I guess more drawn to religion than most people in this room but I say that it's, I've seen it so many times that it doesn't really matter which religion it is, that I would say personally that it's almost the fundamentalist aspect of that that it's, they want to reach out and it's the vulnerable people that that need that and it's almost kind of like that, it's a bit like being co-dependent, you've got an alcoholic, a co-dependent and…

PAUL: Exactly, mutual co-dependece that kind of sums it up. I'm not talking about people who believe it, Serena, I don't want you to get me wrong.

SERENA: No, I understand that.

PAUL: Good. I'm talking about the people who live their lives totally there… yeah, they can be extremists, I think 'get out more, do things'!

SERENA: Open your mind.

PAUL: But it's not the people who believe, I don't want to go into detail but there's two Christians I've been communicating with over the last two or three weeks, both have got similar situations going on. Person A, dealing with it very well. Person B, 'But I'm a Christian so I've got to support this person'. Person A is absolutely fine with stuff, Person B is in bits, and I'm thinking hang on, there has to be a way, there has to be a limit, there has to be a boundary. The whole religion thing is clouding their judgement, it's becoming dangerous.

SERENA: Person B wants to become a saint. I would say that's co-dependency, not religion.

PAUL: I completely agree but they're using the thing of religion… ugh.

RAD: Get Person A to talk to Person B.

PAUL: I wish I could put them in the same room because Person A would whoop Person B's butt because Person A is incredible. This person just gets on with it, she believes her beliefs for her, very privately, very personal, fantastic.

SERENA: And [she?] also needs to say, that's the one thing.

PAUL: That's utility innit? So, I just see religion as being kind of at the root of an awful lot of stuff and creating further issues, but I say that as an atheist [laughs].

SERENA: I suspect there's plenty of atheists who have plenty of issues! It's a good vehicle to put it on but I suspect yeah.

PAUL: I don't really need to do this but I feel comfortable [discusses a difficult experience as a child]. As an adult, the whole religion thing for me, I have to work really hard not to question it because for me that wasn't about being good, it was about being contradictory, it was about control, it was about all sorts of other issues, but that's where I kind of, where my atheist thing came from.

SERENA: That's got to be healthy that you feel that way about it.

PAUL: Yeah. I'm passionately atheist yeah, and I have tried years ago to say you know what's this atheist thing about, am I really an atheist or and I am, I absolutely am, but I've got a reason for it and I've made my mind up over many years of crap, bad things happen to all of us of course they do, but we question them and I've not been able to come up with enough reason to convince myself that I'm not an Atheist. At least I'm

passionate about my belief, so many people throw the term Atheism around when they're not even sure what it means.

SERENA: So many people use it when they mean Agnostic.

PAUL: Yeah, I think I'd agree with that, I think I'd agree. So again, I'd go back to the point that for me to sit and watch a programme about religion, deep down, initially I kind of wanna go [makes a noise] but I don't, I sit and watch, because I've made my mind up, I'm comfortable with my belief about religion, I can therefore open my mind a little bit…. Yeah, the last five minutes [of *ATW80*], I could have gone there. There was this church, the most unusual looking church I've ever seen, I was, wow, if I could put up with the heat I would go [laughs].

SERENA: I've also tried the sweat lodge thing and those things always scared the hell out of me. I think what he was saying after that…

PAUL: The sickness thing got me, the heat.

SERENA: Well, before we went in I was, he looked so amazed by it and…

PAUL: If you've ever sat in a sauna for fifteen minutes and then come out.

SERENA: I know but I've never actually sat in .

PAUL: Have you not? Have you ever done it?

KEITH: No.

PAUL: It's bizarre, it's like the change in temperature makes you quite high. So when he says I feel on a whole different level, I kind of could relate to that, but the sickness

thing, ooh, and you're cleansed? No, you're just a pound lighter [all laugh] but erm I go back, it's what every individual believes in, that's cool.

RAD: Do any of you subscribe to the view that what you believe is fine and it's down to the individual, does everybody share that perspective?

SERENA: Well it depends on if there's harm to other people, doesn't it?

PAUL: Does it? Tell us more about that.

SERENA: Well you get your fundamentalists, like they were saying about California, I found that very upsetting. I guess it hinges on the problem with a great deal of fundamentalists whatever sort of faith it is because it does end up impinging on other people and that's where I had my hangups because, it's possibly unfair and probably biased but that's where I have my problems.

PAUL: But that's based on considering other people's feelings so that's kind of alright.

[Laughter]

LAURA: An abortion doctor's been shot in America.

KEITH: That's the last religion in the media thing I can think of, coverage of that, just, shot in a church.

SERENA: It's terrible.

LAURA: We believe in the sanctity of life - except yours – BANG!

[Laughter]

LAURA: It's ironic though, isn't it? And a bit… depressing.

KEITH: Yeah.

SERENA: You can't actually have everybody believing what they want to believe

because otherwise…

KEITH: Because some people would believe in shooting other people.

PAUL: Mmm. That goes back to the extremism, doesn't it, I guess?

Online focus group #1. Programme: *Revelations*: 'Muslim School'. **Participants:**
Conga, Woof, Alk, Eurodesign

CONGA: Maybe wait a minute for people to remember

CONGA: while I put some eggs on to boil for tea!….

RAD: Evening Mutt

RAD: Will give it two or three mins to see who turns up and then we'll get going

WOOF: Hi **RAD**

…

RAD: Glad you came

RAD: Hope I won't have to keep @replying people for the next six episodes

RAD: But this is the first week I've done this and only set it up at the weekend

CONGA: Is @replying a twitter thing?

WOOF: Oh, it's a series? I thought it was a once-off.

RAD: conga - ys, sorry

RAD: Mutt - a series of eight one-off docs

RAD: last week was the first one

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WOOF: hehe, figures

RAD: So why were you watching tonight?

CONGA: I watched because I like documentaries and think Islam is widely

misunderstood. I'd like to learn more about it

WOOF: I've explored a number of religions, quite in depth (and have blogged about it),

and I just wanted to see if this episode showed anything unexpected. I'm a bit cynical

about TV documentaries, I'm afraid.

RAD: Woof - me too (fairly obviously)

RAD: So what were your overall impressions

RAD: ?

CONGA: I love them. You get to learn things from a vastly skewed point of view!

WOOF: It's not the documentaries that are a bad thing. It's normally the execution.

RAD: I have a love/hate relationship with them

RAD: evening euro

EURODESIGN: hello RAD

RAD: We're just getting started about why people watched the programme tonight

EURODESIGN: are you the phd person ?

CONGA: I didnt feel like I learned a lot about it. Although it was good to hear some

quotes from the koran and points of view of mostly women. Its a male dominated

religion (from what i've seen) so good to focus on the girls

RAD: Yes I am, sorry, should have said

EURODESIGN: ok

WOOF: Normally I wouldn't favour following young kids around and asking for their

insights or opinions on things like religion, as they're really vessels being filled by those

around them. Mirrors of their parents and teachers. At least until a certain point.

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EURODESIGN: I didnt see it

WOOF: euro: It's on Ch4+1 now if you're in the UK.

RAD: Mutt: do you think there would be a better way of doing a programme about faith schools?

ALK: Evening...

RAD: Evening alk

RAD: I'm Ruth (the one doing the PhD)

ALK: Ahhh...

ALK: Watching that Revelations programe live (C4+1)

EURODESIGN: why do you call yourself RAD ?

RAD: It's my initials, no great mystery

WOOF: RAD: I'm not sure, particularly because it is faith/religion we're talking about. Young children are parrots of their parents/teachers and adults are normally dogmatic adherents. It's difficult.

EURODESIGN: ok

CONGA: I thought the kids in the programme werent very much like that though

CONGA: The white girl chose the religion herself and although its not like its an easy ride, she is kept inside and has to study a lot, it was her choice

ALK: Stlll concerns me...

CONGA: the other girl was a bit more forced and took it all a bit more seriously but her mother seemed very open, explaining that religion is more about whats on the inside

WOOF: I was pleased with the 7yo girl (the one near the end chatting with her mum about wearing hijab), as she did exercise critical thinking. It's encouraging.

RAD: Do you think there should have been more 'voices' in the doc? (eg teachers, parents, other kids, etc?)

ALK: (I'll see that in 50 mins)

CONGA: i do know what you mean though, religious children of any sort are a bit worrying

ALK: OK - I'll lay my cards on the table - active Baptist Christian..

RAD: I thought it was interesting watching it after seeing things like Deborah 13 and Baby Bible Bashers if any of you saw those

EURODESIGN: whats your main degree in RAD ?

WOOF: RAD: As in providing more perspective, or as in making it more engaging?

ALK: ... but when you have kids claiming that they have no allegiance ot where they are living...

RAD: Mutt - maybe both

RAD: euro - media/sociology

ALK: Yeah - most Chirstians would class the parents of the Baby Bible Bashers as complete wingnuts...

CONGA: yes, more voices would have made it a bit deeper. I might have gained a bit more by hearing from the absent father perhaps

EURODESIGN: right

WOOF: RAD: Personally, I like the "follow the life of person X" approach as it lets you see more. But there is a risk that the perspective is limited.

CONGA: I liked the older sister perspective. Same family, different paths

RAD: What did we make of the presenter?

RAD: (well, journo/narrator)

WOOF: alk: The nature of Islam is allegiance to it first; place of abode second. Though that interpretation varies as much as Christian opinion on prophylaxis.

RAD: Isn't that true of a lot of religions though, for those that are very devout, anyway? That religion comes first

ALK: yeah - still worrying when we have people like CHoudhary being on record was wanting military action against the host country

WOOF: RAD: She seemed to be more a prompter, perhaps relying too much on the children carrying the motion.

ALK: *with

CONGA: but with children you have to prompt them a bit more or they'll ramble on

EURODESIGN: adults too

RAD: Do you think the documentary had a particular agenda?

CONGA: or was that what you meant, that she let them ramble too much?

CONGA: maybe to show the muslim school was just like any other. or maybe better

WOOF: RAD: Actually, no. And that's rare. Normally you can see the agenda of the interviewer/producer/channel from a mile away, but this one seemed to be genuine.

RAD: I kind of felt I'd have liked to understand the school more.

RAD: But I understand that the two girls would make better telly

WOOF: djembe: Yes, I meant that the interviewer wasn't interactive enough. But then there's a risk of leading the interviewee.

WOOF: RAD: Yes, it seemed to leave the practical side of it all -- the school, the circumstances, the environment -- to the viewer, with their own understanding (or lack of).

CONGA: cccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccc

CONGA: sorry, that was the cat

RAD: Yes, I would have liked to understand more about its relationship to mainstream schools and so on than I felt the doc covered, but then I work in education and have many teacher friends so maybe that's why.

WOOF: I liked how the interviewer asked the mother about the "segregation from society" issue, though it's a pity she didn't push for a meaningful response.

CONGA: a lot of the benefits are the same as private schools, smaller class sizes etc

ALK: Agreed..

CONGA: which mother was that? i dont remember that bit

ALK: That kid being asked about why they wear head-coverings scares me./

RAD: Why scares?

ALK: (sorry - Good Little Evangelical coming out there)

WOOF: djembe: The mother of the young girl, discussing the hijab.

WOOF: al: Perhaps it might help to remember that mainstream Christianity required its women to cover their heads in church until relatively recently.

CONGA: you mean that they wear because it will help them get to paradise

CONGA: i think thats a symptom of the male influence on history and religion. they dont want people distracted by the beautiful ladies

ALK: ... which in turn subjugates even further..

RAD: I thought it was interesting that she told the interviewer she was a good person and would go to Paradise and the hijab was only for Muslims - seems very different from the Christian conception. I thought Islam was like Christianity in its 'this is...

RAD: ...the only way' kind of approach, so that surprised me. Was that just the girl's belief, or is that common, anyone know?

CONGA: although at the start of that conversation the interviewer asked if she'd go to paradise and the girl goes 'nooo thats just for us!' but then turned it around to be a bit more open.

RAD: I thought she meant the hijab was just for them

CONGA: yeah hijab just for muslims but you can still be a good person and (maybe) go to paradise if you didn't wear it because she wasnt required

WOOF: RAD: You mean that only Muslimas have to cover their heads, and it's not required of non-Muslims? Technically it's optional/voluntary for all Muslimas, but the hierarchy (patriarchy really) mandates it in more fundamentalist communities.

ALK: A tad different from Jesus dealing with it all - perfect sacrifice and all..

WOOF: RAD: Like fish on Fridays for Christians. It's not mandatory, but...

RAD: Mutt: no, sorry, I meant where she was saying well what conga says

RAD: al - true in terms of a general Christian concept, but many streams of Christianity don't really live according to that principle and live more to rule, ritual and behaviour etc.

CONGA: the hijab is just an extra. jesus died for people to go to christian-paradise so technically you don't HAVE to go to church and have bible study and things but people do to lead a more holy life

CONGA: so all thats extra too

RAD: Did people see any publicity for the programme tonight?

CONGA: I agree, RAD, many people live according to ritual rather than having god in their hearts

CONGA: I saw the aderts on channel 4

WOOF: Though dogma has been subsequently added to Christianity to ensure people still do go to church, behave themselves, etc, despite the belief that Jesus died for everyone's sins.

EURODESIGN: i did

RAD: Do we think the C4 ads were a fair representation of the programme?

RAD: (And did anyone see any other publicity apart from the trailers?)

EURODESIGN: no

CONGA: yeah, mutt, to make you better christians. the hijab helps make you better muslim, not just muslim to start with

WOOF: RAD: No, I had no idea it was on. Stumbled across it.

RAD: Mutt - channel flicking or in a TV guide?

WOOF: djembe: Yes, I think that's a fair analogy of the beliefs.

CONGA: The advert made it look just about the same as it was for real. Not spectacularly interesting but it did get me to watch

WOOF: RAD: I'd just finished watching the Tour de France highlights and saw the show title in the Next/Next list of my channels.

WOOF: Now/Next even

RAD: Did anyone see last week's episode?

ALK: Umm - when the religious police stopped an evac from a building fire because the women weren't wearing a headscarf?

WOOF: Not me, but I have set it to record the series now.

CONGA: i saw last weeks

ALK: (no assurance of salvation... hmmm)

CONGA: (and christians have done the same if not worse)

RAD: conga - how do you think the two weeks compare?

ALK: What's next week's ep?

RAD: Army chaplains next week

CONGA: about the same I think. interesting but not spectacular. last weeks got me a bit more engaged because I've experienced some of the things shown. This weeks was nothing I'd experienced so I couldnt engage as well

ALK: Ramadan - where the local Kebabish cook up a shedload of roti at around 4pm..

WOOF: Should be interesting, considering the cultural and religious diversity in modern armies. Well, most armies.

RAD: What do people think about this idea of a strand of religious docs in general? As in the format, scheduling, branding, style etc? (Hard to say after just two perhaps I know)

CONGA: must be one of the hardest places to be a chaplain. death all around, war and horror.

CONGA: date and time are perfect, sunday evenings

CONGA: sundays are good for religious programmes in an (officially) christian country

CONGA: but they're advertised just like regular channel 4 documentaries to hook a wider audience

WOOF: RAD: Perhaps too early to tell and, with a few exceptions (mentioned above), I like the fact there are no agendas, proselytising, witch hunts, setups, etc. Nice change for British TV documentaries.

CONGA: i agree, the two so far have seemed extremely impartial, no obvious agendas

RAD: Are you planning to watch the rest of them?

CONGA: (unlike Michael Moore for instance, who lies and twists things for his own agenda. He'd met Roger - from Roger and Me- before but pretended he hadn't)

WOOF: I am, yes.

CONGA: yes, I've set series record

WOOF: djembe: Yep. Can't stand Moore for his melodrama, manipulation and selective reporting.

CONGA: Do we know what the rest of the series is about or just the next episode?

RAD: I know there's a programme about an atheist understaker who used to be a believer (Christian I think) but not sure about the rest

CONGA: i thought Moore was brilliant... until I heard the 'truth' behind his methods

RAD: Presumably at least one Jewish and one Hindu programme

CONGA: an athiest undertaker? how unusual. A healthy respect for religion surely is a must

WOOF: The website only speaks about the last 2 and next week's:

http://www.channel4.com/programmes/revelations/episode-guide

ALK: As an aside, did people here catch Chris Moyles' comments on the Pentecost service aired? as an alternate view...?

RAD: Well being an atheist doesn't have to mean you don't respect religion

RAD: alk - yes I heard it on the way to work when it was on

WOOF: Why is a healthy respect for religion a requirement for being an undertaker?

WOOF: And yes, that's another common misconception - that all atheists and anti-theists. Not true.

CONGA: Jews can be very strict too, I watched a programme about Kosher foods once and the inspector who goes round the manufacturers making sure it really really is kosher

WOOF: I mean: that all atheists are anti-theists...

RAD: alk - I didn't see the service itself unfortunately but found it interesting to hear what he liked and what his expectations of religion had been compared to what he saw

ALK: Yep..

ALK: I'm part of the AV crew at a church like Kingsgate...

CONGA: well, I just meant that people grieving often look to the afterlife and religion and things and mabe being an athiest wouldnt help in that respect. Or maybe it would! i dont know, i didn't think that comment through

WOOF: Most Muslim (and indeed Christian) pop-apologists I know say: "Don't follow the believer, follow the belief."

RAD: conga - I've met several 'death' staff and they have a range of POVs but all seem to respect people's beliefs (or lack of) and are sensitive to the needs of the grieving.

CONGA: whats this about chris moyles pentecost thing?

ALK: Can URLs be posted here, **RAD**?

RAD: conga - there was a service (a one-off I think, not SoP) on Pentecost and he really enjoyed it

RAD: You can post them but sometimes these chat rooms crash when you click on the URLS.

CONGA: Well thats good RAD, I just have this idea that athiests would be uncaring about people's religions. But that doesnt really add up does it. Why does being an athiest mean you're intolerant. ok I retract my comment

CONGA: Oh, wait I think i saw that on tell

ALK: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StEDAjhuiTo

CONGA: was it where people held up signs to show what they were before god then what they are now

WOOF: It's simple humanism - we're all clinging to this rock together. It costs nothing to respect another's beliefs (and to keep your own view to yourself). Because of that I don't understand why the undertaker's beliefs (or lack of) remotely matter.

ALK: Djembe - not quite - more a progression - God working in their lives

CONGA: but that was the service? the one with the signs?

WOOF: alk: Whatever gets you through the night.

RAD: I don't think they matter as long as they don't affect their professionalism - but as a doc subject it's presumably going to be interestingish or they wouldn't have commissioned it

WOOF: RAD: Yeah, I agree.

RAD: So which docs (religious or otherwise) do we like generally, and which do we dislike (other than Moore)?

…

[CONGA says Theroux and interesting subjects – I accidentally quit chat]

…

RAD: aaargh!

RAD: think that's the name of the programme#

RAD: that was on on Pent

WOOF: RAD: hehe, tried to do it the "right" way huh?

RAD: No, I just clicked the logout button (d'oh)

ALK: RAD - was the name of the BBC OB on Pentecost Sunday

RAD: Do people generally prefer a particular channel for factual programming or not?

ALK: RAD - sorry - was that I have a bit of a beef about sanitised worship coverage on BBC1 in Songs of Praise..

RAD: sanitised?

WOOF: RAD: I used to until the documentary channels started diversifying to catch

ratings. So the History channel is now the WW2 channel + woo channel + a little bit of

history. Discovery has gone that way, too.

RAD: As in more 'moderate'?

RAD: (e.g. not much in terms of 'free' worship etc)

ALK: Umm - as in not showing as much of the vibrant stuff that is the church today..

WOOF: RAD: Now I'll watch for docos on general channels, and typically base my

decision on the channel (i.e. don't expect rational docos from ITV or government-

critical ones from the BBC ;))

RAD: Oh right, yes

RAD: Do you watch Dispatches or Panorama?

ALK: Yes. Both.

RAD: What do people think of the style of those strands?

ALK: Panorama was better when it had a 1 hr slot.

WOOF: RAD: Sometimes. Depends upon the topic. I've seen some truly shocking

imitations of documentaries from both. (Can't remember which to give examples).

RAD: when you say imitations of docs, what do you mean?

WOOF: Agenda-driven rubbish and propaganda... probably written by Nicky Campbell

CONGA: sorry, computer just completely crashed, had to reboot

RAD: So is balance or neutrality something that's a key component of docs (for you

anyway)?

ALK: brb.. sorry...

CONGA: did i miss much?

RAD: getting opinions on Panorama and Dispatches at the mo

CONGA: no not necessarily

WOOF: RAD: It's appalling that question even has to be asked. (Not directed at you).

RAD: Well, I agree to a point... but I wonder how easy it is to make things without an agenda

RAD: Even if it's not overt

EURODESIGN: i think panorama and dispatches have the ageda to shock

CONGA: Louis Theroux approaches subjects from a definate point of view- the point of view of most people watching. So if he's interviewing extreme wrestlers who smash each other with barbed wire every week he approaches it from the point of view that its a viole

WOOF: It's probably not so bad when you know the angle and agenda of the presenters, but to pretend a presentation is neutral when it isn't is not good.

CONGA: violent and strange thing to do

CONGA: Thats exactly it Mutt

RAD: Mutt - yes, I agree with you there... it winds me up a lot

CONGA: Theroux has a definate point of view which is clear. If it pretends to be neutral when its not thats when its damaging

WOOF: And no channel in this country seems immune from it. Even the Beeb.

EURODESIGN: loius agenda is to interest

CONGA: Moore has a point of view but twists things in his favour which is wrong too

EURODESIGN: id say that for panorama and dispatches, conga

WOOF: I'm sure some filmmakers are unaware they're even doing it. Moore probably thinks he's doing the vox populi thing.

CONGA: or when Theroux interviews nazis or south african white racists (sorry cant remember the name) his point of view is clear and that makes a better show. I dont want to see him agreeing with nazis when 99.9% of the population dont

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EURODESIGN: revelation 4+1 has just finished

CONGA: panorma and dispatches I dont normally watch, unless i see an advert for it and it looks interesting. They're a bit dramatic

EURODESIGN: i dont watch them

EURODESIGN: i deeply distrust them

RAD: When it comes to presenting religion, then, is there a 'right' approach, or could the more gentle stuff like tonight or the stuff where the presenter has a clear view (like Theroux) be equaly acceptable?

CONGA: Its the guy who introduces them in an ultra dramatic way like its the most devastating topic in the whole world

RAD: (if we're ruling out programmes that have a clear agenda but pretend they don't. Of which there are many)

RAD: Euro: why?

WOOF: RAD: Answering one of your earlier questions... I like docs on history and specific science topics that interest me (e.g. astronomy/cosmology, archaeology, evolution), providing it's not unidentifiably skewed,

EURODESIGN: i think they misinform RAD

CONGA: I'd not watch science. I don't know enough about it and would have to spend an hour learning instead of being interested

RAD: Euro: in the way Woof has indicated above, or in other ways?

WOOF: RAD: It's tough to present impartial religious docs, I think, for the reasons I mentioned above. Also, particularly with Islam, there's a common UK media misconception that there is any one (or 10) groups who represent that religion here.

RAD: Which Muslims themselves find problematic

CONGA: Someone making a documentary has to be passionate about the topic in order to follow through with it all. In that sense they are likely to have a point of view or agenda. But whether that leads to misinformation I'm not so sure

WOOF: Yes indeed.

RAD: (Or at least the ones I know)

WOOF: And it's worse when the govt goes straight to the MCB for the "British Muslim" viewpoint, and they're likely to get something that's disproportionately different to the population's opinion.

CONGA: The 'right' approach depends on the topic I think. A muslim school requires a gentle, impartial approach. Religious extremists require a more serious, less impartial point of view.

EURODESIGN: i was watching revelations, so i missed woofs earlier point

RAD: Sorry, I'll paste the comment

EURODESIGN: ok

WOOF: I think conga has a point. Sympathetic or antagonistic interviewers do tend to get the better results in a documentary in terms of viewer impact.

WOOF: RAD: Sometimes. Depends upon the topic. I've seen some truly shocking imitations of documentaries from both. (Can't remember which to give examples).

RAD: when you say imitations of docs, what do you mean?

WOOF: Agenda-driven rubbish and propag

EURODESIGN: i thought the children tonight were quite extreme

RAD: extreme in what way?

CONGA: I've seen way more extreme!

EURODESIGN: yes

WOOF: In my experience they are representative of the British Muslim population, at least of those I know.

EURODESIGN: in their beliefs

EURODESIGN: yes

EURODESIGN: probably woof

EURODESIGN: in a benign way

CONGA: The girl was passionate about the hijab and about getting to paradise but her mother was a calming influence and she did re-think her comments on a couple of things when pressed. if she was really very extreme she wouldnt have

WOOF: It's worth remembering that the British Muslim makeup is probably different to those in other countries. We have a lot of immigrants based upon our former colonies. France has with their former colonies. The US will have a cross-section, etc.

CONGA: They're holding on to Pakistani culture as much as the religion I think

RAD: euro - what were your overall thoughts now you;ve seen the whole doc?

RAD: as in about the doc itself as well as about the kids

EURODESIGN: i found it illuminating

EURODESIGN: it got me thinking of kids in general and how they rely on their parients for their view

EURODESIGN: it is limiting for them

WOOF: That's something I've been acutely aware of since I was in primary school. I remember kids spouting horrible things (personal, racial, etc) and realised they were echoing their parents' beliefs and opinions.

CONGA: Thats true across all cultures though. A kid with parents on the dole, no effort to make a better life will see that as the norm just as a muslim child will see Islam as the norm and the same in christianity

RAD: I think it's difficult not to raise kids to think what you think (and to grow up not thinking at keast in some ways like your parents) though, whether that's about religion, politics, money or anything else.

CONGA: yep, agree

EURODESIGN: yes

WOOF: Then you reach a certain point where you re-evaluate what you've been taught/picked up and then become wholly responsible for your perspective and world view.

EURODESIGN: i agree

CONGA: So its limiting but only in such a way as you can't possibly raise a child to believe everything in the world

WOOF: Coincidentally, that's normally the same time children of religion parents tend to leave the flock, so to speak.

EURODESIGN: mm i disagree

RAD: Woof - true but I still sometimes find myself thinking things and knowing I only think that because of my parents (even stupiod stuff like not liking pets because my parents don't)

CONGA: I agree with woof

EURODESIGN: i think you can teach correcvtly

CONGA: I think the parents in the film were level headed and open minded though and would support their children with whatever path they chose

WOOF: RAD: Oh yes, me too. We're the product of our parents and there's always things we experience through the lens of our formative years. Constant evaluation and critical thinking.

EURODESIGN: disagree with that conga

CONGA: could you expand on 'teach correctly' euro?

CONGA: well, the mother with the 16 year old who wasn't following Islam still loved her even though she disagreed with her lifestyle. She engaged the younger girl in a conversation about the hijab and how its not the only thing that makes you religious. She resp

EURODESIGN: put their viewpoint in the context of a sensible/workable view of the world

CONGA: respected her childrens points of views while trying to teach them to live good lives

EURODESIGN: yes conga

WOOF: My view on that would be to teach your kids critical thinking, nurturing compassion and giving them theunderstanding that people have different opinions and beliefs, and to let them use those tools to form their own conclusions, with support from parents.

CONGA: Ah yes that's a good way to describe teaching correctly

EURODESIGN: islam is conjecture

EURODESIGN: as is any religion

CONGA: christianity too then

EURODESIGN: yes

WOOF: Every belief system.

EURODESIGN: yes

EURODESIGN: but some work better than others

EURODESIGN: science works well

RAD: But if you genuinely believe it's the right way to live (or the only way in the case of at least the Abrahamic faiths) then you'll want your kids to live in that way.

EURODESIGN: i see that

CONGA: I think to a believer of any religion that's the religion which works best. i dont see how any work better than any other. The mainstream ones anyway, not talking offbeat cult type 'religions'

WOOF: But as Dawkins says, they nearly all encourage the dangerous notion that death is not the end. That one point changes absolutely everything.

EURODESIGN: yes

RAD: But is that dangerous? I think many people believe or want to believe in that, even if they have no faith

EURODESIGN: i dont

RAD: I know it *can* be dangerous, but I don't think it *generally~* is

EURODESIGN: true RAD

WOOF: RAD: Another quote I'm reminded of: People want to live forever, but find me one person who can think of something to do on a rainy day.

RAD: heh, nice quote

CONGA: hahaa thats a brilliant quite

RAD: who said it?

WOOF: Unfortunately, I don't know. I suspect it was a US standup comedian

CONGA: Woof just did (haha)

RAD: it'll probably be google-able I suspect

WOOF: No doubt.

EURODESIGN: science and an evidence based approach is workable

CONGA: workable in what way?

WOOF: RAD: I think Dawkins's meaning in that is that once you entertain the notion of death not being the end of it all, then you can create all manner of dogma and

fantasies (some helpful: abject povery and misery -> "you'll get your reward in Djenna")

EURODESIGN: allows you to understand people and make technological advances

CONGA: (sorry, it's hard to keep up, I'm not used to chatrooms!)

WOOF: I agree with euro. If a concept can't stand up to logic and evidence, then it needs to be rejected or approached differently.

EURODESIGN: so keep the world in good shape

CONGA: yet in religion a large part of that logic and evidence is faith based

RAD: Mutt: oh I agree, and it can work like that (and can be dangerous), but I think that's partly a way of dealing with atrocity and finding comfort in it - e.g. black slave songs

EURODESIGN: it also enable control of the oppressed

CONGA: so in that way faith helps people make sense of a horrible world and gives them hope

WOOF: Stephen Jay Gould used to argue the concept of Non-overlapping Magisteria, that Science and Faith are two entirely different animals. Like apples and rocks - incomparable; no business being on the same table.

EURODESIGN: science explains faith

RAD: euro - yes, it can oppress people for sure, but also give them a means of carrying on, or a hope things will be better.

EURODESIGN: exactly how they are oppressed RAD

WOOF: euro: Yes, neurological and evolutionary psychology has shown likely reasons why faith exists.

RAD: Well, yes and no, in that sometimes it helps them cope in their oppression (the idea of heaven). Faith (whether in religion or political ideals) has also helped people break out of their oppression too

WOOF: As a vehicle, yes perhaps.

EURODESIGN: true RAD

WOOF: But faith has also helped keep millions in dark ages. Ever read "Princess" by Jean Sassoon?

EURODESIGN: no

CONGA: religion can opress people in may ways, by controling them, by not letting them explore their true selves, by dictating what they think, how they act, what they wear.

EURODESIGN: absolutely conga

RAD: What's it about Woof?

CONGA: But its only opression if you feel it is. If you want to wear trousers but arent allowed. if you're really into it it wont be opression at all but liberation and acceptance

WOOF: dj: It's doing it today. Look at every major political issue. Behind it (for or against) is a Book. The wars we're fighting, the right to life or choice or dignified death. It goes on and on.

EURODESIGN: i see conga

RAD: Although not always religion - other systems do the same - it's about power and control, and that can be exercised through religion, politics, business etc.

WOOF: RAD: It's a ghost-written autobiography of an Arabian Princess and what it was like growing up and living in Saudi Arabia. Genital mutilation, honour killings, brutality, etc. Awful yet amazing.

CONGA: true, RAD, true

RAD: And all those systems work because there is at least some perceived (or real) benefit to the people involved.

CONGA: It sounds a bit harrowing!

RAD: Even if they serve the interests of the dominant more than the common man

WOOF: RAD: Oh yes, absolutely. Napoleon recognised that religion was a great way to keep the sweaty masses quiet, as have many leaders before and since. And that it's just one of a number of tools that can be used to gain or maintain power and control.

CONGA: I agree

EURODESIGN: yes

EURODESIGN: panorama does it too

RAD: heh

WOOF: RAD: Are there any other questions you have for us, or is this the AOB phase of the meeting?

EURODESIGN: aob ?

CONGA: Any Other Business

WOOF: Any Other Business. Normally the free-for-all part just before the end of a chaired meeting.

RAD: This is the AOB phase I think! I probably should go but feel free to chat - do sign up to the forums and get other people involved. I'm going to host these every week after Revs so do come back.

RAD: Thank you all so much for your time

CONGA: yeah, Family Guy is on in 20 minutes!

Appendix Six: Participant Details

Details of online participants named in Chapter Seven

Pseudonym	Gender (M/F/U = unknown)	Faith position (if identified)	Environment	Topic
69goat	U	Unknown	Comment on Thought Theater blog	Baby Bible Bashers
Aaron	M	Undisclosed	Richard Dawkins Forum	Scientology and Me
ab1	Unknown	Unknown	YouTube	Baby Bible Bashers
Adrienne	F	Believer	C4 Forums	In God's Name
Affi	F	Unknown	The Student Room	Make Me a Muslim
AJ	F	Spiritual	Healthy Pages	Johnny Vegas' Guide…
AK	M	Muslim	MPAC UK blog comments	Undercover Mosque
AlJoseph	M	Undisclosed	YouTube	Saving Africa's Witch Children
AmericanBoy	M	Atheist	Richard Dawkins Forum	General atheist reality show
AngryBlack	U	Unknown	Twitter	Divorce: Jewish Style
Animator	U	Unknown	YouTube	Beginner's Guide to Islam – PG on Richard and Judy
Aniseed	U	Muslim	C4 Forums	Unholy War
Anon1	Unknown	Unknown	Survey	How to Find God
Anon2	Unknown	Unknown	Survey	How to Find God
aso07	U	Unknown	YouTube (comment on a video response)	Saving Africa's Witch Children
avenging	U	Christian	Richard Dawins site	Deborah 13
Bailey	U	Evangelical	C4 Forums	Unholy War

		Christian		
Banana	U	Non-believer	C4 Forums	My Big Fat Moonie Wedding
Barnie	M	Unknown	Twitter	The Exhumer
Bizarre	M	Unknown	Cookd and Bombd	Crucify Me
C33	U	Unknown	Twitter	Talking to the Dead
Cachen	U	Unknown	BBC R&E Eastern Message Boards	BBC - general
CC	M	Undisclosed	BBC Religion and Ethics Message Boards	General 'is BBC biased'
Cerys	F	Christian	Ship of Fools	The Convent
Cleanfreak	U	Unknown	BBC Message boards	Around the World in 80 Faiths
Conspiracy	M	'Conspiritualist'	Healthy Pages	Johnny Vegas' Guide…
CW	F	Pagan	C4 blogs	Christianity: A History (Dark Ages)
Dan	M	Unknown	LowCulture	Deborah 13
DaveD	M	Unknown	Twitter	How to Find God
Debi	F	Unknown	Christian Mums Forum	The Convent
Dippybird	F	Undisclosed	C4 Forums	Undercover Mosque
DocKing	U	Undisclosed	C4 Forums	Undercover Mosque
dom	M	Unknown	Digital Spy	Deborah 13
Doris	U	Undisclosed	BBC Message Boards	A History of Christianity
DragonLord	M	Pagan	Occult Forum	Pagans
Egyptian	F	Unknown	Living Spirits	GYPP, Pagans, Tony Robinson
Eleanor	F	Christian	Christian Mums Forum	The Convent
EN	F	Christian	C4 blogs	Christianity: A History (Jesus the

				Jew)
Fizzy	U	Unknown	C4 Forums	Make Me a Muslim
Fizzywine	U	Unknown	Twitter	Divorce: Jewish Style
Gail	F	Christian	Jonny Baker's blog	The Monastery
Garden	U	Atheist	Richard Dawkins Forum	Genius of Charles Darwin
GD	M	Atheist	C4 Programme site	Return to Africa's Witch Children
GG	M	Undisclosed	BBC Religion and Ethics message boards	General 'is BBC biased' / Moral Maze
GM	F	Undisclosed	C4 blogs	Christianity: A History (Future)
Grace Dent	F	Unknown	Twitter	The Exhumer
Gregg	M	Christian	C4 Programme site	Return to Africa's Witch Children
grunge	U	Unknown	YouTube (comment on a video response)	Deborah 13
GW	M	Christian	C4 blogs	Christianity: A History (Jesus the Jew)
hedges	U	Atheist	Richard Dawkins site	Deborah 13
HedonisticXian	U	Christian	C4 Forums	In God's Name
Hydra	F	Unknown	Living Spirits	GYPP, Pagans, Tony Robinson
iamroman	M	Atheist	Twitter	How to Find God
IntheCity	U	Unknown	C4 Forums	Make Me a Muslim
Jak	U	Undisclosed	Richard Dawkins Forum	Enemies of Reason
Jan	M	Christian	BBC Message Boards	A History of Christianity
Jane	F	Christian	Digital Spy	Make Me a Christian
Jason	M	Unknown	MPAC UK blog comments	The War on Britain's Jews
JB	M	Christian	Jonny Baker's	The Convent/The

			blog	Monastery
Jim	M	Christian	C4 blogs	Christianity: A History (Crusades)
jm	M	Atheist	YouTube video response	Deborah 13
judo	U	Unknown	YouTube	Baby Bible Bashers
Jules	F	Undisclosed	C4 programme site	Return to Africa's Witch Children
justthinking	U	Undisclosed	Richard Dawkins Forum	Scientology and Me
Kathy	F	Christian	Christian Mums Forum	The Convent
Kelly	F	Unknown	BBC Message Boards	The Convent
Kez	U	Undisclosed	C4 Forums	The War on Britain's Jews
Kim	U	Unknown	Cable Forum	Christianity: A History
KT	F	Christian	C4 Programme site	Return to Africa's Witch Children
lahar	U	Unknown	Digital Spy	Deborah 13
Latina	F	Undisclosed	YouTube	Saving Africa's Witch Children
Leela	F	Christian	Ship of Fools	The Convent
les	M	Unknown	YouTube video response	Saving Africa's Witch Children
LH	F	Atheist	C4 programme site	Muslim and Looking for Love
Liz	F	Unknown	Digital Spy	Beginner's Guide to Islam
Londonexile	M	Former Jew	Twitter	Divorce: Jewish Style
Loopier	U	Undisclosed	C4 Forums	Undercover Mosque
Lucyb	F	Unknown	Twitter	How to Find God
Luthor	M	Christian	Christian Mums Forum	The Convent
Mark	M	Unification church	C4 Forums	My Big Fat Moonie Wedding

MattC	M	Unknown	Twitter	How to Find God
Merlot	U	Undisclosed	C4 Forums	Is Dispatches biased?
Mezzo	U	Atheist	Richard Dawkins site	Deborah 13
Michael	M	Secular Jew	C4 Forums	The War on Britain's Jews
Moby	M	Christian	Christian Forums	God is Black, Who Wrote the Bible
MR	U	Undisclosed	C4 blogs	Christianity: A History (Portillo)
Muscular / Strongman	M	Undisclosed	C4 Forums	Is Dispatches biased?
Nature	U	Undisclosed	BBC Message Boards	A History of Christianity
Neo	U	Undisclosed	C4 Forums	Is Dispatches biased?
Nightwork	U	Undisclosed	BBC Message Boards	A History of Christianity
Nixon	U	Undisclosed	C4 Forums	The War on Britain's Jews
OCW	M	Unknown	Twitter	Talking to the Dead
Optimus Prime	M	Atheist	C4 Forums	In God's Name
Pag	U	Undisclosed	Richard Dawkins Forum	Scientology and Me
PaganLove	U	Undisclosed	BBC Message Boards	A History of Christianity
Parking Lot	U	Atheist	Richard Dawkins site	Deborah 13
Paul Rai	M	Atheist	Channel 4 blog	Christianity: A History
PE	M	Undisclosed	BBC Religion and Ethics Message Boards	General 'is BBC biased'
Peyne	M	Christian	Christian Forums	God is Black and Who Wrote the Bible?
PJE	M	Unknown	Digital Spy	Make Me a Christian
Poisonphoto	U	Unknown	Channel 4 Forums	Undercover Mosque
Porpoise	U	Undisclosed	Richard Dawkins	Enemies of Reason

			Forum	
Praya	U	Hindu	BBC R&E: Eastern topic	General Does BBC under-represent UK Hindus and Sikhs?
Praya	U	Hindu	BBC R&E Eastern Message Boards	BBC - general
PW	M	Christian	C4 blogs	Christianity: A History (Crusades)
Python	M	'Sceptic'	Twitter / FG	Talking to the Dead
REC	U	Undisclosed	YouTube	Saving Africa's Witch Children
Rev HS	M	Christian	C4 blogs	Christianity: A History (Future)
RH	U	Undisclosed	YouTube	Saving Africa's Witch Children
Richard	M	Catholic	BBC Message Boards	A History of Christianity
Riri	F	Christian	Twitter	How to Find God, Commando Chaplains
Rius	M	Unknown	Twitter	How to Find God
RKEdd	M	Atheist	Twitter	Muslim School
rob	M	Atheist	Twitter, live chat	How Do You Know God Exists?
RPC	M	Unknown	Richard Dawkins site	Deborah 13
Ruby	F	Unknown	Living Spirits	GYPP
Ruby Caroline	F	Atheist Former evangelical	Twitter	How to Find God
ryaneclipse	M	Unknown	YouTube	Baby Bible Bashers
Sam1980	M	Unknown	Digital Spy	In God's Name
Sasco	U	Undisclosed	YouTube	Saving Africa's Witch Children
Scott	M	Christian	Christian Mums Forum	The Convent
Shedman	M	Atheist	Twittter / FG	Talking to the dead
Sheikh	M	Undisclosed	C4 Forums	The War on Britain's Jews

ShonaG	F	Unknown	Twitter	How to Find God
SmallBen	M	Undisclosed	Digital Spy	In God's Name
Sonicboy	M	Unknown	Twitter	How to Find God
SpaceFungus	U	Believer	C4 Forums	Enemies of Reason
Sponge	M	Christian	Ship of fools	The Convent
Stoner	M	Unknown	Twitter	Muslim School
Stu	M	Unknown	LowCulture	Deborah 13
Thinking	U	Christian	Ship of Fools	The Convent
Thumper	U	Christian	Christian Mums Forum	The Convent
Tim	M	Pagan	C4 blogs	Christianity: A History (Dark Ages)
TOM	M	Undisclosed	Jonny Baker's blog	The Monastery
Trolley	M	Christian	Christian Mums Forum	The Convent
Tubec	U	Unknown	YouTube comments	Scientology and Me: Panorama Exposed response video
Tubor	M	Unknown	Twitter	How to Find God
Turner	U	Christian	Ship of Fools	The Convent
U41	M	Hindu or Sikh (unclear)	BBC R&E Eastern Message Boards	BBC - general
VampireA	Unknown	Former Christian	YouTube (comment on a video response)	Deborah 13
Viola	F	Undisclosed	YouTube	Saving Africa's Witch Children
Wesley	M	Christian	Christian Forums	God is Black, Who Wrote the Bible

WM	F	Muslim	MPAC UK blog comments	Undercover Mosque
Woof	M	Atheist?	Twitter, live chat	Muslim School
Xanadu	U	Christian	C4 Forums	Christianity: A History
Zkovic	U	Pagan	Occult Forum	Pagans

Details of offline focus group participants

A: *Saving Africa's Witch Children/Jews*

Rebecca, 38, Atheist, works in education. Brought up 'in broadly Christian but non church going family'. 'Dabbled in going to a Baptist church aged 15 for approx a year as unsure what I believed then. Came out of it a non-believer'.

Leah, 30, Atheist, Accounts Assistant and DJ, brought up 'vaguely CofE'

Andie, 27, Accountant, Atheist, but 'I think it's a shame sometimes I don't believe because I have no faith'. No religious/spiritual upbringing.

Ben, 37, Tax Advisor, Christian, belongs to a church, brought up 'v. traditional Christian'.

B: *Wife Swap/The Retreat*

Anna, 37, Christian - 'Evangelical Charismatic', Childminder, belongs to a church, brought up Christian (Methodist)

Amy, 38, 'Recently became interested in Buddhism', unemployed (long term illness), belongs to a local Buddhist centre, brought up 'CofE non practising, went to CofE school'

Elizabeth, 24, Agnostic, Journalist, 'Not practising, but I am a Christian', 'I was Christened but my family doesn't practice the faith (although, if you ask most of them, they will say they believe in God')

C: *Around the World in 80 Faiths*: 'North America'/*Gary: Young, Psychic and Possessed*

Serena, 38, on 'An ongoing journey! Started out Christian and probably still am in an ecumenical way!', Customer Relations Assistant, brought up Christian (CofE)

Laura, 32, Atheist, works in bank administration, brought up Catholic

Keith, 30, 'Spiritual Sceptic', unemployed, brought up Roman Catholic

Paul, 37, Atheist, on a career break, formerly a Social Worker, mother was Methodist

Offline focus group survey of religious/spiritual experience

How often do you do the following religious/spiritual activities? (if *never*, leave blank) (R/S = religious/spiritual)

	Daily	Regularly (once a month or more)	Occasionally (less than once a month, more than once a year)	Used to do, but don't any longer	On special occasions only	Rarely (less than once a year)	Have tried once only
Attend a worship service or other R/S ceremony		Ben Anna Amy		Leah Laura Serena	Rebecca	Keith Elizabeth	
Pray	Anna	Ben Serena		Laura		Elizabeth	
Meditate	Amy	Serena	Andie Keith Anna	Laura			Rebecca
Use crystals, icons, rosary or other R/S objects **(specify which):**		Amy (candles, incense)		Laura			Rebecca Serena
Attend séances							
Read horoscopes	Andie	Keith Serena Amy Elizabeth		Rebecca		Anna	

Read 'holy' books (e.g. Bible, Qur'an)		Ben Keith Anna Amy	Rebecca Serena	Laura			Andie Elizabeth
Read websites, books or articles on R/S		Ben Laura Anna Amy	Rebecca Andie Serena Elizabeth				
Watch or listen to TV/radio programmes about R/S		Keith Anna	Leah Andie Ben Laura Elizabeth Serena Amy			Rebecca	
Light candles for 'spiritual' reasons* ***missing from some forms**	Amy		Ben Paul	Rebecca		Andie	
Visit a medium				Keith	Serena		Rebecca
Receive spiritual 'healing' ministry **(specify from which tradition/ faith):**			Anna (Christian)	Serena			Rebecca (Christian Gospel)
Receive		Anna	Ben	Rebecca			

prayer				Laura Serena			
Visit a cathedral, shrine or other religious venue (not for a service)		Amy	Rebecca Laura Leah Andie Anna Elizabeth		Serena	Ben	
Have palm read			Rebecca Andie Serena				
Have fortune told			Rebecca Andie Laura Amy				Serena
Discuss R/S with others		Leah Keith Anna Amy	Rebecca Andie Ben Elizabeth	Laura			
Listen to R/S music		Anna	Rebecca Ben Serena	Laura			
Listen to/read sermons or teaching on R/S issues		Serena Anna Amy	Ben Elizabeth	Laura	Rebecca		
Other (specify):			Paul (relaxation music)		Leah (funerals)		

<u>Appendix Seven: Sample Interview Transcript</u>

David Henshaw (telephone interview)

RAD: Firstly I've noticed that Hardcash work in countries with a lot of political turmoil and oppressive regimes. How far would you say that religion is a part of those countries?

DH: Um, well it's true that we do make programmes in countries where there are very often oppressive regimes. Sometimes that's to do with religion, sometimes not at all. We've made films in North Korea, working with North Korean dissidents, but unless you count a very perverted form of communism as a religion, then that's not really a religious issue.

I became very interested, in 1979, in the resurgence of militant Islam right across the Middle East and North Africa and this became all the more urgent as a subject for investigation after 9/11 for obvious reasons, so, you know, we've made programmes, for example, on the secular student in Iran where you can see the large percentage of the population does feel, er, oppressed by the religious authorities, particularly young people, and that's a good example of a place where the resurgence if you like of a kind of reactionary atavistic form of religion has been oppressive.

One of the things I wanted to do this year but haven't been able to do is look at the resurgence of, the resurgence of rightwing creationism in America, in American politics, because although it's not as central as it is, say the role of Islam in Iraq, it is, to those of us [inaud] in Britain, a very alienating factor.

RAD: I was watching some of your Afghanistan documentaries and I noticed that you

make quite a lot of effort, the presenters or whoever's written them, to distance the

Taliban from mainstream Islam. Was that quite deliberate?

DH: Oh yes, well I think a lot of these terms should be used with caution. I'm not sure

what mainstream Islam is. I mean what's mainstream Christianity, you know? Each sect,

each persuasion will argue that it's mainstream, that it represents the mainstream, so um

I would rather be more precise and just look at each, each [religion] and where it comes

from, what its origins are, ideological, sometimes racial, so the Taliban, interestingly, you

know, their version of Islam is broadly Salifist, what I'd call Salifist, it, you know, you can

trace it back to, I mean a lot of people have traced it back to the kind of theology they

teach in the madrasas from which the Taliban emerged [inaud] in the rise of the 19th

Century and the rise of Deobandism in India in which that kind of militant, anti-Western

Islam was very much part of the anti-imperial struggle, but more recently you can argue

that in the 1980s, the madrasas flourished all along the north west frontier from which the

Taliban emerged, or might have emerged, were not just influenced by Deobandism but er,

Saudi money and um Saudi religious literature in particular.

RAD: I noticed that a lot of your documentaries seem to have references to veils and

veiling in the titles, not just those that are specifically about Islam. Was this, erm, why is

that?

DH: Well, I dunno, just remind me of one that wasn't about Islam.

RAD: Well, a lot of the Afghanistan ones have veiling in the title: *Afghanistan Unveiled*, [*Dispatches*'] 'Beneath the Veil', *Lifting the Veil* and some of those had more emphasis on religion and some of them didn't particularly.

DH: Yeah, well, I suppose, I suppose it's more to do with branding than anything else. When we made 'Beneath the Veil', it was a film that we had no idea of the kind of impact that it was going to have because we, you know, so it was made and initially shown in this country before 9/11. 9/11 happened very quickly afterwards, and then it acquired a significance and an importance, um that it, we, you know, had no idea it was going to have. It became a huge hit internationally and because of that in the subsequent films that we made about Afghanistan, I think we, Channel 4, felt we had to put the word veil in somewhere just to remind people that this was that Hardcash/Afghanistan brand. But you know we also used it in a series we made with Channel 4 on women of Islam [**RAD:** yes, exactly, yeah] called *Islam Unveiled*.

So, that's what got me thinking, because that's obviously not in the Afghanistan strand, a whole other thing where the veiling seemed a little bit more relevant, I guess, to that programme.

RAD: On that programme, how did that come about, the women in Islam, *Islam Unveiled*?

DH: *Islam Unveiled*? Well, after the success of our first two Afghan films, I think there was a feeling at Channel 4 that there was a lot of work to be done looking at the diversity of issues of women and Islam right across the Islamic world and this was about five years ago and you know I think Channel 4 was back then, still had the money and the intellectual

ambition to tackle a subject as big as this, which was great, I wish it would happen now, you know, because it's not the kind of project that gets a big audience.

Anyway, there was this commitment that we should do something, a big investigative enquiry, right across the Islamic world and I liked the ambition of it enormously and the whole point of it was to get away from the well known [fear of] local stereotypes for example at the different traditions you find in Egypt and separating out factors that were actually more to do with cultural practices, trial practices from Islamic practices and where, if you like, reactionary mullahs had made use of the tribal practices like circumcision which was sold as Islamic, when obviously it wasn't, but also to look at a place like Malaysia where you have an interesting contrast between regions which are effectively controlled by pretty hard line reactionary Islamic militants and other parts of the country which Islam, in a very Western sense, is a very tolerant, pluralistic religion.

RAD: And how did you get access to the women that you featured in the programme?

DH: Well we had an all-women team which I suppose made sense, the producer, Rui, was herself brought up as a Muslim, although I don't think she practises any more, and of course, the reporter, Samira Ahmed, is a largely secularised Muslim. I think their very presence in the production term played a large part in the access in areas that it wouldn't have done to communities and groups that you wouldn't have done otherwise.

I mean it was a huge feat when you think about the number of countries that they went to and filmed in. You know, you're talking about Malaysia, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, none of these places are easy to work in, or to gain trust in, Turkey. It was an extraordinary task,

and I think they did extremely well, and as you say, half the battle is in gaining the trust of women who would be probably most [inaud] actually quite suspicious, what was the agenda?

RAD: I noticed that a lot of your documentaries are with Channel 4 and quite a few of them are with *Dispatches*, is that deliberate that you work with them quite a lot, or?

DH: I'll work with anyone who pays me, I mean, you can't fail to notice that the amount of serious television of this kind is shrinking year by year, one on the networks, ten years ago, you know, you had *World in Action*, programmes like *First Tuesday*, *This Week*. Current affairs has virtually disappeared, current affairs and serious documentary making has virtually disappeared from ITV so that's why I make programmes for Channel 4 and the BBC, but even on the BBC, the number of slots for this kind of programme are disappearing.

 I was thinking the other day you know one of the programmes when I was younger that had a huge effect on me in terms of regularly made appointment to watch was *Everyman* which was BBC religious department but they were always really interesting religious documentaries looking at really interesting serious issues. That doesn't exist any more, you know, so that's why I make *Dispatches*, it's one of the few strands left where you know there's this kind of encouragement to make these kind of films.

RAD: So how do the *Dispatches* films get commissioned, do you come up with an idea and suggest it to them, or is it the other way round?

DH: Well, it will be very much 50/50, um, they will sometimes say to me, oh we're looking at this country, can you find the story we should be doing there? Let me give you an example, about five years ago they said to me, you know, we should be doing something on Saudi Arabia, but what? So I had to look at Saudi Arabia and it was at the time when you may remember that lots of Brits were jailed and tortured wrongly for apparently running an illegal bar, but what I thought was the more interesting story and completely unreported in this country was the persecution of Christians in, if you like, the underclass, mainly Filipinos and West Africans. Now the Saudi government said that you know that Christians were supposed to have the right to worship in their own homes, but we found that they were arrested for doing that, tortured, beaten up, jailed, so the story we made in the end was about um developing world servant class nationals in Saudi being persecuted and [inaud] in terms of an organised way.

Sometimes you know, they'll come to me with a specific story, I mean last year, they had a film pretty much lined up about a woman who wanted to film her birth undercover because she'd had such a lousy time before, she wanted to [inaud] and we were given that commission and we filmed it. Sometimes, for example, we've got a film going into production now, which was our idea, which was looking at debt collection agencies that break the rules. So it's sort of 50/50 really.

RAD: So how did the 'Undercover Mosque' documentaries come about?

DH: Well, with the first one, I'd been talking to Channel 4 for a long time about the possibility of finding out what was really going on in a number of mosques where we'd had information that um moderate Muslims in the congregation were worried about what

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was being said, what was being preached and so for some time we'd thought about making this kind of programme but it depended entirely on finding the right kind of reporter who we knew we could rely on that would be able to carry out the undercover filming, cos it's quite a dangerous operation, and then eventually, we'd been talking about this for a long time, probably months, we came across this very bright youngish reporter who'd actually, he'd actually been an interior designer for ten years and then decided he wanted to become a journalist.

He's actually from a Hindu background from Edinburgh, Bobby Pathak, and he'd said he wanted to be a journalist, and the first thing that he'd done, which we thought was really enterprising, was he'd gone undercover on his own bat, with a camera, and filmed Abu Hamza's successor at um the Finsbury Park mosque, making inflammatory statements. He took the story to *The Mirror*. *The Mirror* made it a front page splash and I thought that actually that showed a lot of initiative but also you know, he clearly was capable of doing undercover work, so we and Channel 4 sat down with him and off we went and he spent over a year making that first programme.

RAD: So how did you find the different preachers and the different mosques in the documentaries?

DH: Well, we and Channel 4 were getting information from, let's say, concerned members of congregations who weren't happy about what was happening in their mosques. You see the first mosques that we featured in 'Undercover Mosque', in the first programme, they were all mosques or organisations which claimed to be committed to interfaith dialogue and signed up to the government's policies and so when we had prima facie

evidence that this was not the case, we first of all sent our undercover guy in to see if this was true and once he'd established that it was, then we got permission to film secretly, and that's how we gathered the material.

RAD: So did you anticipate that it would cause a lot of controversy when it was broadcast?

DH: Erm, yes, well I suppose the thing is, you know, I'd seen some of the material before because the producer had kept me up to date with [developments] but it was when I saw it all together that, when I first went in to view the first version of the programme, you know, at that stage, pretty rough, but all joined together, and I just looked at it and I thought this is shocking, this is genuinely shocking because you don't, you know, you don't very often feel that when you go to watch a programme, when it comes through, you don't, to be honest with you, you're bored silly, but this, it just struck me over and over again that first of all this is profoundly shocking and the other thing that struck me at the time was that, God, this is really the opposite of anything that should be spiritual, you know there was no spirituality, there was no spiritual content in it, it was just a litany of hatred, quite extraordinary and I was quite taken aback by it and it was at that moment I thought yeah this is going to disturb a lot of people.

RAD: What was edited out? I mean obviously you'll have had a lot of footage and I noticed that there were bits where it jumps. What was edited out from the footage?

DH: Well you know when you film undercover you film everything you can't stop and start, you press your button when you go in and then you get 6 hours of footage, so you know, most of you know, there were huge periods when nothing was happening at all, at

all, and a lot of it would be repetition, so you know, that's what we wanted to do, but we were very careful to make it clear that what the viewer was seeing was presented a genuine sense of what was going on and one of the good things, if I can say that, as a result of the ludicrous behaviour of the West Midlands police and the Crown Prosecution Service was that what we did, and our editorial methods, were subjected to as rigorous a going over as anyone's gone through by Ofcom in that investigation and we had a complete and utter vindication.

RAD: How did all the investigations affect your company?

DH: Well I mean there was a period when I was really worried about us going under because I mean we're only a small company, in a good year we turn over a million, but that's a good year, that's very small fry for television and after we were ambushed by the West Midlands police and dragged into this you know disastrous extraordinary [inaud] things, I certainly lost one commission I think because people didn't want to touch us, then there was a period of about eighteen months when I was genuinely worried the company was going to go under but Channel 4 were outstanding in their support and I you know I really, really value that.

RAD: So how did the second one come about?

DH: Well the second one came about because while I was very proud of the first one, it was a bit of a jumble, and one of the things the producer and I'd agreed by the end of that process was that there was a political story here as well, the political story was about the Saudi missionary activity in this country, well and throughout the world, but particularly

this country, and wherever we looked, the Saudis seemed to be involved so we wanted to make a second programme that you know looked at that more closely. So that was our starting point.

Regent's Park Mosque, which is run by a Saudi diplomat, a lot of Muslims became aware of that, actually quite a lot of people were horrified when they found that out, and obviously we didn't want to repeat what we had done in the first programme which was why we were interested in working with a woman, for example. And in this film, in the first programme, Bobby Pathak had come from a Hindu background but he was pretty much a secularist. In this second programme, our undercover reporter is, was and is, a devout Muslim, actually. She happens to be a Sufi. One of the reasons that she was very keen to do this is that she felt that um the religion that she valued was being horribly misrepresented by the Salifists, and the Saudi theologians.

She went undercover in Regents Park Mosque and we were, I think, quite surprised by how quickly she gathered a lot of the material you saw in the film, you know this wasn't - when we asked for the mosque for their response to what we'd found, they tried to make out these were rare and unusual examples but literally our reporter went there virtually every weekend over three or four months, every weekend, the same kind of poisonous stuff was being spouted, so we were quite surprised by that. So the second programme was, I think, a better programme because it was intellectually more coherent, and I think its political emphasis was much more pronounced.

RAD: So did the controversy around the first one affect the way you made the second one?

DH: Not really except I thought there was more chance that more people would watch the second one because of the controversy of the first. I suppose the thing is that we all knew a great deal more about the subject by then and one of the things that we love about making these kinds of films is that it is almost making, writing a PhD thesis, in that there's a huge amount of pleasure in just intellectually burrowing your way into a subject and after two years of doing this, I think we know a vast amount and it's fascinating.

RAD: So how have the mosques responded to the 'Undercover Mosque' documentaries? The mosques featured in the films?

DH: Well in the first one, we knew, first of all, that they were furious and then they felt sort of vindicated when the police clumsily intervened. Now I think they're just keeping their heads down, but I had a meeting a couple of weeks ago with, again they don't like this term, but with a very senior moderate Muslim in the North of England and he was saying that the second programme in some ways caused even more shockwaves than the first in that no-one thought that a woman would ever be able to get to infiltrate and film secretly, so I suspect one of the consequences of these films is that mosques where radical preaching has gone on are going to be a bit more careful now. Which doesn't mean that people have changed their opinions or that this has gone away.

RAD: So what feedback on your documentaries do you get from your viewers?

DH: Well, always very mixed. The ones that I worry about is when there's very little viewer feedback, one way or the other. Always very mixed but I think that probably if you're talking about the two 'Undercover Mosque' programmes there is obviously a huge

volume of predictable and sometimes orchestrated complaint. I mean, for example, both programmes featured the use of a man called Shayik Yassin, based in Sheffield, who you may remember in the second programme, he's the man who talks about the pleasure of seeing heads rolling down the streets in Saudi Arabia and equally he has an organised network and we got bombarded by emails and phone calls, but at the same time a huge amount of support as well and not just from secularists, but from a lot of Muslims as well.

When we were doing publicity for the first programme, I went on the BBC's Asian Network on one of their prime time programmes and I was really pleased that in the phone in, at least 50% of the callers who were Muslim were very supportive of the programme.

RAD: So what are you working on at the moment or next?

DH: Well, we're giving religion a bit of a break at the moment. We're doing something on debt collection, dodgy debt collection, [and a BBC Three programme on a student debtor – talks about these programmes and banking crisis a bit… and one on Alzheimer's]

RAD: Is there a reason why you've decided to leave the religion documentaries for a while?

DH: Yes, we may well go back to it, but you don't want you know to do the same thing all the time, all the time just going back to it, and I don't want people to feel that we're becoming obsessed with this brand of Islam, it's not very healthy for anyone.

Note: In 2011, Dispatches showed the Hardcash-produced 'Lessons in Hate and Violence', investigating 'radical Islam' in British schools.

This appendix includes two sample focus group transcripts, one offline and one online.

For details of participants, see Appendix Six.

Focus group #3. Programmes: *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed / Around the World in 80 Faiths*: 'United States of America'. **Participants:** Laura, Keith, Serena, Paul

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RAD: So we're gonna be watching two programmes today. The first is called *Gary, Young, Psychic and Possessed*, which was shown on BBC Three a few weeks ago and the other is one of the episodes of a series called *Around The World in 80 Faiths* which was shown on BBC Two earlier this year. Now have any of you heard of either of these programmes before?

LAURA: Heard of the second one (others all echo this)

RAD: And have any of you watched episodes of it?

SERENA: No.

KEITH: Er, I saw one.

RAD: Right, and do you remember which one it was?

KEITH: It was the Indian one.

RAD: Do you remember anything about it?

KEITH: Er, lots of lovely buildings [laughter].

RAD: And so before we actually watch them, what do you think your expectations are of, knowing what channels they're on and the titles, what do you think they might contain? [Firstly] *Gary, Young Psychic and Possessed*?

KEITH: Was that on Channel Five?

RAD: BBC Three

KEITH: BBC Three? Oh, same difference.

SERENA: I expect it'll be like something like *Most Haunted* or something like that. [**KEITH**: yeah] a bit…

KEITH It's gonna be a bit sensational.

PAUL: Yeah.

KEITH Sensationalist, that's the word.

RAD: And *Around the World in 80 Faiths*. We're gonna look at the American, the North American episode, what do we think?

SERENA: Well that won awards, didn't it, that one, the chap who did that one? So it's going to be quite [pause] in depth, I would have thought, factually astute.

PAUL: Without bias, I think.

RAD: Do you think, one's BBC Three, one's BBC Two, do you think the channel will affect the style and the content of the programmes?

PAUL: If it was ITV, yeah [all laugh] but it's not.

SERENA: BBC Two will reach a wider audience, I think it will. BBC Three I tend to associate actually with dafter stuff to be honest. If it's more solid they tend to move it on to one of the other sort of main channels, BBC so…

RAD: OK. So we'll watch one, talk about it, then watch the other one and have a bit of a longer discussion after the second one.

Discussion during programme

[**PAUL** requests a bit be rewound for clarity].

[Video stuff with sceptics].

SERENA: To be fair the stuff about [having a good reaction from] some kind of therapy can be true of chemotherapy too, I've seen it.

[During section with Gary and his manager, muffled discussion - speculation over whether they are gay]

[Laughter at old man who can't remember what he's being treated for; laughter and shaking of heads at Alzheimer's reveal].

SERENA: That's just so awful!

PAUL: The irony.

KEITH: Well, he didn't know!

LAURA: laughs

[Abraham picture]

SERENA: God, he looks like Catweazle.

[Reveal of him being the prophet]

SERENA: Oh my goodness, not any old Abraham!

[PAUL laughs]

[He's not ready for speaking directly]

PAUL: Not if he's got a 3 phone!

[PAUL asks for Gary's age]

[At the revelation he was 13 in the spiritualist church when he began, lots of 'ohs' and 'rights'.]

[Gary says Emeka can see Abraham working]

SERENA: Oh, channelling. Oh, I've seen that done. It's really weird.

[Laughing at Abraham's voice throughout channelling section]

PAUL: Even the dog's disbelieving.

PAUL: there's a William Hague thing going on as well.

LAURA: Yeah!

[Laughter]

SERENA: Well that wasn't very convincing. I've seen an American Indian type thing being channelled and that was a lot more dramatic and the [inaud] took a big slump at the end. That was, he wasn't acting well enough there, more convincing himself.

[Laughter at stripper reveal]

SERENA: That's an odd mix! I thought he had something going on with that manager but obviously I'm…

PAUL: Yeah. Clearly we're not cut out to be psychic.

[Laughter]

[Stripper psychic describing her dancing]

PAUL: what does she do with her crystal ball?

[Emeka asks about being gay, Gary denies]

SERENA: I don't believe you!

PAUL: My gaydar says different

SERENA: He's really blushing now.

[Psychic talking about Emeka's nan and getting it wrong]

LAURA: There's always a reason!

SERENA: There is a [scientific] explanation for that [glass moving in a seánce] I've tried it and it's potentially nothing to do with the spirit world whatever. Um, it's erm, well, the scientific explanation is we all, you can't keep your hands completely still so even when you point like one finger, one finger wouldn't be enough to move that but combined energy, so none of you's actually pushing the thing anywhere, I've done it with [names] at [local pub] and I have to admit, I think they were quite convinced but… it's just I don't know, it was fun, it was entertaining, but, if you'll excuse me, complete bollocks. It was. So I went straight home and Googled and it was just that, it, there's

got to be something. I've done lots of these different things out of interest and I could tell a few sort of nightmarish stories and so… but that's just, it makes total sense that between the lot of you the energy is enough to get things and once… it gains its own momentum.

PAUL: If it moved without anybody touching it that.

SERENA: Yeah that'd be impressive, yes, I'd give you that.

PAUL: I remember an exercise we did years ago when I went to a [training day with] social services and I can't remember where they got it from but you move a person sitting on a chair, kind of four people stood round and you had to put your hands on top of each others' and you put your finger underneath and you all lifted the person with your finger and your collective energies.

SERENA: Right, that sounds vaguely familiar now.

PAUL: And we were all completely blown away then. Individually you couldn't lift the person, but the power of putting yourself together with others, rather like that. But the thing didn't move on its own. In my head when these things happen, the glass does move on their own, not when people are touching it.

SERENA: Not when people are, yeah. Well, it does feel like it's moving on its own when you're doing it, but… um.. no.

['The lights are switched off to give him more energy' – everyone laughs].

SERENA: I want a large lump of ectoplasm, come on.

[More laughs when Emeka says he hasn't seen anything]

PAUL: Yeah, cos you're not a [inaud].

SERENA: You didn't BELIEVE enough that's what it was.

[Sceptics letter saying they want to ban event]

SERENA: That's a bit harsh.

[He says he doesn't need extra publicity].

SERENA: I think he may be right there. I'm sure I've heard of him before on some of these, uh.

[At the fete]

PAUL: Perhaps the stripper's coming in a minute

[*Bad Psychics* man says people can get addicted, especially vulnerable people]

SERENA: You could say that about any kind of religion though

[Disclaimer]

SERENA: I'm amazed that's legal actually, to be able to do that.

PAUL: Disclaimer innit.

SERENA: It's weak.

PAUL: He can do what he wants.

SERENA: I don't know if that's strictly. Hmm.

[Study for Psychical research elicits laughter]

[One patient believes he removed stone]

PAUL: That's how she did it, she fell over when she was skiing!

SERENA: Oh, for crying out loud.

PAUL: Was that her GP?

RAD: Yes I think so

PAUL So there couldn't be a conflict of interests could there? Can you not wee

gallstones out as well?

SERENA: No that's kidney ones but they can break down. I mean… As far as I

understand she'll have stopped eating fatty foods, cut out caffeine.

PAUL: Maybe there was a misdiagnosis in the first place.

SERENA: They can settle down. Mine settled down for a year when I cut out fat.

PAUL: So it's still there?

RAD: Yeah.

SERENA: Do we know what her symptoms were?

RAD: I don't think she said, I think pain but I don't….

SERENA: Cos the pain comes when it spasms, not the stone itself, if it's a tiny one,

when it gets stuck in a duct that causes problems.

[Discussion of who doc was and if was surgeon or not (ie Dr not Mr)]

[Gary describes what Abraham sees]

SERENA: What utter rubbish! The tissue doesn't get damaged, the whole thing just spasms.

[Emeka: I wasn't expecting Pam to chip in]

SERENA: Well then you were very silly, weren't you? [If you don't shrink it] then it'll get stuck in one of those ducts and she won't be pleased with you!

[Gary has moved]

PAUL: is anyone else thinking the same as me? Substantially nicer, substantially bigger.

SERENA: Ye-es.

KEITH: 32inch TV in the corner.

Programme ends.

SERENA: To be fair, when it comes to conventional medicine it doesn't work a lot of the time but we don't sit here taking the pee but [pause] I just [pause]. Maybe it was the… thirteen, going to a spiritualist church, it's so compelling, you're an 'in-person' if you get to go into the closed circle this kind of thing or if someone tells you you've got abilities, that kind of thing. Thirteen's so impressionable I'm not surprised he feels that, you know, he's got something. Think his mother was right about the attention.

PAUL: There's a sense of family and community at that age as well. Caught at a vulnerable age but the whole thing about him sort of having senses and feelings when he was two [laughs].

SERENA: Well you will, um, I'm sorry.

PAUL: I just weed myself when I was two, but erm ,yeah that's that's kind of, yeah.

SERENA: My niece at four was telling us about 'granny this' and 'granny that' and my mum died years ago, she never met her, but she was clearly just projecting stuff that she wanted, I mean there's a granny thing and some things were right, she picked up on some things she just happened to stumble across that were right but nah, you listen more closely, you, actually was, it was just her imagination.

RAD: Was that what you expected it to be?

SERENA: No.

LAURA: yeah, I think it probably was. There was a lot of montages and stringy music, wasn't it? And there was about five minutes of science in the whole thing.

SERENA: Yeah, well yeah.

KEITH: [Inaudible]

PAUL: [Inaudible] The music was quite emotive, erm it kind of almost started to become a little bit deriding, it was almost taking the piss out of the guy and I... um.. I mean... we... I think the viewers should be allowed to have their own thoughts without the programme maker kind of steering you in but we all know that's what happens anyway.

SERENA: Yeah, I suppose you've got to come from some sort of angle.

PAUL: Yeah. You [can't be] ...completely unbiased.

SERENA: But it wasn't as scientific as you might have hoped.

PAUL: I do think under the mental health act, he's slightly sectionable. Erm [laughs] as a former mental health social worker.

SERENA: I was wondering actually.

PAUL: There were some kind of really big delusions there, but again over time, you know if we can learn to believe in something so strongly it actually becomes a part of [inaud] and I believe that he believes it and stuff, but some of his body language at certain times and some of his the way that he kind of verbalised things suggested an element of doubt so there was erm, there's a word incongruence that I'm looking for, that's the word, there's a bit of incongruence, bits where he actually laughed at himself, that made me feel really awkward because it was almost like he was joining in with people laughing at him. What's that about, erm, hmm?

RAD: What did you make of Emeka, the narrator, the presenter? What did you make of his kind of dialogue and his observations?

SERENA: Lightweight.

LAURA: Patronising.

PAUL: I felt he wasn't with massive bias, erm, until about halfway through and then he started to go down a little bit and then it was all about kind of you know, again the viewer needs to decide rather than be geared into that direction, but I've heard worse.

SERENA: He sounds like he's trying to do a Jon Ronson thing and then just sort of like freaked out but… [inaud] 'I can't let anyone actually think that I think this' it's, at least when Jon Ronson does stuff like this, he, you get the impression that kind of you do get a more balanced, like he did that series on Channel 4 years ago *For the Love Of…*

where he did various different things from moon landings not being real to God knows what else and he never ever took the pee out of whoever he was talking to, or the divide and I'm just thinking that this guy's definitely lacking something, he's sort of….

PAUL: It can ruin a good interview, you know, if the interviewer's kind of got an agenda or a sense of bias. They can manipulate things the way they want and the way they see. Having said that a male stripper friend of mine was interviewed by a psychologist on TV and she was really mean to him and questioned his morals and [name]'s a highly intelligent guy, highly intelligent and one of my closest friends and he's a wonderful guy and this woman was really manipulating and questioning and he came out of this and said you know she was really horrible and you could see it happening. Now if she had gone in there with an open mind, the interview might have been substantially different.

SERENA: Her research wasn't meant to be based around the morality?

PAUL: No no, so again I think as an interviewer you've kind of got to keep an open mind about stuff. You might have your own thoughts and your own ideas but clearly he's got agendas to disprove what this guy was on about, to discredit him. Which is fine, we're all entitled to do that, but as an interviewer, I think he should have kept an open mind.

SERENA: To me it seemed like he was scared that there might be anyone thinking that he…

PAUL:…subscribed to it, yeah.

RAD: Do you think that there was a clear agenda in the programme then?

PAUL: Exposing [**SERENA**: Mmm] was one of the things that I felt, but yeah, discrediting was up there too, there was lots of reference about, you know, people had dissociated and kind of made disclaimers saying we want nothing to do with this guy. They, that was made quite clear so yeah, there probably was an agenda.

SERENA: What, sort of pretending to be balanced?

PAUL: Mmm.

SERENA: Mmm.

RAD: Do you think other channels might have handled the topic differently?

KEITH: I don't think many would have covered it at all.

LAURA: Seemed like a long time spent on a small thing. They could have cut about twenty minutes because there wasn't much to say. The poor guy was ignored by his parents as a kid, he did something to try and get their attention, he did get their attention and did it more and more and more and now he can't stop. He's been doing it all through his life, so what else is he gonna do? Is he gonna turn around and go 'actually if I think about it, I might be able to make that voice go away and maybe I've been making it up all this time just to get people's attention?' He can't say that now, can he, cos he'd look pretty stupid [laughs].

SERENA: Well he's been in that church, the spiritualist church generally since he was thirteen, as you say, it's gonna be…

LAURA: I did feel sorry for him when his mum said 'well there he was, trying to get attention' I just thought 'well why didn't you give him some attention you horrible thing?' [laughs]

PAUL: Plus he's now got a mortgage to pay, and her [**LAURA:** [laughs] Yeah] and the whole thing was kind of summed up at one point for me where it said something about all I'm trying to do is make a living.

SERENA: Mmmmmm.

PAUL: The people that I've kind of had dealings with that, that are passionate to this degree about what they believe in aren't focussed around the money, they're focussed on kind of the other benefits that it brings, rather than the financial aspects. So that kind of brought up, and the last five minutes for me, I just want… I thought, is this a Victoria Wood sketch? [all laugh] I don't know if anybody remembers there was an interview with a couple who'd won the lottery. They'd won the lottery, they were this poor couple who lived in the backstreets of Manchester or whatever and said 'Oh we'll never change if we won' this seventy year old couple 'we'll never change if we win lottery, will we Ken?' 'No' cue them winning the lottery and they're there in their posh wigs and dressed up to the nines in diamante saying 'oh yeah we keep us old house on, we use it as an ashtray' (all laugh) and it's kind of weird, the transition between before and after. this guy lived in, let's face it a house that wasn't particularly - well there was no kind of design, not that I'm a snob, well I am actually sometimes… but you know, it was a man house, with two men, albeit of questionable sexuality and then cue to him living in a much larger house with kind of nice features in it, nice flooring and obviously…

KEITH: Nice flooring.

PAUL: Yeah lovely flooring, I really liked it, I want it in my house [all laugh] but significantly more expensive, nice car parked on the drive. Now call me cynical but the comparison between those two scenarios.

SERENA: Was deliberate and I was wondering, it crossed my mind there may not be a mortgage there looking at two grand of...

PAUL: Probably, yeah exactly.

SERENA: And I think that's what we were supposed to think as well somehow.

PAUL: Yeah yeah I think you're probably spot on on that one, so the whole thing in the end made me feel rather uncomfortable anyway.

SERENA: Mmm.

PAUL: What I do find bizarre is that within a minute or so of it coming on I kind of thought I know what this is gonna be all about, I know what it's kind of gonna do so in one respect it was what I expected but all it served to do was reinforce my negativity perception regarding the whole.

SERENA: It just…

PAUL: Yeah.

SERENA: I don't think it's a coincidence, I mean plenty of them do this psychic healing, he's not on his own but it's not a coincidence he only happens to be twenty whereas I imagine that if any others were approached that were older it would be just no, no need.

PAUL: Some of his terminology as well, I mean I made a few notes not having to go through them all but there was one where he was rubbing a woman's back and going Oh yeah I'm just numbing down the pain receptors. What the buggery bollocks does that mean? [all laugh] I mean I've had nigh on twenty years of physio sessions, right…

SERENA: Pain receptors are all up here [points to brain] aren't they?

PAUL: Yeah, yeah! But the fact is if you are manipulated physically then you'll feel a short term benefit.

[inaud]

SERENA:… is known for that, yeah, absolutely.

PAUL: I've got a permanently knackered back and I know that if it gets manipulated for an hour or two I feel great I… I felt there was a preying on vulnerable people, the emotional side of stuff, the woman who, who had spent ten thousand pounds on stuff, I actually felt for her because I think she was very real, I don't think she was kind of attention seeking, I think there was a real issue there.

KEITH: Well, she was clearly depressed.

PAUL: Well, there was a clear depression thing going on, I would support you on that but actually I think you know the fact that she was significantly overweight wouldn't help her back in all honesty, and the fact that she was taught to look at her posture, that made complete sense. We all slouch sometimes, I know I certainly do, and your back can really start to ache. If you start to sit up straight and align your spine you can start to feel a bit better, so I think for me there was no real evidence at all anywhere throughout that entire documentary that gave him any credibility at all.

SERENA: No.

PAUL: There wasn't anything. Not one shred. Lots to discredit him.

[All: Mmm]

SERENA: I'm not sure, there's not really anything. Science doesn't lend itself to… and I've had plenty of, technically I suppose it's still, technically [had back problems]… but I didn't spend that much money because I didn't have it but as you know as you're getting better you have to wait for that recovery, but there's still that bit of you that wants to explore any, once the doctors give up you don't want to give up on it so you do start trying all these different things and things like the power of touch, I mean I've tried absolutely everything from aloe vera, I'm a bit ashamed at some of the things I've tried to erm, oh my God, umm, acupuncture. Didn't actually work. Well it did work for increased energy levels. All kinds of weird and wonderful things right down to hypnosis and I don't mean just hypnotherapy, so past life regression and [inaud] as well, which, my brain got nowhere, stuck, in the life it was, it wasn't happening.

KEITH: So no-one famous then?

[All laugh]

SERENA: I haven't been anybody.

PAUL: She was Abraham!

SERENA: I've never been anyone else before, I got stuck in my teenage years, it's quite helpful to do like a weird form of therapy but it didn't help with the pain, oddly enough, but I lost weight afterwards (all laugh) but all these sort of bizarre things but

that girl they had saying at the beginning about having a degree in psychology and yet opening your mind up to those things, I've got one of those and I wouldn't day that it opened my, if anything it shuts everything down.

KEITH: Well you see things for what they are, don't you? I mean I had experiences in the spiritualist church as a teenager and so [**SERENA**: Right] when you realise that there's no-one actually telling you, you're just cold reading people.

SERENA: I know, I'm with you.

KEITH: But no-one's done it for him. No-one's said you're just massaging people and giving them a bit of bedside manner.

SERENA: Yeah.

PAUL: Because they've got difficulty disproving what he's saying [**KEITH**: Mmm]. We all know that it's a load of cods but actually prove that it's a load of cods, that's the difficulty because I think that's where he's allowed to get away with exploiting vulnerable people because nobody can actually prove that he's talking cods. I think that's part of the difficulty.

SERENA: Well, it's like he said I mean I can I can that's where I sort of like split, because part of me thinks that I'm sure there are more things on heaven and earth blah blah blah blah blah, I just wouldn't pay twenty quid to find them! [All laugh] You know. Or if I do I just think well OK this is my equivalent of I don't know, going to…

PAUL: Massage or something.

SERENA: Yeah that kind of … you know sometimes you would… you know by opening yourself up to that stuff you do sometimes close yourself down to other stuff so you have to be you have to have that sense of balance I guess, but yeah, like you said no-one's shown him the alternative kind of yeah you might have some kind of spirit in your head but like you said there's the cold reading going on and you've got people feeding off each other with the best of intentions, er, and you see what goes on in some of the spiritualist churches, I don't know, it's kind of nice but, but it's just an entertainment, it's just an hour and a half instead of the usual hour. Suspension of disbelief is severely needed, let's be honest!

PAUL: For me it was all gong and no dinner.

SERENA: Yes, I know exactly what you mean.

PAUL: And his mouth wrote cheques which his arse couldn't cash.

SERENA: And he'd got cos he's so used to that kind of environment cos they egg each other on terribly.

PAUL: He'll not give it up.

SERENA: No.

PAUL: Until he's probably running out of business and running out of clients. But if he's turning over two grand a week and got a successful business in London he's not gonna give that up.

SERENA: To be fair, your average twenty year old fundamentalist is hooked, but like you say, it's got the money on top of that so… [intake of breath through teeth].

PAUL: But it's giving him that on top of… it's giving him an identity, it's bringing him utility so it's gonna keep on doing it. Feeding was a word I think you mentioned earlier, it's a key thing so… I've seen, I've seen programmes that have been more biased, it wasn't as biased as I first expected but it was, it was…

SERENA: It was very lightweight though, wasn't it?

KEITH: It wasn't as lightweight as I expected from the title [**PAUL** laughs]. I was expecting something really hippy and…

SERENA: I was expecting something, to be honest, more far easy to laugh at if I'm honest [**KEITH**: Mmm] like Yvette Fielding or one of those *Most Haunted* people watch this every week.

PAUL: You need Louis Theroux to do…

SERENA: Oh yes.

PAUL: It would have been great.

SERENA: Yes.

SERENA: After watching that I felt a bit embarrassed… my mum died and you'd go plodding along to the medium and you kind of like

PAUL: There's a morbid fascination about it

SERENA: Yeah yeah but it is kind of nice… that sense of energy with a group of people just being together and this time she wanted with my sister not being well she wanted to go and I was thinking oh god this is getting a bit raucous… and when someone's a bit vulnerable like that you wanna watch it so she said will you go with me and I was right

OK so I'd just come out of hospital and she said you go first so I sat down and there was this guy and oh my God it was just like you're gonna meet someone at work [inaud, mentions working with 20 year olds] I work on the telephones so sort of like they're all youngsters. You're gonna meet this person and by the end of the year you'll be settled down with them with a baby. It'll be dead easy, you'll just flip it over the shoulder and you'll be right back… and I was just sort of sat there thinking 'right I've just had a hysterectomy'… I didn't say this to him [**PAUL:** I would have] and I looked at him and said, oh, I thought I would be a bit past it. I thought give him enough, feed him something and see what he comes out with, thought I'd be… and you could see him trying to work out roughly how old I was [all laugh]. And I said 'no that's very charming and some people say I look younger than I am but at 38 now I can guarantee that unless they've done something in there that they were lying about, it ain't gonna happen' and I just like, I just came out with my sister without too much information and she wasn't very happy and I was just able to use that to discredit the silly bugger, but erm it rankled. I just said to her 'never again, I'll just read your cards, I'll get more from that', but yeah that was just I could have punched him at the time because it wasn't an operation I particularly wanted.

RAD: I think in any of these things if you're talking about something as emotive as marriage or children or family you have to be so careful.

[**SERENA** talks about not putting hands on table at another one to foil a cold reader seeing if she was married. **PAUL** recounts an encounter with a woman once telling him the nationality of his father (Irish Canadian) – 'bizarre']

Around the World in 80 Faiths

PAUL: I did actually wanna watch one of these but I missed it.

PAUL: Pause a second, you know that outfit there, the ones with the green…

KEITH: The rubbing ones?

PAUL: Did you go on the camping meet?

RAD: To the cave?

PAUL: Do you remember? Exactly the same.

RAD: It might be, the African one…

PAUL: [Recounts story of African choral people encountered in cave] It was incredibly bizarre, really atmospheric, you had to be there, didn't you Ruth? It was really stunning and it almost made me cry and I wanted to get closer but you didn't want to get really close because you didn't want to invade their space.

RAD: Yes.

PAUL: And also you weren't quite sure if they'd put you on the fire and beat you up with a stick but it was it was, yeah, I'm sure the outfits were absolutely the same.

RAD: Might be from their country that they're from or the same church denomination.

PAUL: Did anyone find out what they were doing?

RAD: Someone from the other group said they were Christians of some kind and they were doing like a fasting thing or something. I don't know if they'd come over just for that or lived here, I don't know.

[Peter Owen-Jones mentions vicar risking his life]

SERENA: Must be the snakes one… and it is.

PAUL: She IS psychic! Pay your mortgage off? You could set up together, I could be your agent.

[POJ explains man been a serpent handler for 40 years]

KEITH: Oh blimey.

SERENA: When they started [inaud] thought it was a bit extreme…

[Laughter at POJ's VO that serpent handling is legal in one state… and this isn't it]

PAUL: Yeah, that just about sums it up - unclear what? A face? Oh my God! [inaud] bunsen burner!

[Snake handler: In the name of Jesus Christ. POJ: I don't think I'd do it in any other name! All laugh]

PAUL: Excellent. Wasn't he [the man on the film] behind the iron bars in *Silence of the Lambs?*

[Child sings]

PAUL: [Britain's?] got talent! [laughter]

[SERENA makes some comparisons with Billy Graham]

PAUL: [He's] incredibly charismatic

[on prostate healing]

SERENA: Did he say prostrate? [laughter]

[Laughter at choice of Jingle Bells in spiritualist meeting]

PAUL: Jeremy Kyle!

[Some laughter at spiritualist session]

LAURA: I hope there's more to the afterlife than flinging tables around!

[All laugh at POJ saying flipping tables around was mad]

SERENA: It didn't prove anything, having established what, it's 160 years ago or something, do you need to keep on pulling it?

[Medium: he's happy he's very happy]

PAUL: He's dead!

[Lodge ritual]

PAUL: Oh gosh you have to share it as well. Wow not good.

PAUL: Is this the polygamists? It still happens doesn't it?

SERENA: Oh yeah.

PAUL: I was having an argument with [name] who says it doesn't and she said she'd give me a thousand quid if I could prove it did.

[Conversation about prosecuting polygamists in UK]

PAUL: I think Louis Theroux did something… that was really interesting.

[Muffled discussion about US drama *Big Love*]

[Jesus appearing to Joseph Smith]

SERENA: Well that makes more sense than the usual him travelling the world before he died.

[People see Mormons as sex crazed, inaudible response denying this]

PAUL: Too knackered!

[On same sex marriages being outlawed]

SERENA: Yes that's awful isn't it?

[All: Mmm]

[inaud comments and laughter about pyramid]

PAUL: There's super smash robots inside!

[POJ: No I'm opposed to drinking nectar that has no alcohol in - lots of laughter]

[Howls of laughter at discussion of Egyptians and mummified cats]

LAURA: What if he's still alive? Look at the disgruntled expression on that cat's face! Wonder what it died from.

[laughing at POJ saying it was interesting]

LAURA: Oh God, that was just [laughs].

SERENA: Oh, it's [the last faith] not science!

RAD: Well I suppose that's [science] not really a faith, although some people believe in it.

Programme ends.

PAUL: I enjoyed that. It was more informative for me, there was less, a lot less bias, more informative, I liked the humour that he interjected it with, made it more viewable.

SERENA: It was personal, rather than biased, wasn't it?

PAUL: Yeah, yeah.

SERENA: Yeah.

PAUL: But it was, the actual there was loads and loads of facts, loads of information which was really presented in a nice way. [**SERENA**: yes] It allowed you to make your own mind up about stuff.

SERENA: His liberalism definitely comes through in how he presented that, which I thought the other thing, despite science not being a religion was definitely that persepctive. I'm not sure how you would do it without an open mind, given the subject but it was erm it [*GYPP*] closed everything down whereas this he, I don't know, he asked more questions than he answered, didn't he?

PAUL: And there was a question mark over the stuff at the end of each section, again allowing you to make your own mind up, whereas the other guy in the other documentary was…

KEITH: Well he did make his own views very clear with the nods to camera about the spiritualists and the [**SERENA**: yeah] wise earthy Navaho and stuff, its... it was a bit easy for me, where were the hard targets like the scientologists?

RAD: Presumably they wouldn't allow them after their last experience with the BBC.

KEITH: Yeah.

[**RAD** explains *Panorama*]

SERENA: Vaguely rings a bell now. The law wasn't involved was it?

RAD: I can't remember but I do know that the scientologists weren't exactly happy so I'm guessing they...

RAD: Did you, was there anything unexpected that you didn't expect in that?

SERENA: In terms of religion, or the way he presented it?

RAD: Either, anything.

SERENA: The last stuff, I must admit I'd come across most stuff in there but the last thing [Burning Man] I hadn't, erm.

LAURA: I did think initially the Burning Man thing was his excuse to get the BBC to pay for him to go to Burning Man festival! [Laughter] But the bit at the very end justified it I think, you know with the burning down the thing. I thought, you just, that's licence fee payer money!

PAUL: As a bit of an aside, I mean I'm not a religious person, I'm more of an anti-religious person but if I was going to be drawn to anything, in the last five or ten

minutes, the Burning Man thing was, most religions seem to me to be very exclusive, and here was a religion that kind of welcomed difference, welcomed you. I mean as a gay man with a Hindu partner, I'm kind of cast aside in many ways anyway but this was a religion that kind of included everyone and that was kind of refreshing to see, it was nice I always have a perception that religion is very exclusive always.

SERENA: See that's where I get, it's the fundamentalist religion that's very exclusive. I think Hinduism's quite an open faith [**PAUL** yeah] if you've got, it's just a general wave across at the moment, I guess we see that in Islam of course or perhaps in people's attitudes towards it a bit more but yeah I…

PAUL: Mmm.

RAD: Did it confirm or challenge any of your already existing perceptions about America or religion in America?

PAUL: For me no. I've always believed that again, the constitution is that anyone can believe what they want to believe and actually I think that's fantastic. I'm an atheist but I think that's fantastic. Who should dictate to anybody else what you should believe in? The fact that there's fourteen billion religions knocking about, great. I you know, it's not for me to dictate to others so I kind of liked that aspect.

SERENA: It's been a while since I've read anything around it but yeah I come from a I suppose I come from a CofE sort of background with various other Christian denominations, but I certainly, yeah, to be pretty honest this sort of pretty much aside from the last part of what I came to associate with the Bible Belt.

PAUL: The tongue-in-cheek humour was good, you know, I liked that and I think sometimes you get a difficult situation or something that's difficult to manage and by interjecting humour you can kind of lift it a little bit and yeah I liked that, it was nice, he's got a good sense of humour. I think it's needed sometimes, so yeah, that was also good. Generally the tone was much higher. It was yeah, it made you think more. The last documentary, they were completely different and you know they were obviously screened by different people as well but the motives were different.

SERENA: Well he's a religious minister to start off with isn't he, so I suppose he was coming at it from a spiritual...

RAD: Do you think that makes a difference having somebody that is religious themselves as to the other narrator who never laid his credentials on the table, you didn't know what if anything he…

PAUL: We didn't know who he was or where he was from. I think it was nice that this guy had got his own kind of way of doing stuff and was able to step back to try and look at other ways and I think that was really nice. It wasn't biased, it didn't feel biased at all and that was quite refreshing because you'd expect somebody to be kind of a little bit, erm, judgemental. He wasn't, I liked that.

SERENA: But you knew, he's a Reverend, isn't he so you, you hope you get an idea of where he's generally coming from whereas the other guy, by the end I think you get an idea of where he's coming from or where his producer, director or whatever is coming from but [sigh]. To be fair there was a lot more covered.

PAUL: Yeah.

RAD: Same length of time, though.

SERENA: Really?

PAUL: But how much more did they, got squeezed into that, I mean there was a lot more.

SERENA: To be honest that really felt much longer and a lot more meaty than the other programme.

LAURA: It was a lot more personal that one, wasn't it? And uh…

KEITH: Yeah, you knew him better by the end [all: yeah] than the other guy.

RAD: Do you think that its, programmes about belief and whatever, do you think having a personal dimension adds to that, do you think it's important?

SERENA: Well belief and faith is all centred around that so yeah I'd say it's essential really.

LAURA: Cos otherwise how do you know? I mean the other guy, we knew nothing about him but he was quite he felt a little bit sneering towards, especially towards the end, like he was properly distancing himself whereas with this guy we knew that he believed in God, the way that he believed in God, the sort of church he belonged to, which sort of, I felt like I got to know him through the programme whereas the other guy couldn't tell you anything about him.

PAUL: Couldn't pick him out in a line-up.

LAURA: No.

SERENA: Yeah.

LAURA: And that's, his programme was like that, you couldn't pick that out it's the sort of bland stuff you turn off after five minutes.

KEITH: Well, it's a BBC Three documentary, isn't it?

LAURA: You wouldn't bother with it.

KEITH: You don't watch *Kizzy, Mum at 14* do you? [laughter]

RAD: Were either of the programmes, either in terms of style or in terms of format of the documentary, are either of them the kinds of things you would normally watch?

KEITH: I initially wanted to watch *80 Faiths* but his sort of friendly, no-tie vicar sort of thing really did put me off initially. He wasn't actually as bad to sit through as I thought he might be.

LAURA: He's a bit Hugh-Fearnley Whittingstall, isn't he?

KEITH: Yeah.

SERENA: Were you expecting somebody more fundamentalist and more?

KEITH: A bit more limbless, CofE, rubbish, you know.

SERENA: I do know exactly what you mean, yeah, I do.

KEITH: Vicars playing guitar, that sort of thing.

SERENA: Yeah but that sort of goes with the [inaud] your average sort of mainstream CofE these days it seems to me is more fundamentalist anyway, where I was watching to see if he, with that gay wedding I was thinking I will definitely see…

KEITH: Which way is he gonna jump?

SERENA: Yeah, yeah we are gonna, because when he was smiling I was sort of wasn't sure if I'm reading that right, I wasn't sure if he's uncomfortable with what's going on here but yeah, I, it's the sort of thing I wish I had watched it now. I mean I'd read about it.

RAD: I'm sure they will repeat it again[1].

SERENA: Yeah.

PAUL: My being an atheist takes it, kind of takes a strong programme to draw me in and when I saw them advertised, erm, I don't know which particular one it was and I thought, yeah must watch that. I didn't because something obviously came up, but for me as an atheist to watch anything remotely involving religion it has to have kind of an angle so yeah, it was something I would have liked to have watched, and I enjoyed it, whereas the last one was kind of yeah we all know where that's going but this one I went into them both really with a completely open mind but this one took me along many different roads whereas the last one was kind of one [inaud] road. But yeah I liked it, I enjoyed it very much.

RAD: In terms of how television presents the religious, the spiritual, what do you think television's role is, whether it's the BBC, or ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, or maybe the

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[1] They didn't.

specialist channels, what do you think the roles are of television to present religion and spirituality, how do you think it should do it, what do you think it should show?

SERENA: It should be representative of the society you're reflecting. I mean BBC gets criticised a lot for this, doesn't it, you get, some of them are so dire as well, what's it called on Radio 4 in the mornings?

RAD: *Thought for the Day*?

PAUL: *Thought for the Day.*

SERENA: Thank you yes, and some of them are, well who is this representing, exactly? I dunno and then your sort of guitar-playing no-tie vicar but erm whereas there I guess the programmes are sort of defending themselves about the kind of spread they do. Christianity gets an awful lot of, they usually get slapped around the place for not doing enough *Songs of Praise*-y type stuff but I guess they do all in some respects, should be, we should get something that's reflective of the society that we're in. Whether or not that would go down well with…

RAD: So what kinds of programming, services and ceremonies or a travelogue like this or a variety?

PAUL: A variety, because we live in a world of variety, in just you know, an hour, well I won't include the last one because it didn't take me into another world, well it did but [all laugh] erm, but seeing things in other countries, things we don't get to see and I think it's a duty and responsibility of programme makers to say right here's an accurate reflection of what goes on in this particular part of the world. Here's how it is, then make your own mind up if you think you know you wanna see more or research more.

I don't like it when things are so biased because they will then show only footage that meets what they set out to do and, that's kind of not fair. You know this guy presented stuff in a way that's kind of, I liked, I'll go home now, look at Burning Man stuff on the internet [**KEITH** right] I might find.

RAD: [My friend] went to Burning Man.

PAUL: Really? Cool.

SERENA: I think it kind of depends because that kind of thing as you say is informative, it opens things up, um, for people generally, but if you're talking about showing worship and ceremonies like songs of praise that kind of thing then I would say I mean th's not so informative I don't think, it's there for people who already believe and can't get out.

KEITH: It's the chance to be in a choir isn't it?

PAUL: Yeah, they're converted.

SERENA: Yeah, its, I suppose it, *Songs of Praise* is trying to convert [inaud] but it's the people that can't…

PAUL: It's a celebration I guess, I mean the people that are in there.

SERENA: Comforting I guess, I mean your average person who is part of the church but can't get to church, rather than get a recording of the sermon, but that gives more of a sense of congregation than perhaps you normally would do, I don't know.

PAUL: But something like that if I switched on and it was on I'd have, eugh, I'd switch channels in a second, but something like this I'd sit and watch because it's interesting, because it's another part of the world and I get excited by watching things like that.

SERENA: Because that's informative [**PAUL**: yeah] On *Songs of Praise*…

PAUL: You don't want some old dear singing Come all Ye whatever it is I dunno, I don't do hymns.

LAURA: Yeah but…

PAUL: That doesn't excite, it doesn't stimulate.

[Inaudible as they all talk over each other]

PAUL: I tell you the one thing on that, the gospel thing, I can't, God, give me Whoopi Godlberg, when she did *Sister Act*, 'I Will Follow Him' and the sense of community, I know that was religious based but it was fantastic, I thought it was energetic but you lack a…[inaud]… I got forced to go to Sunday School as a child and I think it kind of scarred me, it was horrible.

SERENA: It would. I used to take myself along, I know, I was a strange child.

PAUL: It was vile. I used to go round the back eventually and smoke. I like being a rebel, but it was boring, and again these documentaries give you an opportunity to witness how other people do it and you know we're very privileged you know, fifty years ago we wouldn't have had this, even less.

RAD: Thinking about the media in general… are there presentations of religion or spirituality in there that have challenged you either because you thought that's

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interesting, or you thought I really don't like that, or you've thought I've never seen that before?

[Pause]

SERENA: I was listening to something on Radio 4 recently that had, erm challenging what it was challenging the perception I guess in some ways, I can't think what it was now, it was, I say religion, maybe it wasn't as specific, I was guessing Hindu stroke Islam but it was the abuse of women in this country coming over from India and this kind of cloak of but it was a cultural thing.

KEITH: Yeah, that was *Woman's Hour*, I heard it.

SERENA: In that case, yeah, and that kind of, even though I felt I should have known it, it did challenge the idea that it was actually coming from within as opposed to something that we were imposing, so from that perspective, yes but I think I might have seen something else recently.

RAD: Or has there been anything that has just stood out?

SERENA: You mean in things like soaps?

RAD: Anything.

SERENA: Well they're really going for it in *EastEnders* at the moment aren't they with the whole gay Muslim storyline?

PAUL: Oh, that one again [laughs]

SERENA: I think it's really…

PAUL: Is it?

SERENA: The Muslim one is I think they're really going for it.

PAUL: Yeah yeah good point.

PAUL: I watch *Emmerdale* because I'm kind of an *Emmerdale* freak and Ashley's been kind of questioning his old belief systems and his value base after his little son died and it got swapped round and that was quite interesting because it opened up the whole what are my beliefs based on kind of thing erm he's gone back to it now with [inaud] lovely but erm yeah, I thought that was quite good.

SERENA: Cos I think it's kind of a misconception that faith is supposed to be there as a sort of teddy bear, supposed to paper over the cracks. Faith is supposed to be there to challenge you, not to make you feel better, it's there to sort of make it more real, so yeah I did see some of that storyline and I agree with you there.

LAURA: I went on the BBC website remember on Easter Sunday what was it about, about Ken in *Coronation Street*, which I don't watch but I read about it on the BBC.

KEITH: Oh, I had to watch it, my mum watches it.

LAURA: He said something about religion's made up so you can feel better cos like he made an atheist comment [**KEITH:** On Easter Sunday] so there was a storm of protest about, that, people tutted or something. It got quite high up on the BBC website that Christians were annoyed that he'd made anti-God sentiment on Easter Sunday.

SERENA: That is quite amusing that cos the bloke himself isn't at all which is kind of, he the guy who plays him, you'd think he's sort of.

LAURA: Well he looks like a vicar doesn't he?

SERENA: He had a small daughter that died, about two or three and he talks about sort of visions and stuff like that to do with which is really weird for someone who's sort of like best mates with Jeffrey Archer it doesn't really equate.

KEITH: Ken Barlow and his visions!

[All laugh]

SERENA: But I suppose the character is one that's supposed to be Mr Educated and therefore is an atheist…

PAUL: The thing is, religion [is] so incredibly different for everybody, it's whatever it is for you. Why do we try to box it? We're obsessed with boxes, from a sociological perspective. It's an individual thing and you take from it whatever suits you and whatever works for you, you don't have to try to live everything by the letter and that's just…

SERENA: Fundamentalists would hate you.

PAUL: But I've got too many examples where it kind of gets proven.

SERENA: But it is that sort of fundamentalist attitude.

PAUL: But I've met really unhappy people that live it by the letter and you think, God, balance!

SERENA: Might be a guilt thing going on.

PAUL: Yeah, yeah. A Catholic thing?

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SERENA: To be fair, I associate it with most of Christianity, not just Catholicism.

RAD: I don't think it's exclusive to Christianity either.

SERENA: Probably not, yeah.

PAUL: I think the Jews are quite good at it yeah.

RAD: The Muslims have got a fair line on it too.

[All laugh]

SERENA: I guess it's part of the human condition in that case but it just seems, yeah.

PAUL: Probably the most extreme, or one that sticks in my mind is a 52 year old mate of mine who's never had sex with anybody. He's gay and he's never had sex with anybody because his religion would condemn it and he's spent his entire life in torment. I've known him twenty years and he identifies as being gay but he can't proceed with anything because he'll be, in his mind, kind of cast aside and you just think wow, this guy's wasted his entire life. He struggles massively with it, the conflict is huge and you just kind of think...

SERENA: Yes there is something frightening about something that makes you deny yourself that much.

PAUL: Yeah.

SERENA: Then you get people, I mean you get these people, does it come under religion, Christianity? I'm pretty sure it does that think they can cure [homosexuality]... I saw a programme about it.

RAD: There are streams in America.

PAUL: Westboro Baptist Church?

RAD: Westboro Baptist Church are a law unto themselves aren't they?

KEITH: Yeah.

PAUL: They're off their trolley. Did you watch that documentary on that?

RAD: Which did you watch, the Keith Allen or the Louis Theroux?

PAUL: Keith Allen, who really gave them a run for their money. [SERENA asks about them] Westboro Baptist Church is, uh, Google it, YouTube, really.

SERENA: Right.

PAUL: God hates fags. Erm, absolute. Sending kids out with boards. They were coming to the UK but they've been banned han't they? Not been allowed in.

SERENA: So specifically hinged around the idea of homosexuality?

RAD: Well it's a very small, it's about 20, 30 people isn't it?

PAUL: Yeah, and they all live on a little commune.

KEITH: Can we call it a cult?

LAURA: It might be the ones, was it Louis Theroux?

RAD: Louis Theroux and Keith Allen, they both did one with them.

LAURA: Well there was one where they gave them a specific date where they were going to get took up to heaven and the date passed and they went back and they could see them all standing there but they wouldn't let them back in.

RAD: That's *The End of the World Cult* which is another…

SERENA: Jehovah's Witnesses had that didn't they? They kept moving the date and then it didn't work. They had to stop it in the end but yeah that's…

LAURA: Stop themselves looking silly.

SERENA: Well they just…

LAURA: They look increasingly ludicrous each time it…

RAD: Why do you think people like Gary and the Westboro Baptist Church and the End of the World Cult let the cameras in?

PAUL: Because they passionately believe in what they do and that's absolutely fine, but please don't tell me that I'm wrong for not subscribing to what you believe in. I think they want to ridicule their people because they're so passionate. I like, I dunno, let me think of an example, I like strawberry cheesecake but I don't need to convert everyone else to loving strawberry cheesecake, if they prefer something else.

SERENA: If you were saved through strawberry cheesecake then you might have to.

PAUL: If what?

SERENA: If you were saved through…

PAUL: Oh saved, oh it's saved me a few times, I've got to admit! The strawberry cheesecake Häagen-Dazs, let's not even go there! [lots of laughter]

SERENA: I think this is this idea isn't there, that God is some sort of quiz show host, going Uh-uh, you've got the wrong answer, you're not coming in, you know, there is that kind of…

PAUL: Exclusivity, yeah. Again, it's just acceptance of difference and I do wanna convert people on some of my beliefs cos I'm passionate about them, but you have to learn to draw a line and these extremist people really want to get more memberships because perhaps it justifies what they do, perhaps it gives them validity, perhaps it gives them utility, perhaps it makes them, perhaps it reassures them around some of their own issues about disbelieving what it is they believe in if that makes any sense at all. Maybe it just reassures.

SERENA: The one that struck me was the Mormons there and everyone else was trying to convert while they were alive and bless them I can remember my mum's friend, her parents were Mormon and my grandfather was a, well he was a Baptist minister but not in the vein that you're talking about, he was actually.

RAD: What, a British Baptist minister, or?

SERENA: Not even what you would get now, he was more, to be honest, to be honest you'd probably see it more aligned with CofE, we're talking pre-war, but he was started working pre-second world war but he, after he died, my mum's best friend's father sort of said, that's why they have all that stuff there, you can go back and research your family tree there can't you, cos they go back over generations, they convert everybody, they just do it posthumously. Can you imagine my mum's face at the

thought of, just yes, so they really are making sure that they've got everybody on side!

[Laughs]

PAUL: Safety in numbers, that's, I think you hit the nail on the head, but if you believe in something passionately, it doesn't… I don't really care what anybody else really believes in something or not, If I believe it that's what matters and [sigh].

SERENA: We could all believe the world is cuboid but it ain't gonna turn cuboid is it?

PAUL: Yeah!

SERENA: That bit seems to escape…

PAUL: Well beliefs are personal as well aren't they? They're not, I don't want everyone believing the same things as I believe, that's what makes me me.

KEITH: If everyone did as they were told then…

PAUL: Yeah. I think some people are a bit bored too and I'm going to be borderline a bit offensive here but the more extreme religious people, I think they need to go out and get a life sometimes, get a real life and kind of not centre it around something that… this is me as an atheist coming out, I can't help it but I just kind of thing people need, the more extreme guys and I'm thinking now of the really extreme guys need to get out and live real life rather than focus around church and God and religion. It's about family, it's about love, it's about friendship, it's about having fun, it's about lots of other things, not to the exclusivity of everything to have religion, it seems a bit sad.

SERENA: But it's a good way of helping the vulnerable isn't it, again, that papering over the cracks. I do consider myself to be spiritual and I guess more drawn to religion than most people in this room but I say that it's, I've seen it so many times that it doesn't really matter which religion it is, that I would say personally that it's almost the fundamentalist aspect of that that it's, they want to reach out and it's the vulnerable people that that need that and it's almost kind of like that, it's a bit like being co-dependent, you've got an alcoholic, a co-dependent and…

PAUL: Exactly, mutual co-dependece that kind of sums it up. I'm not talking about people who believe it, Serena, I don't want you to get me wrong.

SERENA: No, I understand that.

PAUL: Good. I'm talking about the people who live their lives totally there… yeah, they can be extremists, I think 'get out more, do things'!

SERENA: Open your mind.

PAUL: But it's not the people who believe, I don't want to go into detail but there's two Christians I've been communicating with over the last two or three weeks, both have got similar situations going on. Person A, dealing with it very well. Person B, 'But I'm a Christian so I've got to support this person'. Person A is absolutely fine with stuff, Person B is in bits, and I'm thinking hang on, there has to be a way, there has to be a limit, there has to be a boundary. The whole religion thing is clouding their judgement, it's becoming dangerous.

SERENA: Person B wants to become a saint. I would say that's co-dependency, not religion.

PAUL: I completely agree but they're using the thing of religion... ugh.

RAD: Get Person A to talk to Person B.

PAUL: I wish I could put them in the same room because Person A would whoop Person B's butt because Person A is incredible. This person just gets on with it, she believes her beliefs for her, very privately, very personal, fantastic.

SERENA: And [she?] also needs to say, that's the one thing.

PAUL: That's utility innit? So, I just see religion as being kind of at the root of an awful lot of stuff and creating further issues, but I say that as an atheist [laughs].

SERENA: I suspect there's plenty of atheists who have plenty of issues! It's a good vehicle to put it on but I suspect yeah.

PAUL: I don't really need to do this but I feel comfortable [discusses a difficult experience as a child]. As an adult, the whole religion thing for me, I have to work really hard not to question it because for me that wasn't about being good, it was about being contradictory, it was about control, it was about all sorts of other issues, but that's where I kind of, where my atheist thing came from.

SERENA: That's got to be healthy that you feel that way about it.

PAUL: Yeah. I'm passionately atheist yeah, and I have tried years ago to say you know what's this atheist thing about, am I really an atheist or and I am, I absolutely am, but I've got a reason for it and I've made my mind up over many years of crap, bad things happen to all of us of course they do, but we question them and I've not been able to come up with enough reason to convince myself that I'm not an Atheist. At least I'm

passionate about my belief, so many people throw the term Atheism around when they're not even sure what it means.

SERENA: So many people use it when they mean Agnostic.

PAUL: Yeah, I think I'd agree with that, I think I'd agree. So again, I'd go back to the point that for me to sit and watch a programme about religion, deep down, initially I kind of wanna go [makes a noise] but I don't, I sit and watch, because I've made my mind up, I'm comfortable with my belief about religion, I can therefore open my mind a little bit…. Yeah, the last five minutes [of *ATW80*], I could have gone there. There was this church, the most unusual looking church I've ever seen, I was, wow, if I could put up with the heat I would go [laughs].

SERENA: I've also tried the sweat lodge thing and those things always scared the hell out of me. I think what he was saying after that…

PAUL: The sickness thing got me, the heat.

SERENA: Well, before we went in I was, he looked so amazed by it and…

PAUL: If you've ever sat in a sauna for fifteen minutes and then come out.

SERENA: I know but I've never actually sat in .

PAUL: Have you not? Have you ever done it?

KEITH: No.

PAUL: It's bizarre, it's like the change in temperature makes you quite high. So when he says I feel on a whole different level, I kind of could relate to that, but the sickness

thing, ooh, and you're cleansed? No, you're just a pound lighter [all laugh] but erm I go back, it's what every individual believes in, that's cool.

RAD: Do any of you subscribe to the view that what you believe is fine and it's down to the individual, does everybody share that perspective?

SERENA: Well it depends on if there's harm to other people, doesn't it?

PAUL: Does it? Tell us more about that.

SERENA: Well you get your fundamentalists, like they were saying about California, I found that very upsetting. I guess it hinges on the problem with a great deal of fundamentalists whatever sort of faith it is because it does end up impinging on other people and that's where I had my hangups because, it's possibly unfair and probably biased but that's where I have my problems.

PAUL: But that's based on considering other people's feelings so that's kind of alright.

[Laughter]

LAURA: An abortion doctor's been shot in America.

KEITH: That's the last religion in the media thing I can think of, coverage of that, just, shot in a church.

SERENA: It's terrible.

LAURA: We believe in the sanctity of life - except yours – BANG!

[Laughter]

LAURA: It's ironic though, isn't it? And a bit… depressing.

KEITH: Yeah.

SERENA: You can't actually have everybody believing what they want to believe

because otherwise…

KEITH: Because some people would believe in shooting other people.

PAUL: Mmm. That goes back to the extremism, doesn't it, I guess?

Online focus group #1. Programme: *Revelations*: 'Muslim School'. **Participants:** Conga, Woof, Alk, Eurodesign

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CONGA: Maybe wait a minute for people to remember

CONGA: while I put some eggs on to boil for tea!….

RAD: Evening Mutt

RAD: Will give it two or three mins to see who turns up and then we'll get going

WOOF: Hi **RAD**

…

RAD: Glad you came

RAD: Hope I won't have to keep @replying people for the next six episodes

RAD: But this is the first week I've done this and only set it up at the weekend

CONGA: Is @replying a twitter thing?

WOOF: Oh, it's a series? I thought it was a once-off.

RAD: conga - ys, sorry

RAD: Mutt - a series of eight one-off docs

RAD: last week was the first one

WOOF: hehe, figures

RAD: So why were you watching tonight?

CONGA: I watched because I like documentaries and think Islam is widely misunderstood. I'd like to learn more about it

WOOF: I've explored a number of religions, quite in depth (and have blogged about it), and I just wanted to see if this episode showed anything unexpected. I'm a bit cynical about TV documentaries, I'm afraid.

RAD: Woof - me too (fairly obviously)

RAD: So what were your overall impressions

RAD: ?

CONGA: I love them. You get to learn things from a vastly skewed point of view!

WOOF: It's not the documentaries that are a bad thing. It's normally the execution.

RAD: I have a love/hate relationship with them

RAD: evening euro

EURODESIGN: hello RAD

RAD: We're just getting started about why people watched the programme tonight

EURODESIGN: are you the phd person ?

CONGA: I didnt feel like I learned a lot about it. Although it was good to hear some quotes from the koran and points of view of mostly women. Its a male dominated religion (from what i've seen) so good to focus on the girls

RAD: Yes I am, sorry, should have said

EURODESIGN: ok

WOOF: Normally I wouldn't favour following young kids around and asking for their insights or opinions on things like religion, as they're really vessels being filled by those around them. Mirrors of their parents and teachers. At least until a certain point.

EURODESIGN: I didnt see it

WOOF: euro: It's on Ch4+1 now if you're in the UK.

RAD: Mutt: do you think there would be a better way of doing a programme about faith schools?

ALK: Evening...

RAD: Evening alk

RAD: I'm Ruth (the one doing the PhD)

ALK: Ahhh...

ALK: Watching that Revelations programe live (C4+1)

EURODESIGN: why do you call yourself RAD ?

RAD: It's my initials, no great mystery

WOOF: RAD: I'm not sure, particularly because it is faith/religion we're talking about. Young children are parrots of their parents/teachers and adults are normally dogmatic adherents. It's difficult.

EURODESIGN: ok

CONGA: I thought the kids in the programme werent very much like that though

CONGA: The white girl chose the religion herself and although its not like its an easy ride, she is kept inside and has to study a lot, it was her choice

ALK: Stlll concerns me...

CONGA: the other girl was a bit more forced and took it all a bit more seriously but her mother seemed very open, explaining that religion is more about whats on the inside

WOOF: I was pleased with the 7yo girl (the one near the end chatting with her mum about wearing hijab), as she did exercise critical thinking. It's encouraging.

RAD: Do you think there should have been more 'voices' in the doc? (eg teachers, parents, other kids, etc?)

ALK: (I'll see that in 50 mins)

CONGA: i do know what you mean though, religious children of any sort are a bit worrying

ALK: OK - I'll lay my cards on the table - active Baptist Christian..

RAD: I thought it was interesting watching it after seeing things like Deborah 13 and Baby Bible Bashers if any of you saw those

EURODESIGN: whats your main degree in RAD ?

WOOF: RAD: As in providing more perspective, or as in making it more engaging?

ALK: ... but when you have kids claiming that they have no allegiance ot where they are living...

RAD: Mutt - maybe both

RAD: euro - media/sociology

ALK: Yeah - most Chirstians would class the parents of the Baby Bible Bashers as complete wingnuts...

CONGA: yes, more voices would have made it a bit deeper. I might have gained a bit more by hearing from the absent father perhaps

EURODESIGN: right

WOOF: RAD: Personally, I like the "follow the life of person X" approach as it lets you see more. But there is a risk that the perspective is limited.

CONGA: I liked the older sister perspective. Same family, different paths

RAD: What did we make of the presenter?

RAD: (well, journo/narrator)

WOOF: alk: The nature of Islam is allegiance to it first; place of abode second. Though that interpretation varies as much as Christian opinion on prophylaxis.

RAD: Isn't that true of a lot of religions though, for those that are very devout, anyway? That religion comes first

ALK: yeah - still worrying when we have people like CHoudhary being on record was wanting military action against the host country

WOOF: RAD: She seemed to be more a prompter, perhaps relying too much on the children carrying the motion.

ALK: *with

CONGA: but with children you have to prompt them a bit more or they'll ramble on

EURODESIGN: adults too

RAD: Do you think the documentary had a particular agenda?

CONGA: or was that what you meant, that she let them ramble too much?

CONGA: maybe to show the muslim school was just like any other. or maybe better

WOOF: RAD: Actually, no. And that's rare. Normally you can see the agenda of the interviewer/producer/channel from a mile away, but this one seemed to be genuine.

RAD: I kind of felt I'd have liked to understand the school more.

RAD: But I understand that the two girls would make better telly

WOOF: djembe: Yes, I meant that the interviewer wasn't interactive enough. But then there's a risk of leading the interviewee.

WOOF: RAD: Yes, it seemed to leave the practical side of it all -- the school, the circumstances, the environment -- to the viewer, with their own understanding (or lack of).

CONGA: cccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccc

CONGA: sorry, that was the cat

RAD: Yes, I would have liked to understand more about its relationship to mainstream schools and so on than I felt the doc covered, but then I work in education and have many teacher friends so maybe that's why.

WOOF: I liked how the interviewer asked the mother about the "segregation from society" issue, though it's a pity she didn't push for a meaningful response.

CONGA: a lot of the benefits are the same as private schools, smaller class sizes etc

ALK: Agreed..

CONGA: which mother was that? i dont remember that bit

ALK: That kid being asked about why they wear head-coverings scares me./

RAD: Why scares?

ALK: (sorry - Good Little Evangelical coming out there)

WOOF: djembe: The mother of the young girl, discussing the hijab.

WOOF: al: Perhaps it might help to remember that mainstream Christianity required its women to cover their heads in church until relatively recently.

CONGA: you mean that they wear because it will help them get to paradise

CONGA: i think thats a symptom of the male influence on history and religion. they dont want people distracted by the beautiful ladies

ALK: ... which in turn subjugates even further..

RAD: I thought it was interesting that she told the interviewer she was a good person and would go to Paradise and the hijab was only for Muslims - seems very different from the Christian conception. I thought Islam was like Christianity in its 'this is...

RAD: ...the only way' kind of approach, so that surprised me. Was that just the girl's belief, or is that common, anyone know?

CONGA: although at the start of that conversation the interviewer asked if she'd go to paradise and the girl goes 'nooo thats just for us!' but then turned it around to be a bit more open.

RAD: I thought she meant the hijab was just for them

CONGA: yeah hijab just for muslims but you can still be a good person and (maybe) go to paradise if you didn't wear it because she wasnt required

WOOF: RAD: You mean that only Muslimas have to cover their heads, and it's not required of non-Muslims? Technically it's optional/voluntary for all Muslimas, but the hierarchy (patriarchy really) mandates it in more fundamentalist communities.

ALK: A tad different from Jesus dealing with it all - perfect sacrifice and all..

WOOF: RAD: Like fish on Fridays for Christians. It's not mandatory, but...

RAD: Mutt: no, sorry, I meant where she was saying well what conga says

RAD: al - true in terms of a general Christian concept, but many streams of Christianity don't really live according to that principle and live more to rule, ritual and behaviour etc.

CONGA: the hijab is just an extra. jesus died for people to go to christian-paradise so technically you don't HAVE to go to church and have bible study and things but people do to lead a more holy life

CONGA: so all thats extra too

RAD: Did people see any publicity for the programme tonight?

CONGA: I agree, RAD, many people live according to ritual rather than having god in their hearts

CONGA: I saw the aderts on channel 4

WOOF: Though dogma has been subsequently added to Christianity to ensure people still do go to church, behave themselves, etc, despite the belief that Jesus died for everyone's sins.

EURODESIGN: i did

RAD: Do we think the C4 ads were a fair representation of the programme?

RAD: (And did anyone see any other publicity apart from the trailers?)

EURODESIGN: no

CONGA: yeah, mutt, to make you better christians. the hijab helps make you better muslim, not just muslim to start with

WOOF: RAD: No, I had no idea it was on. Stumbled across it.

RAD: Mutt - channel flicking or in a TV guide?

WOOF: djembe: Yes, I think that's a fair analogy of the beliefs.

CONGA: The advert made it look just about the same as it was for real. Not spectacularly interesting but it did get me to watch

WOOF: RAD: I'd just finished watching the Tour de France highlights and saw the show title in the Next/Next list of my channels.

WOOF: Now/Next even

RAD: Did anyone see last week's episode?

ALK: Umm - when the religious police stopped an evac from a building fire because the women weren't wearing a headscarf?

WOOF: Not me, but I have set it to record the series now.

CONGA: i saw last weeks

ALK: (no assurance of salvation... hmmm)

CONGA: (and christians have done the same if not worse)

RAD: conga - how do you think the two weeks compare?

ALK: What's next week's ep?

RAD: Army chaplains next week

CONGA: about the same I think. interesting but not spectacular. last weeks got me a bit more engaged because I've experienced some of the things shown. This weeks was nothing I'd experienced so I couldnt engage as well

ALK: Ramadan - where the local Kebabish cook up a shedload of roti at around 4pm..

WOOF: Should be interesting, considering the cultural and religious diversity in modern armies. Well, most armies.

RAD: What do people think about this idea of a strand of religious docs in general? As in the format, scheduling, branding, style etc? (Hard to say after just two perhaps I know)

CONGA: must be one of the hardest places to be a chaplain. death all around, war and horror.

CONGA: date and time are perfect, sunday evenings

CONGA: sundays are good for religious programmes in an (officially) christian country

CONGA: but they're advertised just like regular channel 4 documentaries to hook a wider audience

WOOF: RAD: Perhaps too early to tell and, with a few exceptions (mentioned above), I like the fact there are no agendas, proselytising, witch hunts, setups, etc. Nice change for British TV documentaries.

CONGA: i agree, the two so far have seemed extremely impartial, no obvious agendas

RAD: Are you planning to watch the rest of them?

CONGA: (unlike Michael Moore for instance, who lies and twists things for his own agenda. He'd met Roger - from Roger and Me- before but pretended he hadn't)

WOOF: I am, yes.

CONGA: yes, I've set series record

WOOF: djembe: Yep. Can't stand Moore for his melodrama, manipulation and selective reporting.

CONGA: Do we know what the rest of the series is about or just the next episode?

RAD: I know there's a programme about an atheist understaker who used to be a believer (Christian I think) but not sure about the rest

CONGA: i thought Moore was brilliant... until I heard the 'truth' behind his methods

RAD: Presumably at least one Jewish and one Hindu programme

CONGA: an athiest undertaker? how unusual. A healthy respect for religion surely is a must

WOOF: The website only speaks about the last 2 and next week's:

http://www.channel4.com/programmes/revelations/episode-guide

ALK: As an aside, did people here catch Chris Moyles' comments on the Pentecost service aired? as an alternate view...?

RAD: Well being an atheist doesn't have to mean you don't respect religion

RAD: alk - yes I heard it on the way to work when it was on

WOOF: Why is a healthy respect for religion a requirement for being an undertaker?

WOOF: And yes, that's another common misconception - that all atheists and anti-theists. Not true.

CONGA: Jews can be very strict too, I watched a programme about Kosher foods once and the inspector who goes round the manufacturers making sure it really really is kosher

WOOF: I mean: that all atheists are anti-theists...

RAD: alk - I didn't see the service itself unfortunately but found it interesting to hear what he liked and what his expectations of religion had been compared to what he saw

ALK: Yep..

ALK: I'm part of the AV crew at a church like Kingsgate...

CONGA: well, I just meant that people grieving often look to the afterlife and religion and things and mabe being an athiest wouldnt help in that respect. Or maybe it would! i dont know, i didn't think that comment through

WOOF: Most Muslim (and indeed Christian) pop-apologists I know say: "Don't follow the believer, follow the belief."

RAD: conga - I've met several 'death' staff and they have a range of POVs but all seem to respect people's beliefs (or lack of) and are sensitive to the needs of the grieving.

CONGA: whats this about chris moyles pentecost thing?

ALK: Can URLs be posted here, **RAD**?

RAD: conga - there was a service (a one-off I think, not SoP) on Pentecost and he really enjoyed it

RAD: You can post them but sometimes these chat rooms crash when you click on the URLS.

CONGA: Well thats good RAD, I just have this idea that athiests would be uncaring about people's religions. But that doesnt really add up does it. Why does being an athiest mean you're intolerant. ok I retract my comment

CONGA: Oh, wait I think i saw that on tell

ALK: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StEDAjhuiTo

CONGA: was it where people held up signs to show what they were before god then what they are now

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WOOF: It's simple humanism - we're all clinging to this rock together. It costs nothing to respect another's beliefs (and to keep your own view to yourself). Because of that I don't understand why the undertaker's beliefs (or lack of) remotely matter.

ALK: Djembe - not quite - more a progression - God working in their lives

CONGA: but that was the service? the one with the signs?

WOOF: alk: Whatever gets you through the night.

RAD: I don't think they matter as long as they don't affect their professionalism - but as a doc subject it's presumably going to be interestingish or they wouldn't have commissioned it

WOOF: RAD: Yeah, I agree.

RAD: So which docs (religious or otherwise) do we like generally, and which do we dislike (other than Moore)?

…

[CONGA says Theroux and interesting subjects – I accidentally quit chat]

…

RAD: aaargh!

RAD: think that's the name of the programme#

RAD: that was on on Pent

WOOF: RAD: hehe, tried to do it the "right" way huh?

RAD: No, I just clicked the logout button (d'oh)

ALK: RAD - was the name of the BBC OB on Pentecost Sunday

RAD: Do people generally prefer a particular channel for factual programming or not?

ALK: RAD - sorry - was that I have a bit of a beef about sanitised worship coverage on BBC1 in Songs of Praise..

RAD: sanitised?

WOOF: RAD: I used to until the documentary channels started diversifying to catch

ratings. So the History channel is now the WW2 channel + woo channel + a little bit of

history. Discovery has gone that way, too.

RAD: As in more 'moderate'?

RAD: (e.g. not much in terms of 'free' worship etc)

ALK: Umm - as in not showing as much of the vibrant stuff that is the church today..

WOOF: RAD: Now I'll watch for docos on general channels, and typically base my

decision on the channel (i.e. don't expect rational docos from ITV or government-

critical ones from the BBC ;))

RAD: Oh right, yes

RAD: Do you watch Dispatches or Panorama?

ALK: Yes. Both.

RAD: What do people think of the style of those strands?

ALK: Panorama was better when it had a 1 hr slot.

WOOF: RAD: Sometimes. Depends upon the topic. I've seen some truly shocking

imitations of documentaries from both. (Can't remember which to give examples).

RAD: when you say imitations of docs, what do you mean?

WOOF: Agenda-driven rubbish and propaganda... probably written by Nicky Campbell

CONGA: sorry, computer just completely crashed, had to reboot

RAD: So is balance or neutrality something that's a key component of docs (for you

anyway)?

ALK: brb.. sorry...

CONGA: did i miss much?

RAD: getting opinions on Panorama and Dispatches at the mo

CONGA: no not necessarily

WOOF: RAD: It's appalling that question even has to be asked. (Not directed at you).

RAD: Well, I agree to a point... but I wonder how easy it is to make things without an agenda

RAD: Even if it's not overt

EURODESIGN: i think panorama and dispatches have the ageda to shock

CONGA: Louis Theroux approaches subjects from a definate point of view- the point of view of most people watching. So if he's interviewing extreme wrestlers who smash each other with barbed wire every week he approaches it from the point of view that its a viole

WOOF: It's probably not so bad when you know the angle and agenda of the presenters, but to pretend a presentation is neutral when it isn't is not good.

CONGA: violent and strange thing to do

CONGA: Thats exactly it Mutt

RAD: Mutt - yes, I agree with you there... it winds me up a lot

CONGA: Theroux has a definate point of view which is clear. If it pretends to be neutral when its not thats when its damaging

WOOF: And no channel in this country seems immune from it. Even the Beeb.

EURODESIGN: loius agenda is to interest

CONGA: Moore has a point of view but twists things in his favour which is wrong too

EURODESIGN: id say that for panorama and dispatches, conga

WOOF: I'm sure some filmmakers are unaware they're even doing it. Moore probably thinks he's doing the vox populi thing.

CONGA: or when Theroux interviews nazis or south african white racists (sorry cant remember the name) his point of view is clear and that makes a better show. I dont want to see him agreeing with nazis when 99.9% of the population dont

EURODESIGN: revelation 4+1 has just finished

CONGA: panorma and dispatches I dont normally watch, unless i see an advert for it and it looks interesting. They're a bit dramatic

EURODESIGN: i dont watch them

EURODESIGN: i deeply distrust them

RAD: When it comes to presenting religion, then, is there a 'right' approach, or could the more gentle stuff like tonight or the stuff where the presenter has a clear view (like Theroux) be equaly acceptable?

CONGA: Its the guy who introduces them in an ultra dramatic way like its the most devastating topic in the whole world

RAD: (if we're ruling out programmes that have a clear agenda but pretend they don't. Of which there are many)

RAD: Euro: why?

WOOF: RAD: Answering one of your earlier questions... I like docs on history and specific science topics that interest me (e.g. astronomy/cosmology, archaeology, evolution), providing it's not unidentifiably skewed,

EURODESIGN: i think they misinform RAD

CONGA: I'd not watch science. I don't know enough about it and would have to spend an hour learning instead of being interested

RAD: Euro: in the way Woof has indicated above, or in other ways?

WOOF: RAD: It's tough to present impartial religious docs, I think, for the reasons I mentioned above. Also, particularly with Islam, there's a common UK media misconception that there is any one (or 10) groups who represent that religion here.

RAD: Which Muslims themselves find problematic

CONGA: Someone making a documentary has to be passionate about the topic in order to follow through with it all. In that sense they are likely to have a point of view or agenda. But whether that leads to misinformation I'm not so sure

WOOF: Yes indeed.

RAD: (Or at least the ones I know)

WOOF: And it's worse when the govt goes straight to the MCB for the "British Muslim" viewpoint, and they're likely to get something that's disproportionately different to the population's opinion.

CONGA: The 'right' approach depends on the topic I think. A muslim school requires a gentle, impartial approach. Religious extremists require a more serious, less impartial point of view.

EURODESIGN: i was watching revelations, so i missed woofs earlier point

RAD: Sorry, I'll paste the comment

EURODESIGN: ok

WOOF: I think conga has a point. Sympathetic or antagonistic interviewers do tend to get the better results in a documentary in terms of viewer impact.

WOOF: RAD: Sometimes. Depends upon the topic. I've seen some truly shocking imitations of documentaries from both. (Can't remember which to give examples).

RAD: when you say imitations of docs, what do you mean?

WOOF: Agenda-driven rubbish and propag

EURODESIGN: i thought the children tonight were quite extreme

RAD: extreme in what way?

CONGA: I've seen way more extreme!

EURODESIGN: yes

WOOF: In my experience they are representative of the British Muslim population, at least of those I know.

EURODESIGN: in their beliefs

EURODESIGN: yes

EURODESIGN: probably woof

EURODESIGN: in a benign way

CONGA: The girl was passionate about the hijab and about getting to paradise but her mother was a calming influence and she did re-think her comments on a couple of things when pressed. if she was really very extreme she wouldnt have

WOOF: It's worth remembering that the British Muslim makeup is probably different to those in other countries. We have a lot of immigrants based upon our former colonies. France has with their former colonies. The US will have a cross-section, etc.

CONGA: They're holding on to Pakistani culture as much as the religion I think

RAD: euro - what were your overall thoughts now you;ve seen the whole doc?

RAD: as in about the doc itself as well as about the kids

EURODESIGN: i found it illuminating

EURODESIGN: it got me thinking of kids in general and how they rely on their parients for their view

EURODESIGN: it is limiting for them

WOOF: That's something I've been acutely aware of since I was in primary school. I remember kids spouting horrible things (personal, racial, etc) and realised they were echoing their parents' beliefs and opinions.

CONGA: Thats true across all cultures though. A kid with parents on the dole, no effort to make a better life will see that as the norm just as a muslim child will see Islam as the norm and the same in christianity

RAD: I think it's difficult not to raise kids to think what you think (and to grow up not thinking at keast in some ways like your parents) though, whether that's about religion, politics, money or anything else.

CONGA: yep, agree

EURODESIGN: yes

WOOF: Then you reach a certain point where you re-evaluate what you've been taught/picked up and then become wholly responsible for your perspective and world view.

EURODESIGN: i agree

CONGA: So its limiting but only in such a way as you can't possibly raise a child to believe everything in the world

WOOF: Coincidentally, that's normally the same time children of religion parents tend to leave the flock, so to speak.

EURODESIGN: mm i disagree

RAD: Woof - true but I still sometimes find myself thinking things and knowing I only think that because of my parents (even stupiod stuff like not liking pets because my parents don't)

CONGA: I agree with woof

EURODESIGN: i think you can teach correcvtly

CONGA: I think the parents in the film were level headed and open minded though and would support their children with whatever path they chose

WOOF: RAD: Oh yes, me too. We're the product of our parents and there's always things we experience through the lens of our formative years. Constant evaluation and critical thinking.

EURODESIGN: disagree with that conga

CONGA: could you expand on 'teach correctly' euro?

CONGA: well, the mother with the 16 year old who wasn't following Islam still loved her even though she disagreed with her lifestyle. She engaged the younger girl in a conversation about the hijab and how its not the only thing that makes you religious. She resp

EURODESIGN: put their viewpoint in the context of a sensible/workable view of the world

CONGA: respected her childrens points of views while trying to teach them to live good lives

EURODESIGN: yes conga

WOOF: My view on that would be to teach your kids critical thinking, nurturing compassion and giving them theunderstanding that people have different opinions and beliefs, and to let them use those tools to form their own conclusions, with support from parents.

CONGA: Ah yes that's a good way to describe teaching correctly

EURODESIGN: islam is conjecture

EURODESIGN: as is any religion

CONGA: christianity too then

EURODESIGN: yes

WOOF: Every belief system.

EURODESIGN: yes

EURODESIGN: but some work better than others

EURODESIGN: science works well

RAD: But if you genuinely believe it's the right way to live (or the only way in the case of at least the Abrahamic faiths) then you'll want your kids to live in that way.

EURODESIGN: i see that

CONGA: I think to a believer of any religion that's the religion which works best. i dont see how any work better than any other. The mainstream ones anyway, not talking offbeat cult type 'religions'

WOOF: But as Dawkins says, they nearly all encourage the dangerous notion that death is not the end. That one point changes absolutely everything.

EURODESIGN: yes

RAD: But is that dangerous? I think many people believe or want to believe in that, even if they have no faith

EURODESIGN: i dont

RAD: I know it *can* be dangerous, but I don't think it *generally~* is

EURODESIGN: true RAD

WOOF: RAD: Another quote I'm reminded of: People want to live forever, but find me one person who can think of something to do on a rainy day.

RAD: heh, nice quote

CONGA: hahaa thats a brilliant quite

RAD: who said it?

WOOF: Unfortunately, I don't know. I suspect it was a US standup comedian

CONGA: Woof just did (haha)

RAD: it'll probably be google-able I suspect

WOOF: No doubt.

EURODESIGN: science and an evidence based approach is workable

CONGA: workable in what way?

WOOF: RAD: I think Dawkins's meaning in that is that once you entertain the notion of death not being the end of it all, then you can create all manner of dogma and

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fantasies (some helpful: abject povery and misery -> "you'll get your reward in Djenna")

EURODESIGN: allows you to understand people and make technological advances

CONGA: (sorry, it's hard to keep up, I'm not used to chatrooms!)

WOOF: I agree with euro. If a concept can't stand up to logic and evidence, then it needs to be rejected or approached differently.

EURODESIGN: so keep the world in good shape

CONGA: yet in religion a large part of that logic and evidence is faith based

RAD: Mutt: oh I agree, and it can work like that (and can be dangerous), but I think that's partly a way of dealing with atrocity and finding comfort in it - e.g. black slave songs

EURODESIGN: it also enable control of the oppressed

CONGA: so in that way faith helps people make sense of a horrible world and gives them hope

WOOF: Stephen Jay Gould used to argue the concept of Non-overlapping Magisteria, that Science and Faith are two entirely different animals. Like apples and rocks - incomparable; no business being on the same table.

EURODESIGN: science explains faith

RAD: euro - yes, it can oppress people for sure, but also give them a means of carrying on, or a hope things will be better.

EURODESIGN: exactly how they are oppressed RAD

WOOF: euro: Yes, neurological and evolutionary psychology has shown likely reasons why faith exists.

RAD: Well, yes and no, in that sometimes it helps them cope in their oppression (the idea of heaven). Faith (whether in religion or political ideals) has also helped people break out of their oppression too

WOOF: As a vehicle, yes perhaps.

EURODESIGN: true RAD

WOOF: But faith has also helped keep millions in dark ages. Ever read "Princess" by Jean Sassoon?

EURODESIGN: no

CONGA: religion can opress people in may ways, by controling them, by not letting them explore their true selves, by dictating what they think, how they act, what they wear.

EURODESIGN: absolutely conga

RAD: What's it about Woof?

CONGA: But its only opression if you feel it is. If you want to wear trousers but arent allowed. if you're really into it it wont be opression at all but liberation and acceptance

WOOF: dj: It's doing it today. Look at every major political issue. Behind it (for or against) is a Book. The wars we're fighting, the right to life or choice or dignified death. It goes on and on.

EURODESIGN: i see conga

RAD: Although not always religion - other systems do the same - it's about power and control, and that can be exercised through religion, politics, business etc.

WOOF: RAD: It's a ghost-written autobiography of an Arabian Princess and what it was like growing up and living in Saudi Arabia. Genital mutilation, honour killings, brutality, etc. Awful yet amazing.

CONGA: true, RAD, true

RAD: And all those systems work because there is at least some perceived (or real) benefit to the people involved.

CONGA: It sounds a bit harrowing!

RAD: Even if they serve the interests of the dominant more than the common man

WOOF: RAD: Oh yes, absolutely. Napoleon recognised that religion was a great way to keep the sweaty masses quiet, as have many leaders before and since. And that it's just one of a number of tools that can be used to gain or maintain power and control.

CONGA: I agree

EURODESIGN: yes

EURODESIGN: panorama does it too

RAD: heh

WOOF: RAD: Are there any other questions you have for us, or is this the AOB phase of the meeting?

EURODESIGN: aob ?

CONGA: Any Other Business

WOOF: Any Other Business. Normally the free-for-all part just before the end of a chaired meeting.

RAD: This is the AOB phase I think! I probably should go but feel free to chat - do sign up to the forums and get other people involved. I'm going to host these every week after Revs so do come back.

RAD: Thank you all so much for your time

CONGA: yeah, Family Guy is on in 20 minutes!

Fig X9.1 *Christianity: A History* blog and comments, Channel 4's *The TV Show* website

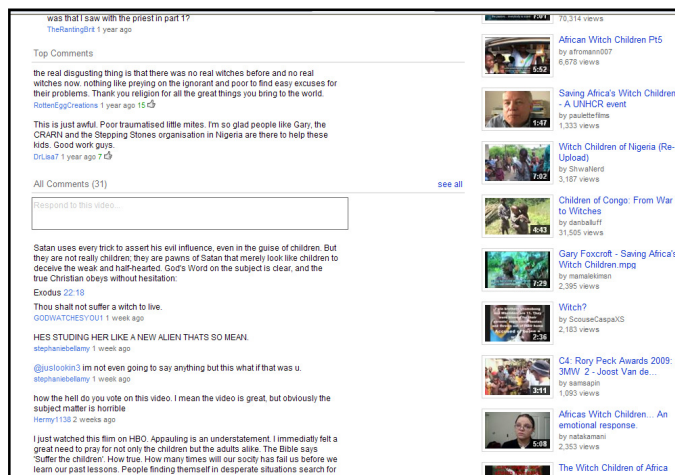Fig X9.2 *Digital Spy* forums

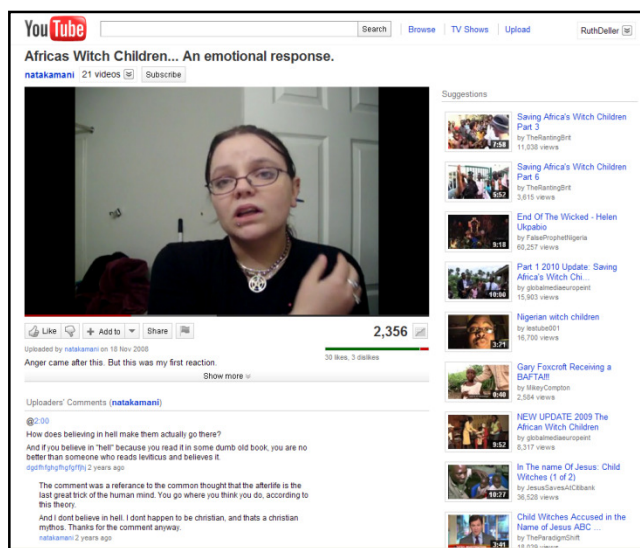Fig X9.3 YouTube comments

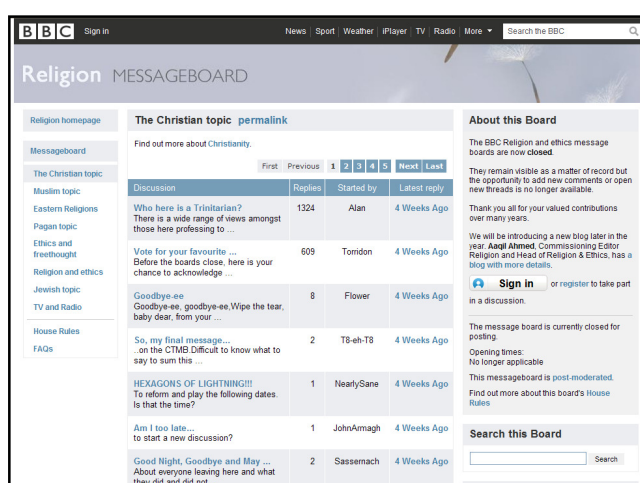Fig X9.4 YouTube video response

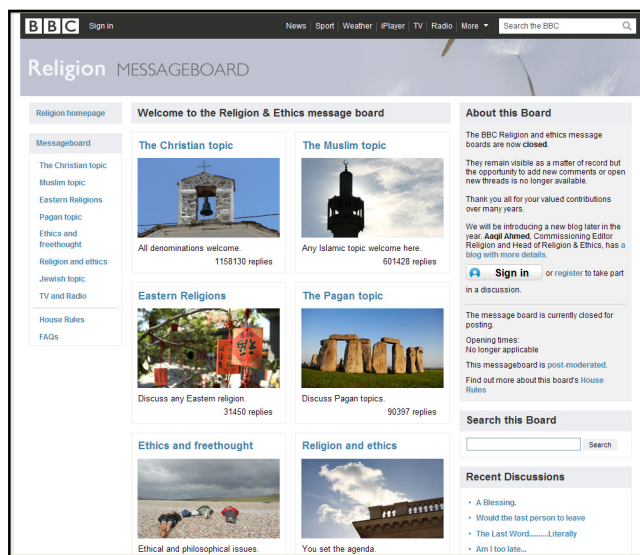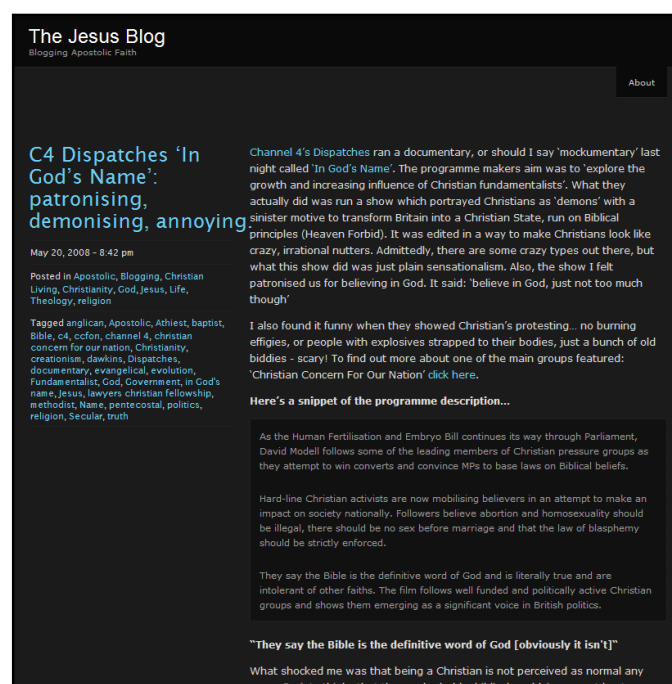Fig X9.5 *BBC Religion message board* circa 2011
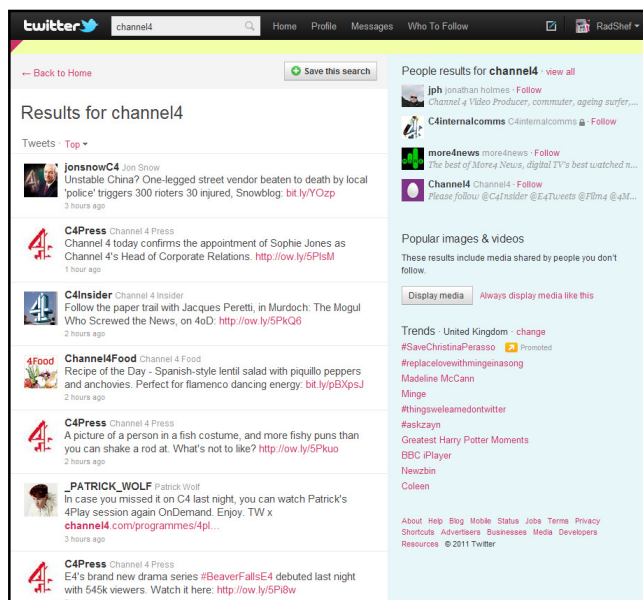

Fig X9.6 Sample blog post

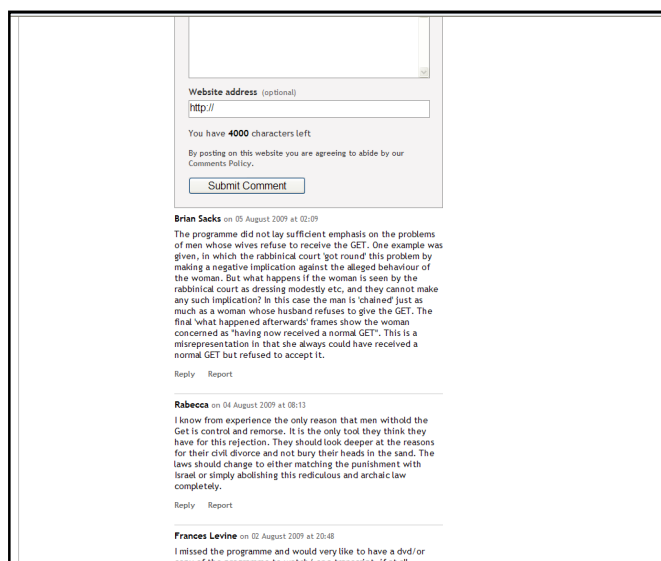Fig X9.7 Sample Twitter thread

Fig X9.8 Channel 4 *Revelations*: 'Divorce Jewish Style' programme site and comments

Appendix Ten: Extract from ITV's response to Ofcom's first Public Service Review, circa 2004

It is clear from the research published by Ofcom that viewers rate dedicated programming in religion, for example, as of much less value than other genres. Combined with an economic analysis that clearly demonstrates the pressure that will be placed on the traditional funding model for commercial public service broadcasting, it is self evident that the current balance of obligations and the way in which they are delivered will need to evolve.

That is not to say that ITV1 should abandon the delivery of a broad range of PSB programming in the near term. Religion, for example, will continue to play an important role on the channel but it is right that we review whether the current scenario, in which ITV1's requirement is double that of Channel 4 and Five and exceeds that of the BBC, is appropriate. We also need to question whether the end of the old box-ticking approach offers us an opportunity to deliver genres such as religion in a more engaging and impactful way.

Ofcom's conclusion that viewers prefer to see, in general, minority and specialist interests served via the mainstream may provide this opportunity. As a mass audience channel it absolutely makes sense for ITV1 to seek to address the interests and portrayal of minority groups within its mainstream content. That is exactly where we have sought to make a contribution in recent years in the area of cultural diversity, for example. *Coronation Street* has led the way in bringing the issues and concerns of multicultural communities to the widest possible audience and has been

recognised with the Race in the Media Awards Best Serial Drama in 2002 and 2003, for its story lines dealing with arranged and mixed-race marriages. ITV was also shortlisted for the first time for Broadcaster of the Year at the 2002 Race in the Media Awards, with the judges remarking on a palpable change in output, signalling 'a real advance'. In June 2003 *The Bill*, which has made consistent efforts over recent years to reflect the cultural realities of London's police force, was used as a model of good practice for a well-attended Cultural Diversity Network workshop organised by ITV for writers and practitioners.

We need to consider ways in which we can bring religion and matters of faith and spirituality to the widest possible audience, not by ghettoising it through the provision of narrowly focused acts of worship, but by seeking to refelect those ideas in a wider range of programming. For example, in 2003 ITV1 broadcast a drama entitled *The Second Coming*. This probably had a greater impact in terms of religious and ethical debate on the wider ITV1 audience than all of its weekly acts of worship combined, and yet it was only counted as a contribution to drama and not religion.

ITV1 intends to continue to broadcast a mix of religious output, acts of worship, debates, and documentaries, but we should also look at ways of refreshing the output. This is certainly something that religious communities have suggested they would welcome. But we must not get hung up on maintaining exactly the same number of hours year on year. We note that ITV1's competitors have raised concerns about any change to ITV1's obligation in this area. That reflects, of course, their

competitor interests. Yet, no-one is arguing publicly that the way in which religious programming is currently done should be maintained.

Writing in *Broadcast10[10]* Channel 4's editor for religion, Aaqil Ahmed, states that *'If we want religious programmes to have impact, to survive post digital switchover, then we are going to have to think long and hard about how our output must evolve. It's up to all of us to find ways of connecting mainstream peaktime audiences with programmes that reflect our multifaith world'.* We have used religious output as an example of where and how change might happen. That is not because we wish to single it out as a "problem" but simply that it provides a useful illustrative example. The approach outlined above, based on moving away from an obsession with rigid box-ticking and volume levels in favour of looking for ways to increase the impact of PSB content, is one that should be applied across all genres. We also agree with the proposition that for the time being the major terrestrial channels should remain the main vehicles for the provision of PSB content in order to maintain critical mass and accessibility.