PIETY AND PROFESSIONALISM
The BBC’s changing religious mission
(1960–1979)

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This research focuses on two decades in the BBC’s relationship with religion as an area of programming. The 1960s and 1970s marked a period of massive social change in Britain in which traditional religious institutions were challenged relentlessly and a more religiously diverse society emerged. This makes it a significant time to examine the BBC’s response and the impact these changes had on the culture of production within the Corporation. This research asks how did the BBC frame the making of religious programmes within the changing socio-political context and how did their changing religious mission sit within the Corporation’s wider strategic aims? Religious broadcasting also offers a unique microcosm within which to view the changing professional culture of the BBC itself. To address these interests this research uses documents from the BBC’s written archive and accounts from staff involved with the genre at the time.

KEYWORDS BBC; religious broadcasting; professionalism; programme aims

Like the House of Lords, cricket and the Church of England, religious broadcasting in the BBC is a peculiarly British phenomenon: slightly odd, hard to explain and yet remarkably resilient and effective. Its form and organisation were not planned. But in the process of development it evolved a structure which combined freedom and control in a way which has been the envy of many other broadcasting organisations. (BBC 1975 1)

This article examines the ‘process of development’ which occurred in religious broadcasting at the time this account was written. The 1960s and 1970s marked a period of massive social change in which institutional religion and authority were being thoroughly challenged and a new discourse of multiculturalism emerged. To what extent did the BBC’s approach to religious broadcasting change during this tumultuous time especially given the Corporation’s close ties with the Church in the early days of broadcasting? This article also examines the impact of these changes on the programme-making culture of the Religious Broadcasting Department (RBD), the unit responsible for religion and faith-based output within the BBC, at a time when there was a greater focus on raising the quality and professionalism of the output (Burns 1977).

There are four areas which this article deals with:

1. How did the mission for religious broadcasting change and how were these changes debated?
2. What challenge did these changes represent to the ‘mainstream’ monopoly which existed until this time?
3. How did the occupational context for religious broadcasting evolve as the medium of television developed?
4. What new styles of programming and editorial policy emerged as a result of the changes to the mission?

It challenges the view expressed above that these developments were unplanned and argues that this period in the history of religious broadcasting is marked by extensive debate, consultation and strategic awareness of a changing society and broadcasting landscape.

Along with a small number of interviews with former staff from that period, the BBC Written Archive Centre provided much of the substance for this research. Although incomplete, the archived material revealed the internal negotiations, struggles and victories that took place around the genre of religion at this time. The BBC Handbooks also articulated the vision and culture of the RBD, while policy documents like the Annan Report (1977) were a centralising force around which much of the internal discussions took place. Public statements and evidence to the report also brought many of the internal debates to the public domain.

This research begins by drawing on the work of historians like Kenneth Wolfe to provide a brief overview of how religious broadcasting began in Britain, thus contextualising later developments. It is followed by an overview of the religious landscape during the 1960s and 1970s.

The Early History of BBC’s Religious Broadcasting

The coverage of religion was regarded as a vital part of broadcasting’s social responsibility, a position which is discernable even today. It has been part of the organisation’s output since its earliest history when on Christmas Eve 1922, the Rector of Whitechapel gave the first religious address. Despite many in the Protestant churches seeing radio as a threat, there was general consensus between those within and outside the BBC as to the direction in which the genre should evolve. The early (unchallenged) aim was to promote and protect the Christian faith and give a greater appreciation of faith and religious doctrine to listeners combining education and proselytism within the mission. At this time the idea of the ‘mainstream’ was also introduced. The BBC successfully argued that they had limited resources and so the focus would have to be on the diverse needs of the principal Christian traditions in Britain. This policy is briskly defended by Reith himself in his book Broadcast over Britain:

Christianity happens to be the stated and official religion of this country; it is recognised by the Crown. This is a fact that those who have criticised our right to broadcast the Christian religion would do well to bear in mind. (Reith 192)

Therefore, at this time religion was seen as integral to national identity (Bailey 7) and any moves to broaden religious access to the airwaves would serve as an important part of broader cultural struggles and negotiation. The implication of this policy on programming was that the BBC would avoid material which was critical or threatening to the mainstream. This meant theologically conservative content in schedules including church services, bible readings, religious talks and hymn singing. As Bailey (5) argues religious broadcasting ‘expected a great deal from its listening public, viz: discipline, obedience, reverence, and Christian manliness’.
The early consensus which characterised the genre was mainly achieved through extensive consultation with religious leaders in the early development of programme policies and the inclusion of members of the clergy in the production staff of the BBC’s specially created RBD allowing ‘some sort of control for the religious side’ (Stuart cited in Briggs Secularization 274). A further measure to ensure the cooperation of the main denominations was the assembly of a Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC) which would provide advice on suitable content and contributors (see Wolfe; Bailey). Convened by the BBC in 1923, the committee would in later years extend its role to advise the ITA (Independent Television Authority) and the independent television companies.

When television established itself in the 1950s much of the content was adapted from radio (see Wolfe; Street; Bailey). However, the broad agreement which characterised the early days of religion on radio would not last as issues of control surfaced. The Churches expected much the same reverential treatment from television which, up to this point, they had largely received at the hands of radio. While the Churches demanded airtime, the RBD was aware of the difficulties that the different faiths had yet to overcome with radio, specifically in terms of the quality of speakers, a weakness they feared television would further expose.

Both the Churches and the Corporation began moving in increasingly divergent directions. While the Churches still clung to their proselytising mission, the broadcasters needed to meet the demands of a diverse and even more discerning audience. From these incompatible positions tensions mounted over the nature and timings of programmes. The debate around Sunday scheduling and the ‘closed period’ demonstrated some of these conflicts. Due to public pressure and a greater concern for ratings, the BBC assumed control of religious programming, eventually making a number of decisions which upset the Churches.

By the end of the 1950s a number of things had been achieved. The most important accomplishment was the creation of a recognisable and sustainable style of programming, an important change in emphasis from the broadcasting of religion to religious broadcasting. However, religious broadcasting was moving in a direction where quality was paramount, and a rhetoric of inclusion favoured over exclusion or elitism. Furthermore, in line with the broader internal culture of the BBC, the values and working practices of the RBD were slowly emerging. However, the BBC did not to have it all its own way as debates over ‘Reithian Sundays’ and the continued Christian monopoly demonstrated the influence still held by the Churches.

**The Religious Landscape**

As important to this account as the broadcasting history is the dramatically changing religious context of the time. Up to the late 1950s Britain was still defined by the denominational structure of mainstream Christianity. However, three trends conditioned religious life in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s: (1) the mounting discourse around secularisation yet the persistence of traditional religion, (2) the emergence of plural traditions and alternative spirituailities and (3) the growing complexity of religious institutions (Parsons Introduction 7).
These decades signalled the continued statistical decline of church attendance and the challenging of long-standing hierarchies and religious authority. However, at the same time areas of growth emerged (e.g. charismatic wings of the Protestant churches) and the residual strength of the Churches endured (especially around ‘national’ churches). The significance of ‘popular religion’ remained with surveys from the time showing that orthodox Christianity and popular belief had drifted apart suggesting that for a significant section of the population ‘believing without belonging’ more accurately captured their relationship with religion (Davie). These diverging trends suggest a complex religious picture emerging during these decades, as religion was uncoupled from other social institutions and began its move from the centre of social life to the less visible margins. For many, however, this was not tantamount to the blanket secularisation of society (Davie).

Post-Second World War migration also brought further religious diversity and the possibilities and challenges which a plural society brings. Communities of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs emerged across the country, while sub-cultures of the New Religious Movement and alternative spiritualities becoming more prominent. New Christian groups also added to the bewildering mix of sub-groups, denominations and communities which now characterised Britain. These developments further challenged the secularisation thesis as debates around modern British identity became more problematic.

These two decades also impacted in different institutional ways on the main Christian churches. For Roman Catholics there was a move from denominational distinctiveness towards the cultural and ecumenical mainstream (Parsons *Contrasts* 31–46). On the other hand the Protestant churches faced an era of questioning and exploration directed towards fundamental doctrines, texts and organisation. This critical reflection eventually gave way in the latter part of the 1960s to ‘a mixture of self-doubt, disillusionment and a sense of crisis and sudden decline’ (Parsons *Contrasts* 64). This meant that from the 1970s onwards critics argued that the principal Protestant churches were plagued by a lack of coherent direction.

Therefore, what is clear is that in these two decades there began an increasingly complex and untidy institutional structure in the Christian churches. A more complicated religious picture was emerging and debates continued publicly over where society was moving in terms of its religious identity and future. It was within this evolving social context that religious broadcasting negotiated its role.

**A Change of Mission**

Religious broadcasting has always been explicit in its aims. These purposes are clearly articulated in the BBC handbooks and in the early 1960s read as follows:

The aims of religious broadcasting may be briefly summarized under three heads. The first is that it should reflect the worship, thought, and action of those churches which represent the mainstream of the Christian tradition in the country. The second is that religious broadcasting should bring before listeners and viewers what is most significant in the relationship between Christian faith and the modern world. The third aim is that religious broadcasting should seek to reach those on the fringe of the organised life of the churches, or quite outside it. (BBC 1961 52)
This acknowledges the established format of the output underwritten by aims inherited from its early days and the traditional role the department played in delivering these. The output was to be Christian centric and while it was non-denominational, the focus was on the mainstream Churches in Britain. While the genre would crucially no longer defend the Christian faith, it would still promote it suggesting that an undercurrent of proselytising remained in the early years of the decade.

However, internally there was a desire to move religious broadcasting more in line with the social current of the day and an extended period of consultation began around the mission of the Corporation in relation to religion. An internal memo in 1965 from the Head of Department under the subject ‘Next Steps’ outlines some of the critical self-reflection taking place and the wider issues which conditioned the change:

[O]ur primary aim is to try to show the continuing contemporary relevance of the Christian faith to everyone whose attention we can gain and hold […] We do not succeed as often as we should like. One reason for this is that at present Christians themselves disagree both as to what Christian belief involves and implies, and as to how it may best be affirmed. Another is that we in Religious Broadcasting are ourselves caught up in this disarray. We come from differing Christian traditions, we work in different Regions, to some extent we differ in conscience about the best way of doing our job.5

Religious broadcasting had long suffered criticisms both internally and externally. This memo suggests awareness within the department around the need to prepare for and deliver a different experience of religion in post-war Britain. It also pre-empts a need to change the workings of the department as it too faced challenges to its authority and professional standing.

It was the preparations for, and the responses to, the Annan report (1977) which would provide the opportunity for the biggest soul-searching effort about what religious broadcasting should be doing and for whom.6 A number of documents written by the Head of Religious Broadcasting at the time (Revd John Lang) directed much of debate internally. In July 1975 Lang wrote a report entitled ‘The Aims of Religious Broadcasting’ which proposed a revision of the written objectives of the genre.7 The revised aims were drawn heavily from CRAC’s evidence to Annan and suggested that religious broadcasting should:

i, To seek to reflect the worship, thoughts and action of the principal religious traditions represented in Britain, recognising that those are mainly, if not exclusively, Christian; ii, to seek to present to viewers and listeners those beliefs, ideas, issues and experiences in the contemporary world which are related to a religious interpretation or dimension of life; and iii, to seek also to meet the religious interests, concerns and needs of those on the fringe of, or outside, the organised life of the Churches.

This amendment represented some profound changes to the objectives and programming policy of religious broadcasting.8 There was a tentative gesture to multiculturalism with the inclusion of non-Christian traditions; a less prescriptive programme policy which allowed moral and ethical material to be included as areas of interest, and the revision advocated a less active endorsement of institutional religion. As Lang predicted it would ‘constitute a shift in emphasis likely […] to have far-reaching effects in the coming years’.9
This document was the basis of much discussion on the aims of religious broadcasting throughout the late 1970s. It was circulated for review to various stakeholders including the General Advisory Council, the Religious Programmes Board of Governors Sub-group (1975–1977) and the Broadcasting Council of Scotland. The revised aims generally met with approval (albeit with changes to the text of the statement\textsuperscript{10}) and opened up further debate around access, provision, programming and scheduling.

It was, however, the Broadcasting Council of Scotland who provided the most resistance citing concerns that the paper was ‘an English document’.\textsuperscript{11} The distinct religious make-up of Scotland was one reason for its criticism but it was also the changes to what religious broadcasting should be doing that caused alarm:

Even more unacceptable do they find the statement that the idea of “proselytising” should be ruled out. If by “proselytising” is meant “effort to convert by persuasion” then it is the view of the Council that any minister of the Christian Church, or indeed any committed Christian who appeared in a religious programme with any intention other than to try to convert people to the unique Christian message, would be betraying his or her mission and should simply not be there. Any other approach implies a lack of conviction and confidence to say nothing of zeal which would be unlikely to bring forth much comfort or help to a bewildering world.

There is a long history of tension between the regional and national offices and the centre of the BBC in relation to what they should be doing and how (Wolfe). Production offices in Scotland and Wales had closer ties to the traditional churches and through their programming represented their own national experiences around identity and faith (i.e. Presbyterianism in Scotland and Methodism in Wales). Despite significantly smaller budgets they continued to provide innovative and important output, much of which would be broadcast nationally. However, this response shows that as outlined in the earlier memo the experience and agenda for religious broadcasting was not always built around consensus. Furthermore, the archives suggest that while these concerns were acknowledged they were largely marginalised in discussions at the centre.

The final Annan Report acknowledged the changes to the religious texture of the country and to some of the uncertainties in religious broadcasting. It reiterated some of the concerns about ‘what was religious broadcasting’ believing that this question was being answered in increasingly vague terms by those arguing for its continued importance and described the output which had emerged in response to this ambiguity as a ‘synthetic television and radio religion’ (Annan para. 20.19). The report recognised a conflict between religious broadcasting which was watered down beyond recognition, and religious broadcasting which would be akin to party political broadcasts; neither of which they argued was desirable. The Annan report placed much of the responsibility for this situation in the hands of the Churches, who it believed had failed to adequately take the initiative. However, there was uncertainty amongst the Churches about what should be done to assume effective control and this reflected the Church’s own dilemma surrounding its role in society (Paulu 279).

The two biggest changes between the aims in 1961 and those which ended the 1970s were that religious broadcasting shifted from promoter and defender to being a
more objective commentator and forum for criticism. This increased the BBC’s distance from the Church which in turn had a knock-on effect in relation to editorial policy and scheduling. The Christian monopoly which had dominated religious policy to this time was also radically revised to the chagrin of some in the BBC and its audience.

A Challenge to the Mainstream Monopoly

The greatest legacy of the Annan report in relation to religious broadcasting was its recognition that whilst religious sensibility in Britain was still relatively strong, this was no longer synonymous with Christianity (Annan para. 20.12). The concept of ‘mainstream’ had been instilled at the founding of religious broadcasting and had been sustained through the Pilkington Report (1962) published 15 years prior to Annan. Annan articulated a debate taking place inside the BBC as the Corporation shifted towards a more inclusive policy.

In a series of memos and reports written in the mid-1960s the issue of religious diversity and representation was debated. Again Lang, as Head of the RBD, was instrumental in outlining the department’s policy towards inclusion and how they recognised three principal groups: (1) traditional mainstream faiths; (2) sects with a long British history and ‘sufficiently close to the mainstream theologically, and sufficiently significant historically and sociologically, and that they can offer acceptable broadcasts’ (e.g. Quakers, Unitarians, The Salvation Army); and (3) sects more recently established or imported (e.g. The Churches of Christ-Scientist, The Seventh Day Adventists, Pentecostalists). This suggests that material challenging the orthodoxy of the traditional Churches, which once would have been considered un-Christian and thus banned, would now be considered for transmission. It also included the airing of dissident voices from within the Christian church. For the first time the Churches themselves began to feel the intrusion of the media into their sacred institutions.

While this suggested greater inclusion, Lang (quoting CRAC) called for restraint when representing these diverse religious voices as ‘[t]here are so many of them, however, representing so small a proportion of the population, that any attempt to include them all would result in our presenting a gravely distorted view of the religious life of this country’. Mainstream Christianity was to remain dominant but not through ‘prescriptive right’ but because it was a ‘true reflection’ of the religious condition in Britain and ‘in such a wider context (Christian) witness, should not, and would not, be blunted but made sharper’.

While diversity within Christianity was one challenge, the RBD also acknowledged that there were interests ‘other than Christian’ (BBC 1976 35). This development is publicly highlighted in the 1977 Handbook, which recognises other places of worship, including mosques and temples, and in a paper to the General Advisory Council in which Lang stated ‘it is a different world’. A tangible result of this change would be that the advisory committee, CRAC, would further broaden its membership to include non-Christian faith groups and laymen.

One recurring debate centred on the BBC’s own institutional relationship with Christianity. In a General Advisory Council draft paper Lang wrote that ‘The BBC itself should not, indeed cannot be Christian; its relationship with the mixed society it serves
makes the very idea improper. This position is contested by the Chairman of the GAC who in the minutes from a meeting discussing the paper says that:

[H]e always hoped that the BBC was, and always would be, Christian and that it would help other Christians in serving God and their neighbours in what had become a mixed society embracing people of other religions [...] he personally did not think that the BBC need abjure its corporate expression of belief in Christianity in order to serve that society.\textsuperscript{19}

Lang retorts ‘The BBC could not be a Christian organisation in itself’. The Director General concludes the discussion saying religious broadcasting is ‘no different in kind from other parts of the output which [are] concerned with minority interests, but that its attitude towards its audience should be one of understanding and not dictatorship, of seeking consent and not the imposition of opinions’.\textsuperscript{20}

This exchange signals a change from the BBC’s historically close ties to the Church and part of broader social trend within Western liberal democracies to secularise public institutions. This can be viewed as part of wider political calculations happening in the BBC during the 1970s:

[M]easured judgement and rational discourse was mired in political calculation: a need for the BBC to keep its powder dry for what it saw as its more important battles: its fights with politicians and the public over accusations of bias in its journalism, and its efforts to keep external regulation at bay. (Hendy 117)

However, it also indicates an attempt to separate programme-making policies and institutional policy. In the early history management and staff shared many of the same values and ambitions for religious programmes. By the 1970s, and the increased reconciliation of public and commercial interests, religious broadcasting and its producers had to struggle ‘out of [their] chrysalis into a more predatory and competitive world’.\textsuperscript{21}

The Developing Medium of Television

Until the 1960s radio was the dominant medium in British broadcasting. From then the focus (and resources) shifted from radio to television and for religion this new medium became increasingly important (Briggs \textit{Competition} 581). Across all genres, not just religion, much of the content for television had been adapted from radio and many producers and presenters struggled to get to grips with this new medium and the professional demands it placed on them. For those working in television religion seemed to offer even more professional conflict as Penry Jones, a producer (and later Head of the RBD), pronounces:

I am divided, an ambivalent person, as anyone is bound to be who is engaged in religious television. One is bound to have one foot in the realm of the church and one foot in the realm of television; one foot on the pavement and one foot in the gutter. (ITA 47)

The debate around reconciling personal religious identity with publicly visible professional identity is something which features within many of the internal debates. The Head of Religious Programmes, Radio writes:

I am not a politician [...] I am a preacher. I know this makes for difficulties but I cannot help being incurably religious and deeply committed.\textsuperscript{22}
Despite the change of focus from radio to television the BBC maintained a single RBD, which would deal with output for both radio and television with staff reporting to one Head of Department. This went against the general trend of separating output into autonomous departments which occurred in other internal areas of production and over at ITV. According to the Director of Public Affairs, a single Head of Department was retained:

[S]o that the BBC can speak with one authoritative voice in its relations with the churches [...] to apply through all its parts a consistent policy in religious matters, as it does in its journalistic and educational activities.23

However, the single authoritative voice of the department came under threat as suggestions were made within the Annan report to disband the RBD and place its staff in different departments so that moral and religious issues could permeate all other output. In the end following discussion they would remain an autonomous department, though the question of decentralising religious staff would resurface at various times in the future.

There were, however, some significant changes introduced to the personnel profile within the department over these two decades. Up to the 1970s staff of the RBD were mainly clergy who were trained to produce programmes for the Corporation. When television arrived generally each programme maker specialised in one of the two media. During the 1970s the number of laypeople joining the department grew reaching nearly half of the department’s staff by the end of the decade.24 Unsurprisingly, the BBC viewed this as a positive change:

A decade ago all producers were clergy of the Church of England and other main churches in the country. Though they were talented people many of them suffered the disadvantage of coming into a new profession rather late in life. In 1975 about half are layman and the proportion is still rising. What is more, many of them are appointed at or near the beginning of their working lives so that they learn the craft of programme production from the bottom up. This has already had a marked effect on programmes and should in due course raise professional standards to a very high level. (BBC 1976 35–36)

This marks an end to Reith’s vision of a directly involved clergy and more broadly a further separation of Church and Corporation. There is nothing in the archives to suggest that the Churches were concerned about this move and indeed various letters and reports praise the professionalism of those involved in the broadcasting at that time. One of their key concerns at the beginning of broadcasting was that the BBC would be unable to deal effectively with theological affairs which were beyond their capabilities—something the BBC at the time accepted with the inclusion of clergy on their staff. It seems that by the 1970s, the BBC had grown enough in confidence to cut that tie to the Church.

One of the reasons for this shift was the need to create what was seen as more professional styles of programming. By the 1970s religious producers recognised the professional limits of the ‘closed period’ and began to look for more regular commissions on peak-time schedules. This new approach garnered some significant internal support as the Director of Public Affairs, Kenneth Lamb, advocates:

The changes in the closed period were an important step forward in religious broadcasting, first because they would enable the programmes to reach wider audience
and second because the programmes would be supported by resources commensurate with their placing in the open field of television.25

The main effect of moving out of the closed period was that religious broadcasting was now subject to the forces of competition. The introduction of commercial television and more sophisticated audience measurement techniques had further intensified the pressure on all BBC departments, including the RBD, to deliver audiences. Therefore, stepping out of the ‘ghetto’ signalled both a growing confidence within the RBD while simultaneously recognising that even more important battles were likely in the future:

[W]e have known we were not ready to come out into the sun [...] Everything depends on what we can make of this opportunity.26

This heralded ‘a radical policy of change in television’ in order to compete and in the archives a marked difference is visible over the 20 years.27 ‘A different attitude in production’ was visible as a result of changes to the aims of the genre, a programming policy more in line with prevailing professional values and improving production skills.28 By the end of the 1970s religious broadcasting was characterised by increased confidence and a renewed sense of purpose.

**A New Type of Programming**

While programmes like *Songs of Praise* (BBC1 1961 -), *Daily Service* (Radio4, 1926 -) and *Thought for the Day* (Radio4, 1941 -) continued to provide comfort to millions of listeners and viewers, a less prescriptive mission for religious broadcasting allowed further styles to emerge. These programmes were more critical and provocative than their predecessors and sought to experiment with new modes of delivery particularly in relation to religious current affairs and news (Briggs *Competition* 582). These included, amongst others, *Viewpoint* (BBC1, 1959–1964), *Speakeasy* (Radio1, 1969–1973), *Sunday* (Radio4, 1970 -) and *Reason to Believe* (BBC1 1969). However, ‘the most ambitious so far undertaken’ by the department was the current affairs series *Anno Domini* (BBC1, 1974–1977) which was later modified to be *Everyman* (BBC1, 1977–2005).29 In the minutes of a Religious Programmes Sub-group meeting, Peter Armstrong (Head of Religious Programmes, Television) describes the agenda of *Anno Domini*:

[T]o look at religious phenomena unapologetically and objectively, and to show their connection with the real world. It was a religious current affairs programme. They wanted it to be as professional a product as *Panorama*.30

In a further document the editorial principles of *Anno Domini* are outlined which included the reporting of first-hand stories at home and abroad; to cover religious issues not church stories ‘that no-one care about’; to cover a variety of faiths not just Christianity; and most crucially (and controversially) to include normal journalistic procedures with ‘no special pleading on behalf of any religious position. We have fought hard for this audience credibility and the right to criticise the church where necessary’.31 Programmes covered issues such as religious life in Russia, Pentecostalism in Brazil, specially commissioned polls on belief and faith, the tensions between Celtic and Rangers football clubs, and the
traditional hymn ‘Abide with Me’. The programme was scheduled for Sundays at 10.15 pm, outside the closed period.

The archives show how these programmes simultaneously garnered much criticism and praise, both internally and externally. On one side there were concerns that Everyman, in particular, was preoccupied with issues ‘on the fringe of religious life’. Mark Thompson, current Director General of the BBC and one time researcher with the programme, reiterates this concern more recently:

I couldn’t help noticing that one thing that Everyman didn’t seem to do very often was actually to make programmes about religion. Each year there would be a handful of programmes on conventional religious subjects [. . .] But most editions of Everyman were only “religious” in the broadest possible sense. They’d deal with topics in the hinterland between science and spirituality – cryogenic suspension, for instance, as a hoped-for route to immortality. (Thompson 2008)

This highlights how the genre was broadened to include not only religious material but also moral and ethical issues, something which continues to feature in the output today. Other correspondence criticises individual programmes or the inclusion of certain speakers or groups highlighting how access to the airwaves was a discussion point both internally and externally. Such criticisms were vigorously dealt with by those involved in the production of these programmes. Policies were regularly defended through attempting to distance the BBC and its programmes from enforcing moral standards; a defence which materialised from the revised mission discussed earlier. Proponents argued that these new programmes reflected the shifting sands of culture, taste and professional broadcasting.

However, expressions of appreciation were also forthcoming as this letter testifies:

A few weeks ago I paid my annual licence for my monochrome TV set for the year to August 1979, at a cost of £9.00. Last night, I had my full £9.00 worth in just one half-hour programme “Abide with Me”.33

This external correspondence is further complemented by a range of internal memos praising individual programmes:

It [programme about the legal battle between Mary Whitehouse and Gay News] was a brave concept and beautifully executed [. . .] the Duty Log reflected viewers’ admiration of the programme. (Bill Cotton, Controller BBC1, Sept 1977)

[Yo]ur film and the Anno Domini series in general have revolutionised attitudes towards this area of work. It should be a spur to the rest of us in television to get on with something worthwhile. (Barrie Gavin, producer Omnibus, Sept 1977)

Despite this praise there were still concerns that religious broadcasting was not been taken seriously by BBC management. Colin Morris, Head of the RBD, discusses some of the anxieties of the programme makers at the time:

[I]ts audience was very very limited and this team were desperately anxious to get in to the mainstream of broadcasting. They wanted to be tested against Panorama and Horizon and World in Action. They didn’t want to be tested against another studio programme on ITV. (Personal correspondence, 2007)
This view of *Anno Domini* and *Everyman* as ‘superb programmes’ was reiterated by many of the interviewees with many seeing this as a ‘golden age’ for religious debate on television. However, scheduling, the lack of trailing for the series and a continual squeeze on resources were at the heart of some oft-repeated concerns.

Once the television service takes the placing of religious programmes as seriously as it takes, say, *Panorama* there will be no problem. But I am afraid we are still a long way from that.\(^3^5\)

Important comparisons are repeatedly made between *Everyman* and other current affairs programmes like *Panorama* (BBC 1 1953 -). There is a recognition that religion needed to compete with these in terms of professionalism and resources. However, importing established values from other departments and genres also allowed the RBD to be more objective thus gaining acceptance from other levels in the organisation. This functioned as a tangible way of demonstrating the collective professionalism of the department as they tried to stimulate institutional support and prevent the further ghettoisation of the output. This suggests that as television developed and competition grew internally and externally the culture of the RBD itself was evolving.

### Conclusion: The BBC’s Changing Religious Mission

During the period 1960–1979 a number of significant changes happened within the BBC’s policy for religious broadcasting: the output was extended to include new themes (including themes previously regarded as dissident and un-Christian); much of this output discussed the relevance of religion and the challenges the Churches faced in an increasingly secular society; following decades of debate greater access to the airwaves was granted to other non-Christian faith groups breaking the monopoly which had been enjoyed by Christian groups since the 1920s; at the same time the BBC also began to acknowledge wider societal changes and to dispel the assumption that the audience were members of a major faith group as they slowly began to create programmes for believers and non-believers. Religious broadcasting would persevere throughout the 1960s and 1970s, but it would have to make substantial accommodations relating to its content and access.

During this time there was also a fundamental departure from earlier aims and objectives. The early aims were borne from a controversial paternalism towards the audience and deference towards the authority of the Christian churches. Once these values shifted old certainties crumbled and evangelism and proselytising were largely sidelined. However, it was unclear what would replace these and so in response to the changes, the BBC widened the scope of religious output. This for some raised the question ‘what was religious about religious broadcasting’.

In 1972 Revd Canon Trevor Beeson wrote:

> It must be emphasised that neither the BBC nor the ITA see themselves as handmaidens of the churches. It is neither their function to assist in recruitment to church membership or even to contribute to the making, or keeping of Britain Christian. Their task is to inform, educate and entertain, and religion will only find a place on broadcasting schedules for a long as those responsible for broadcasting believe it to be important enough to a significant number of viewers and listeners to justify the use of expensive resources. (Beeson 87)
Implicit in this statement are a number of the changes highlighted in this article. Beginning in the 1930s on radio but growing more important with the introduction of television ‘the BBC was promoting public religion as private entertainment’ (Bailey 14). Religion was increasingly being framed as a private sphere concern rather than a public one and this meant religious output was being marginalised in the minds of those involved in the new medium of television (most significantly amongst executives and policy-makers). Religion needed to be private entertainment for a significant number of people to make it viable. This was a fundamental change not only in the treatment of religion but also forecasted some of the main challenges that public service broadcasting would face more generally.

As Beeson also alludes to in the quote above, the 1960s and 1970s heralded a much changed relationship between public institutions. In the 1930s the BBC was widely regarded as ‘an adjunct of the Christian establishment’ (Bailey 18). However, two decades later it was clear that the Church had moved from being a valued partner to yet another interest group concerned with the role of the media (Fortner). This change can be seen most clearly in the professional makeup of the RBD and the role that its head, Revd John Lang, took in driving these changes internally.

The decades which this research considers also reveal significant professional change within the BBC and indeed broadcasting more generally. Due to external pressure arising from growing competition and an increasingly discerning audience, changes would occur in the occupational culture of the broadcasters. The link between professionalism and quality was being firmly established and this directly impacted on the purpose and evolving culture of the BBC. The ethos of professionalism would come to condition all aspects of broadcasting, including religion.

The most tangible impact of this professionalism on religious broadcasting related to the protected status of religion within the schedules. Protectionist strategies, such as the ‘god slot’, were seen as limiting the professional standing of religion and therefore could not last in the current climate. A further internal change was in the composition of the programme makers within the RBD and how this radically shifted over a relatively brief period of time from vocationally skilled clergy to professional broadcasters. This would continue and in the 1980s a ‘new school’ of producers and religious staff was evident mainly through Channel 4 who was increasingly objective towards religion. Therefore, the 1960s and 1970s were both a ‘golden era’ for some areas of religious programming and also the end of an era for a specific kind of religious mission.

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Notes

1. As noted by Chignell the handbooks ‘provide some of the best statements of broadcasting policy to be found anywhere’. Religious broadcasting occupied a dedicated section of the handbook offering a unique resource to chart its development – though this still needs to
be treated with caution as these documents functioned as part of a wider agenda for the BBC. In the area of religion they do offer a comprehensive and at times surprisingly candid appraisal of the state of the genre. In his review of the handbooks Chignell highlights how ‘in the case of religious programming, the handbooks can be used not only to articulate the official policy on religious programming but also to chart its demise’ however, I would argue that in the handbooks relating to the period under discussion in this article this demise is less obvious although there are persistent attempts to acknowledge the challenges facing the genre. In the entries for later years this ‘demise’ is more acutely evident.

2. Roman Catholics were generally excluded at this time and ‘non-Christian talks [on religious themes] were regarded as controversial and thus forbidden’ (Wolfe 10).

3. The ‘closed period’ or the ‘God Slot’ (Paulu 281) was a specific concession by the BBC and ITV at that time in order to maintain the support of the church. During this weekly slot on a Sunday evening only religious programmes or those which dealt with themes of faith and belief could be transmitted. Although the control was lifted in 1972 both the BBC and ITV continued to schedule religious programmes during this slot for many years after.


6. The Annan Committee into the Future of Broadcasting was set up by the government in 1974 and published its report in 1977. It was tasked with proposing ‘what constitutional, organisational and financial arrangements’ and conditions should be applied to broadcasting in Britain (Annan para. 1.1).


8. Lang followed up his proposals with two further reports in 1977 which crystallised the changes and argued for the possibility of religious broadcasting as ‘at the very centre of the Corporation’s thinking about its work for the public’.


10. In the 1978 handbook there are some changes to the wording of the aims. The word ‘represented’ does not appear in the first aim, while part of the second aim is written as ‘which are evidently related to religious interpretation’. The most significant change, however, was in the first aim in which ‘if’ was replaced to read ‘mainly, though not exclusively, Christian’.


Seaton describes how mosques and temples had featured in religious programmes on the radio from as early as the 1930s; however, up to the late 1970s other faiths were not fully embraced within the system and were ‘treated like an ornithologist would treat an exotic new species, curious observers, specimen hunters’ (10m13s).


General Advisory Council minutes: 27th April 1977. WAC RC78/2, 554/1 Religious Programmes Policy (Part 2), BBC Written Archives Centre.

General Advisory Council minutes: 27th April 1977, Sir G. Jackson. WAC RC78/2, 554/1 Religious Programmes Policy (Part 2), BBC Written Archives Centre.


‘Developments in Religious Broadcasting, Note by Director, Public Affairs’: 10th Feb 1977. WAC RC78/2, 554/1 Religious Programmes Policy (Part 2), BBC Written Archives Centre.

This move echoed greater lay involvement in the Protestant churches at this time (Parsons 62).

General Advisory Council minutes: 27th April 1977, K. Lamb (Director of Public Affairs). WAC RC78/2, 554/1 Religious Programmes Policy (Part 2), BBC Written Archives Centre.


33. Letter to Director General from J. Hustwick (West Yorkshire): 25th September 1975. WAC T24/147/1 Everyman ‘Abide with me’ TX 24/9/78 BBC1, BBC Written Archives Centre.

34. See: WAC T24/150/1 Religion Everyman/Anno Domini General (Correspondence) 1975–1977, BBC Written Archives Centre.

35. Memo to Director of Public Affairs from Revd J Lang (Head of Religious Broadcasting): 3rd Feb 1977. WAC R78/3, 108/1 Religious Programmes General (1/10/64–1/12/90), BBC Written Archives Centre.

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