Annual Lecture 2008

Faith, morality and the media

by Mark Thompson
foreword by Jeremy Vine

Theos
The public theology think tank

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Published by Theos in 2009

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The following is a transcript of the
Theos Annual Lecture 2008, given by Mark Thompson,
Director-General of the BBC.

The lecture was delivered on
14 October 2008 at the Lewis Media Centre, Millbank.

It was chaired by broadcaster Jeremy Vine,
whose introduction serves as the foreword.

foreword

I've got something to confess to you, which is that I am a Christian.

Immediately I say that, of course, I feel the need to qualify it, by adding that I am actually not a very good person, and faith is the same as doubt, and actually it is a constant struggle to believe in anything. But the bottom line is that I think Christ is who he said he was; the resurrection and the life.

Before I introduce Mark, my question for all of us here is "Why should I not say that on my programme on Radio 2?"

Now I wouldn't say that, of course. I wouldn't say it because it might create "static" in the studio when we do items on religion. I wouldn't say it because fundamentally I am a journalist; an observer not a participant. And I wouldn't say it because of the intervention by the grisly news editor in the movie *Broadcast News* – you remember the scene, the newscaster William Hurt suddenly announces on air "Here's what I think about this story," and in the studio gallery the editor flinches and says, "Who cares what he thinks?"

Additionally, since the whole Hutton debacle in the BBC, we have been on a drive towards impartiality, which is us saying "our views don't matter, only yours do".

So it is my constitutional duty not to express a view. In fact it is the only way for a presenter to do business. The classic cartoon of a talk-show host - and immediately I say that, you probably have someone in mind – is a loud and actually rather boring figure. Once the listener knows what you're about to say before you say it, you don't have a listener. You can have an audience without having listeners. So far, so straightforward.

But actually, impartiality is incredibly complex. Last time I looked, the BBC was not impartial on murder. If this country were to be invaded, I'm not sure that we would spend 50% of our time explaining why the French were quite right to march in.

When a BBC person tells you grandly, "Our views don't matter", ask him when he last expressed a view, and I bet it was this morning at the programme meeting. Running orders do not come together by accident. Interview questions are not written by computer. In fact, if you went into battle with us on it, you might argue that every single

thing we do betrays a view. What is the lead story on the [*News at*] *Ten* tonight? Who chose it? Who chose it? Besides, the BBC has expressly told us that its mission is to put the audience at the centre of everything we do. But the audience has views – immigration, capital punishment…

Fabulous contradictions arise from all of this: when a "climate change special" was discussed at the Edinburgh TV festival, an editor of *Newsnight* said heroically, "It's not the BBC's job to campaign." Fine. Good. He got a round of applause. But it came in the very instant that Radio 2 launched a social action week, described as "a week of campaigning to help the elderly".

To run the BBC is to manage contradiction. Where does it leave the presenter? I think my job is to connect with the audience. Now I can't connect with them by expressing opinions on every single story, because as we've discussed, it's not right.

But I do believe that presenters connect through values. Values are profoundly important and they are nothing for us to be embarrassed about. What was it that drove Michael Buerk's reports from Ethiopia, or Richard Dimbleby's reports from Belsen? Did you hear them use the phrase "on the other hand"?

In my own small corner of the Beeb - a news show on an entertainment network, and we could add *Panorama* in as well - the audience need to know that this is their show, it understands them, and they own it. And this is what presenters struggle with every day – how to have values without having views, an outlook without an opinion. And it is not just a question for me, it's a question for the Director-General and the entire corporation, because once we concede that we do have corporate or personal values, we need to ask where they come from, and - the purpose of tonight's discussion - whether faith plays any part in who we are and what we do.

And that's the perfect note on which to introduce Mark. I shan't give you his CV because it's well known, but just to say, I've seen five Directors-General in my 21 years at the Beeb, and this one is the strongest and the most creative. It's great that he's come here to speak to us tonight, on this, the most complex and important of all subjects.

Jeremy Vine

faith, morality and the media

I'm going to talk this evening about a difficult relationship. Not a broken relationship, not a hopeless relationship, but – I think most people would agree – sometimes a pretty fraught one.

It's a relationship where accusations and grievances often fly back and forth – though one can't help thinking that it may be more a matter of mutual misunderstanding than of malice. But it's also a relationship that matters to both the parties: a relationship it's worth getting right.

So who's in this fractious but ultimately worthwhile marriage? On one side of the bed, the UK's churches, church leaders and the leaders of Britain's other faith communities. On the other side of bed, well it's us: the Devil's party, or to give us our usual name, the UK's mass media.

religion is back

The relationship matters because quite simply religion is back. It's not just in the news, but often leads the news.

Front of mind of course are the series of "shocks" and outrages directly or indirectly connected with extreme strains of Islam. 9/11 and 7/7 are the dates that many of the media would cite as the days on which their view of the place of religion in the world changed. In fact I would date the collision between hardline Islam and the British mass media to an event which occurred much earlier in my career as a journalist and editor: to the autumn of 1988, and the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, which was followed a few months later by the fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

For billions of people in the modern world, religion is not a private leisure activity, but an all-consuming, central part of their lives.

The tensions revealed by this story – the cognitive dissonance between the values and worldview of a given minority and the expectations of the majority in a liberal democracy, the revelation that we live in a very small world where secularity in one country does not make you immune from religious fervour in another, above all the reminder that for billions of people in the modern world, religion is not a debating point or a private leisure activity, but an all-consuming, central part of their lives – these tensions are ones we still live with today.

And if you work in the media – and certainly if you are Director-General of the BBC – you can't help but bump into them. *Jerry Springer: The Opera* had successful seasons at the Edinburgh fringe, the National Theatre, the West End, it had won numerous theatre awards, all without anyone raising the topic of blasphemy. When we decided to show it on BBC TWO, in a late night slot and with numerous warnings to those who might be offended by it, all hell broke loose. Tens of thousands of emails, demonstrators outside Television Centre – and from what I am sure was only a tiny and unrepresentative minority of the complainants, threats of arson, violence and death.

It wasn't politics or investigative journalism or international affairs that put a security guard outside my house. It was a debate about the way the BBC handles religion.

I became Director-General in the aftermath of the Gilligan-Kelly-Hutton affair. Everyone said that the biggest battles I would have to fight would be over the BBC's political independence. That may yet turn out to be true. But no political issue has so far come anywhere near *Jerry Springer* in terms of anger and emotion. It wasn't politics or investigative journalism or international affairs that put a security guard outside my house. It was a debate about the way the BBC handles religion.

But there are so many other reasons why religion feels vital and topical again. So many of the big stories of the day – war and peace, global poverty, environmental sustainability, advances in science and medicine – throw up issues and debates in which religious perspectives feel relevant and in which church leaders can get their voices heard.

And the churches have found themselves in controversies of their own: women and gay priests and bishops; child abuse. Our current, relentless and sometimes rather pitiless culture of accountability has focused on organized religion as on every other aspect of public life. Our national taste for controversy and debate means that the theological – perhaps even ideological – struggle that is taking place between conservatives and liberals in many faiths is played out on our front pages and news bulletins.

And behind all of this, I believe, is a growing if often a grudging and unhappy acceptance that that broad mid-20th century assumption - an assumption that was almost all-pervasive in the media world I joined as a BBC trainee in 1979 - that the decline and marginalization of religion was a straightforward corollary of modernism and was inevitable; that it was happening in the West first but was the manifest destiny of the whole world; well, I think a growing number of people would accept that what's actually happening is far more variegated and dynamic. Indeed, over the next twenty years, the demographers expect the number of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs all to grow as a proportion of the world population. The groups they expect to decline most are those who profess no religion or who define themselves as atheists.

the charge–sheet against the media

The media can't avoid religion, in other words, if they want to reflect the world. And, to state the obvious, if the world's great religions want to communicate to that world, they are virtually bound to do that, at least in part, through modern mass media.

If the world's great religions want to communicate to that world, they are virtually bound to do that through modern mass media.

That's why the relationship matters. But – although this is only relatively rarely spelt out in public – I believe it is a relationship which is often marked on both sides by skepticism, suspicion, sometimes even contempt.

Well, I'm not a bystander in this relationship. I'm not just a member of Britain's mass media, but one of its leaders. And I'm certainly not going to try to persuade you that everything the BBC does, or the wider media does, in relation to the churches and Britain's other faiths, is perfect. I've already hinted at how difficult I think we have found it – and still find it – to come to terms with and to respond to the unexpected prominence of religion in global and national politics and in many other aspects of life. But the charge-sheet against the media is a good deal longer than that.

Three years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury gave a thoughtful but also pretty trenchant speech about the British media – and about journalism in particular. While he accepted that a thriving media was vital to a "mature democracy", he also claimed that the news media often acted in ways which were "lethally damaging" to journalism's own reputation. High levels of adversarial and suspicious probing send the clear message that any kind of concealment is guilty until proven innocent. And he suggested a root cause of the problem: "there is a tension at the heart of the journalistic enterprise," he said:

> Its justification is that it promises to deliver what other sources can't – information that is needed to equip the reader or viewer or listener for a more free and significant role as a human agent. But at the same time it is bound to a method and a rhetoric that treats its public as consumers and the information it purveys as a commodity.

So: negative, suspicious, prejudiced and instrumentalist. Hm, so what's your point, Dr Williams? Well, of course, no one would deny that all of those things are sometimes true of some of the media, perhaps sometimes true of all of the media. There's a big variation in journalism – even in journalism at the BBC – and all of it is fallible.

The accusatorial tradition – centuries old in our journalism as well as in our courts and in Parliament – means that whether in radio or TV current affairs or in the op-ed pages of our newspapers, often the bowling is fast and hard. As far as the BBC is concerned, I believe our audiences want us to be tough in holding public figures to account. But hectoring, character-assassination, exaggeration are all wrong. I believe they're all pretty rare in our output – and rarer than they used to be (if you don't believe me go back and look at some of the TV current affairs programmes of the 60s and 70s) – but they should be rarer still.

I sometimes wonder if part of the problem isn't the frantic attempt to stand out from the crowd, to shout louder than one's peers, to find a bigger, more shocking headline than anyone else.

Rowan Williams' point about news and information as a commodity and about readers and audiences as consumers is an interesting one. I sometimes wonder if part of the problem, especially in the print media, isn't almost the opposite of commoditization, and if it isn't the frantic attempt to stand out from the crowd, to shout louder than one's peers, to find a bigger, more shocking headline than anyone else; if, in other words, it isn't the attempt to de-commoditize what might otherwise be undifferentiated, generic news.

Again, I don't believe – and audiences tell us they don't believe – that sensationalism is a major issue in BBC News. And even the exceptions, the occasions when we do go a little over the top, are often eccentric rather than malicious. I'll give you an example in a moment.

It's also a feature of the BBC's unusual funding model and our view about what public service journalism consists of that, at least in our case, Dr Williams' point about treating audiences as consumers rather than as citizens or as human beings falls wide of the mark.

People who watch or listen to free-to-air public service content on TV, radio or the web are not consumers: there is no setting of a price for a given programme, no transaction, and nothing is consumed in the sense of being used up so that the next person cannot watch and enjoy the same programme. And in the case of the BBC, the fact that the same licence-fee is levied from every household means that all audiences are of equal value to us. There is no specially favoured demographic, no premium market.

Our system incentivizes us to try to deliver value to everyone whatever their age or race or income. And I believe at least that this focus on universal value does encourage BBC editors and producers to think of audiences in the round: as private users of our services, one by one or household by household; but also as citizens and as communities. And again, of course, sometimes to offer them content for immediate enjoyment, but also often to broadcast what the economists call merit goods – programmes and services whose full value to those who experience them will only become apparent over time.

Dr Williams, of course, was not talking specifically about the way the media cover religion, but I would be surprised if he didn't believe that his critique applied in that particular context too. I know, because they've told me, that many other church leaders would say it did. And some of them would go further and say that hostility to religion is so marked and so widespread that an additional bias often comes into play, or a blunt incomprehension, or even a bizarre transference of religious-like fervour into the secular or scientific.

the anti-God squad

I talked a few minutes ago about the sometimes eccentric subjects which the BBC picks on the rare occasions when you can accuse it of sensationalism. One example some people would choose is our coverage of what it must be said has so far been the rather fleeting launch of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN. In the *Daily Mail*, Stephen Glover accused us of going utterly 'barmy' over the Collider and I must say that, by the end of that week – and even for those who share my lifelong love affair with the Higgs boson – my goodness, the coverage did seem comprehensive. But Stephen goes on to make a bolder claim. It's aimed squarely at the BBC, but I know there are many who would say it's true of nearly all of the media:

> The BBC represents a materialist, mechanistic consensus which has rejected God, and deludes itself that science is capable of providing a complete explanation of existence. Hence the ludicrously inflated claims that are being made of what is going on near Geneva.

It's not the first time I've heard this accusation. When I announced I'd been offered a job by the BBC, an even greater authority than Stephen Glover – namely my mother – shook her head: "The BBC," she said, "is anti-Catholic and anti-God".

But these claims are not just too sweeping; they are not even *directionally* true. Of course inside the BBC you'd find many people who take a strongly sceptical view of religion – you'd find such people in any contemporary British institution or company – but you'd also find thousands of people for whom religion plays a central role in their lives.

Now I accept that it would be possible for a media organization to contain many believers and yet for the prevailing climate or *zeitgeist* to be anti-religious, but I don't believe that that is true either. Indeed I want to go further. I believe that the BBC has maintained the daily and weekly presence of religion on its services with more consistency and commitment over the decades than any other British media organization, and also more than most of the rest of what you could call public Britain.

The BBC has maintained the daily and weekly presence of religion on its services with more consistency and commitment over the decades than most of the rest of what you could call public Britain.

This year we celebrated the 80th anniversary of the launch of the *Daily Service. Songs of Praise*, *Choral Evensong, Thought For The Day, Prayer For The Day*: the reflection of the cycle of the Christian week and the Christian year is there for anyone who wants to find it. So too – though admittedly less prominently – are reflections of some of the key festivals of the UK's other major faiths. It's hard to square any of this with the idea of the BBC as the anti-God squad.

This engagement with religion not as *story* or *controversy* but as *faith* and *lived experience* is, I accept, unusual in the rest of the media. The print media, including as far as I can see the *Daily Mail*, now only offer marginal space – if that – to liturgical or contemplative religious content. While Channel 4 continues to broadcast some outstanding factual programming about the world's faiths, religion on ITV has beat a steady retreat in the face of competitive and financial pressures.

But there's another dynamic here. Beyond our core religious output, interest in the topic of religion and faith among general commissioners and controllers at the BBC is *growing* rather than diminishing. From *Extreme Pilgrim* to *An Island Parish*, there are more, many more, primetime television commissions on religious subjects than there were a generation ago – when beyond *Songs of Praise* there were essentially *none.* And the controllers have noticed that they typically play to big audiences.

This Easter, we broadcast a drama series across the week called *The Passion*, which told the gospel story from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. This series, I think, is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the mere fact of its being commissioned. I believe it is pretty unimaginable that the BBC I joined in 1979 would have *dreamed* of spending so much money on such a piece or of placing it in the middle of the evening on BBC ONE, as opposed to in some late night slot. The last time the BBC had ventured anywhere near this territory on television was with Dennis Potter's *Son Of Man* in the 1960s.

Interest in the topic of religion and faith among general commissioners and controllers at the BBC is growing rather than diminishing.

And that brings me to a second oddity. It is *The Passion*, in other words it is the 2008 drama, rather than *Son of Man* that decides to confront the Resurrection and to do so – I thought at least – in an imaginative way which nonetheless remained faithful to the gospel narrative.

And *The Passion* is only part of a wider story. We have more large-scale religious projects being made today than I can remember, including a new landmark history of Christianity with Diarmaid MacCulloch.

Now I can see how a resolutely atheistic BBC can fit into a particular worldview: whether that view is an *elegiac* one about the long, slow disappearance of the sea of faith over the shingle of Dover Beach; or whether you believe rather that religion is instead the victim of an active conspiracy of some kind, by a coalition of militant atheists and a liberal elite for instance.

A combination of events, cultural developments and demographic facts has undermined what was once a widely held assumption about the inevitable global retreat of religion.

At least in the case of the BBC, however, the facts point in a quite different direction. There is *more* interest and *more* high profile programming than there was, say, twenty-five years ago. Religion appears *more* often in our news bulletins.

I spoke earlier about how a combination of events, cultural developments and demographic facts has undermined what was once a widely held assumption about the inevitable global retreat of religion.

Well, I also want to argue that *another* set of prophesies – about the inevitability of the marginalization of religion on the airwaves – are also

turning out to be false, at least as far as the BBC is concerned. And of course these two, superficially counter-intuitive, trends are connected. The public remain stubbornly intrigued by questions of faith, destiny, values and ethics. Millions of them take part regularly or occasionally in religious practice; and tens of millions of them, almost certainly a large majority of the population, when asked, show evidence of at least some religious belief.

It's not surprising then that they should want to watch or listen to content which deals with these topics and beliefs and practices – nor that some of our most talented writers and programme-makers should be inspired by this public interest.

I remain optimistic that programme commissioners who are truly in touch with the audiences will continue to broadcast at least some religious output.

Addressing this demand on the part of our audiences is an important part of the BBC's public service mission and we know that. And while it is true that provision of religious output *beyond* the BBC is bound up with the massive structural change that is taking place in UK broadcasting, and the stresses that are being felt across the public service broadcasting system beyond the BBC, I remain optimistic that, wherever they sit, programme commissioners who are truly in touch with the audiences, will continue to broadcast at least *some* religious output. It may not be as tightly defined or as overtly religious as it might have been under the old dispensation, but that does not mean it will be any less valuable.

morality and the media

But many religious leaders attack the mass media *not* because of the media's perceived lack of interest or lack of sympathy for religion – though they may believe that as well – but because of what they see as the media's general *amorality* or moral *shallowness*.

Materialism, celebrity culture, hedonism, the celebration of greed or cruelty, the use of foul or abusive language, an absence of clear moral benchmarks, or of any kind of moral or philosophical seriousness: many of those who worry about contemporary life and especially about the values which society passes on to its young often identify the mass media as a significant part of the problem. A *transmitter* of the problem, almost certainly in their view, but perhaps also an *originator*. At its most trenchant, this line of criticism accuses the modern media of the crime for which Socrates was given hemlock – corrupting the youth of the city.

Now of course, if you read, watch and listen to the whole of the modern mass media – above all, if you spend a few hours drifting through the internet, you can find anything: all of the shallow and negative things on my list and no doubt a lot worse besides.

But I have two observations to make. The first is that it is important to keep a sense of proportion. I believe that, on balance, the BBC was right to broadcast *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. But that does *not* mean that I believe that showing religious figures or sacred images in a controversial setting, or in a way which may cause distress or anger to some believers, is something the BBC should do lightly, or do every day.

And we don't. The *overwhelming* majority of our programmes which deal with religion do so in an obviously respectful and non-controversial way.

The overwhelming majority of our output stays well within the bounds of traditional expectations about violence, about language, about sexual content and about values.

And more broadly, the overwhelming majority of our output, especially that aimed at children and at family audiences, stays well within the bounds of traditional expectations about violence, about language, about sexual content and about values. Programmes like *Eastenders* do sometimes deal with controversial topics – domestic violence, child abuse, the challenge of coping with a disabled family member and so on – but characteristically they do so with real care: taking advice from the experts throughout the process from initial storyline to transmission; offering phone and web support to viewers who may want information or help because the given story has found an echo in their *own* lives.

Moreover, it's a mistake – usually made by those who don't actually watch programmes like *Eastenders, Holby City* or for that matter *The Archers* – to imagine that these programmes inhabit an amoral universe. Nothing could be further from the truth. In these long-running dramas, actions always have consequences and the authors of the actions almost always have to live with those consequences. The choices the characters have to make – and of course almost all drama is about choices – are almost always moral choices, or at least choices with a moral dimension.

And – without wanting to load brilliantly entertaining programmes with too much moral cargo – most of these programmes are exploring themes which run pretty deep. In different ways, both *Eastenders* and *The Archers* explore the ways in which the different generations of traditional communities try sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to adapt to a changing world. *Doctor Who* is not just about daleks and cybermen: it's about mothers and families and friendship.

Now there are boundaries. At the BBC, we have editorial guidelines and we apply them. We adjust storylines. Sometimes we remove material, especially if we believe it will exceed the expectations of audiences watching before the nine o'clock watershed. Very occasionally, as in the case of the animated comedy *Popetown*, we will withdraw a

programme completely before transmission if we believe that the potential offence outweighs the benefit of showing the programme.

And of course from time to time we make mistakes – very rarely in mainstream output, most frequently when we're trying something new or original. Another of our duties is to support creative innovation and risk-taking and sometimes that *does* lead to tension with audience expectations. To be the controller, say, of Radio 1 or of BBC ONE for that matter, is to be put on the spot.

It is my and my senior colleagues' job to ensure as far as possible that the right decisions are made and to be the first port of call if and when the public complain.

But the matter doesn't rest there. The BBC Trust can and does review our decisions, as well as approving any changes to the editorial guidelines; and the independent regulator, OFCOM, also has a significant role when it comes to taste and decency, harm and offence. Both Trust and OFCOM publish their findings which are taken up – usually with some enthusiasm! – by the rest of the press. Accountability is public then and, as we saw in the case of the issues with phone competitions last year, can lead to sanctions.

If one of the goals of the media is to mirror human life, then to complain about what you find there is pretty close to complaining about human nature.

OFCOM also takes its duties very seriously in relation to the rest of broadcast media. In the case of *print* media, beyond the basic legal boundaries of defamation, obscenity and so on, the system is largely one of self-regulation – while content on the internet is essentially unregulated.

But even when it comes to print and internet, I'm resistant to the idea that the media is some kind of well-spring or accelerant of immorality. There is enormous variety across our newspapers and doubtless plenty of things to criticize – just as there are among the broadcasters – but most of them seem to me at least to want to engage their readers in a moral, as well as a political debate about the great issues of the day. If, taken together, they suggest a good deal of moral confusion and uncertainty, then that seems to me a pretty fair reflection of reality – which is, after all, their job.

The same is true to an even greater extent about the web, whose motto should be: *here is God's plenty.* As everyone knows, you can find pretty much anything on the web, from would-be terrorists and fanatics of every description to the most high-minded and worthwhile exchange of knowledge, ideas and values. If you are looking for immorality, in other words, you can find it. But that after all is true of any town or city in the world. If one of the goals of the media is to mirror human life, then the internet is doing that more

closely and more diversely than anything that has come before; and to complain about what you find there is pretty close to complaining about human nature.

And that brings me to my second observation: which is that we are manifestly moving – perhaps have already moved – from a period when one could reasonably hope to control the media by controlling the *supply*, with content regulation, with laws and so on, to a period in which supply will be to a large extent unlimited and what will matter most is *demand*. In other words, a period in which the public will be free to choose what content they access and enjoy and where *their* judgment about what they should and shouldn't watch will be what counts. Power in other words will flow from people like me to the public.

All of my experience of audiences suggests to me that the public at large are sophisticated and astute in the way they think about the media.

Your view of this development probably depends almost entirely on your view of the public themselves. Here too I am very definitely on the side of the optimists. All of my experience of audiences suggests to me that the public at large are sophisticated and astute in the way they think about the media. They may sometimes choose a popular *genre* over a more challenging one, but within any *genre* – from arts programming to reality – they can always tell a good programme from a bad one. They want quality and, although they sometimes want familiar and consistent pleasures, they also look to broadcasters like the BBC to challenge and surprise them.

They may well look to us and to others to *guide* them in this new and sometimes bewildering digital world – this is why I believe that substantial and well-targeted *media literacy* tools are going to be so important for the BBC to provide, not just to children and young people, but to adults too – but I believe that the benefits of this greater freedom and greater choice of content are likely far to outweigh the dangers.

At the BBC, for instance, we hope to open up a significant part – perhaps ultimately all – of our archive for the public to use. The launch of the iPlayer has already demonstrated an extraordinary hunger for people to access TV and radio on *their* terms, when and where they want it. But iPlayer is currently just about the past seven days' worth of programmes. We have just pricked the surface of what's possible: which is to make available pretty much everything that the BBC has broadcast. It's an amazing moment – one in which the benefits which public service broadcasting always promised, in delivering high quality information, knowledge, skills and culture, can finally be fully realized.

the response of religion

And that in turn takes me to my last point, which I want to put on the table with all due humility. It is that there is a case for the churches and the UK's other faith-leaders to engage with the extraordinary, developing market-place of ideas, and perspectives and testimonies with perhaps more confidence and a little less defensiveness than is sometimes the case today.

Already of course many faiths understand and exploit the power of the internet to connect with supporters and, in various ways, to mobilize them. But the broader media space, in which TV, radio, newspapers and magazines are converging with each other and with the web, is a space full of opportunity for those with a powerful message to convey. There are risks, of course, in opening yourself up to media scrutiny whether it is in the form of a traditional *Today* programme interview, an access documentary or a blog, but it is interesting if we take another field like business, how many of today's leaders – from Richard Branson to Warren Buffett – see a personal *presence* and a public *point of view* as a central part of their job.

There is a case for the churches and the UK's other faith-leaders to engage with the extraordinary, developing market-place of ideas, perhaps more confidence and a little less defensiveness than is sometimes the case today.

And wise leaders, whatever their field, know that it's just as important to be visible when you're handling bad or contentious news as it is when you're completing a victory lap.

In many ways, religious leaders and the mass media are in the same business: the business of communication. At our best, we share some of the same virtues and skills: an understanding and respect for our audience but a determination to stand for some enduring values; a willingness to listen as well as to speak. We also confront some of the same challenges: a noisier, more confusing, more fragmentary world with more competition for people's attention and where much less is taken for granted; a transfer of power and initiative in favour of the public.

In both our worlds, it's perhaps not surprising that some feel pessimistic and are tempted to turn away, to turn inward. For me though, this is also a moment of real potential and of real hope. Power in the media is moving to where it should always have been – in the hands of the public. At the BBC, and beyond the BBC, our ability to deliver real public value in my view will grow, not lessen, if we make the right decisions and follow them through.

There has never been a better moment in history for story-telling, or so many new means to reach the ears of the indifferent as well as the convinced.

This is also a future which could see a better, richer relationship between religion and the media. That can and should mean an honest dialogue between us – as far as the BBC is concerned, I believe we always benefit when people are frank with us with their criticisms and their suggestions. But it could also mean new collaborations.

It seems to me that, whatever else it is, religion is about story-telling – about stories which are so compelling that they can change the lives of the hearers for ever. There has never been a better moment in history for story-telling, or so many new means to reach the ears of the indifferent as well as the convinced.

We certainly should continue to hold each other to account. But perhaps we can also find new ways of telling some of these stories too.

Policy Statement

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Faith, morality and the media

The BBC Director-General, Mark Thompson, gives a robust defence of the Corporation's engagement with religion in this transcript of his 2008 Theos public theology lecture.

Thompson states that the relationship between religion and the media is important "because, quite simply, religion is back. It's not just in the news, but often leads the news." The assumption when he joined the BBC back in 1979, that the decline and marginalization of religion was a straight forward corollary of modernism and was inevitable, is in the process of being disproven.

Commenting on a speech given by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2005 on the media, where he argued that news media often acted in ways which were "lethally damaging" to journalism's own reputation, Thompson defends the media and the BBC. Claims that the BBC is anti-God are "not just too sweeping; they are not even directionally true", he argues, going on to outline his optimism for the future relationship between religion and the media.

The lecture was introduced by broadcaster Jeremy Vine, whose introduction forms the foreword to this transcript. Both Thompson and Vine bring thoughtful reflection and clear-sighted direction to this complex but important topic.

The lecture was delivered at the Lewis Media Centre on 14 October 2008.

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