Religious Programmes
and the Ofcom Broadcasting Code

A report of the key findings of a qualitative research study

Research study conducted by Counterpoint Research
on behalf of Ofcom

May 2005
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Executive Summary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Background &amp; research objectives</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Programme Code review</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General attitudes to regulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of channels &amp; platforms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions to the draft Code</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in specific groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Professionals’ views</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry professionals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders of faith communities &amp; other belief systems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

Section 319 (1) of the Communications Act 2003 (“the Act”) requires Ofcom to set a Code which contains standards for the content of television and radio services. The Ofcom Broadcasting Code, published on 25 May 2005 takes effect on 25 July 2005. The Code applies to all broadcasters regulated by Ofcom, with certain exceptions in the case of the BBC (Sections Five, Six, Nine and Ten) and S4C (part of Section Six).

This independent research was commissioned by Ofcom from Counterpoint Research to assist in the consideration of points raised by the public consultation on the Ofcom Broadcasting Code which began in July 2004.

The draft Code (which can be found on the Ofcom web-site) contained a set of rules proposed by Ofcom to meet the objectives of the Act. The Act requires that the proper degree of responsibility is exercised regarding the content of religious programmes. The Act also requires that religious programmes should not involve any improper exploitation of any susceptibilities of the audience for such a programme or any abusive treatment of the religious views and beliefs of those belonging to a particular religion or denomination.

This research was undertaken, as part of the consultation process, to aid Ofcom in finalising the Code. The views of those with specific religious beliefs and with no religious belief were canvassed on a series of questions linked to that section.

The research was qualitative in nature. This means it explored in some depth the views of respondents in order to give directional steers to Ofcom. As it is not a quantitative study, the results cannot be extrapolated to represent the views of the wider population. It contributed to the policy considerations but is not in itself conclusive about how any individual issue should be treated. It is also the case that (unlike harm and offence) - generally accepted standards are not applied to religious programmes.

The research conclusions were part of the information taken into account by Ofcom and in deciding what the supporting web-based guidance should be.

1 with the exception of rule 10.17 which takes effect on July 1st 2005 when the Investment Recommendation (Media) Regulations come into force
Section 1

Executive Summary

General attitudes to regulation

- Across all the groups\(^2\), respondents were in agreement that in its current form religious broadcasting should be protected by regulation. When thinking about regulatory issues, participants felt that faith or belief based programmes were quite different from mainstream programmes on a number of levels and therefore felt it was only right that separate rules should apply to such programmes.

- Respondents felt that audiences were far more ‘open’ when viewing or listening to such programmes and were often watched/listened to with ‘suspended’ critical disbelief. Religion was also felt to be a very sensitive issue and respondents were very worried indeed about the potential exploitation of audiences by “conmen”. Respondents were nervous of the power that television in particular has to ‘sell’ and were very concerned that access to this medium be restricted and controlled.

- There was concern about a variety of types of people, including children, the elderly, lonely, depressed and isolated, all of whom respondents felt could be vulnerable to manipulation. Crucially, most felt that any viewer or listener could be vulnerable at some stage in their life.

- In almost all groups, respondents spontaneously came up with a set of rules which they felt should apply to programmes within this genre:
  - such programmes should properly explore alternative beliefs and views, and not be disrespectful or dismissive;
  - while such programmes should be able to take a light-hearted look at other faiths, cultures, values, morals and ethics, they should be mindful of others’ views; specifically, such programmes should not be serious about one faith whilst being light-hearted about other faiths;
  - programmes about religion and faith should always be “reasonable” and “fair”, i.e. should be very well researched and reliable in their portrayal of faith;
  - programme information should be provided for programmes outlining one faith so that the audience can frame their ‘listening mode’ appropriately;
  - faith-based programmes should present beliefs, culture and values without presenting them as being better than others;
  - such programmes should not be allowed to ‘preach’, i.e. claim that theirs is the “only” valid faith, and/or a faith which the audience should join.

- Having laid out such rules, respondents were very quick to argue that no programme could ever be ‘pure’ or ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and that this field would always be one where judgement and shades of grey were common. Having laid down this cornerstone, they went on to argue that matters of faith will always involve strong feelings, and it will be likely that someone will “take offence” when none was intended.

\(^2\) A broad cross-section of the UK population was included in the research, including weak, lapsed or non-believers of traditional religions, Christian believers (including denominations) and followers of major world faiths (Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism & Buddhism).
Perceptions of channels and platforms

- Respondents saw three different types of channels/platforms:
  
  - **Terrestrial television and radio**: Respondents felt the main provider of religious programming on terrestrial channels is mainly BBC One, but most argued that good quality satellite channels such as Discovery or National Geographic, as well as an entertainment-based channel such as ITV could easily produce good quality programming within the broader definition of religious programmes. Certainly such mainstream channels were expected to comply with all of the regulatory rules they suggested above.
  
  - **Satellite and cable channels which are part of a package**: Participants felt the issue here was that individual ‘choice’ was not appropriate to the decision making process – the point of consumption is removed from the point of purchase, and in any case it was felt that broadcasters were adding new channels to packages all the time without informing subscribers properly. Thus, they felt that regulation should be the same as for terrestrial television. Ethnic minority respondents talked about ‘their’ channels in the context of satellite or cable channels that came as part of a package. They tended to argue that their religion was very tied up with their language, and that therefore much of their religious programming would have to come via the satellite channels, reasoning that it would be unfair to demand airtime for a foreign language based service on terrestrial channels.
  
  - **Channels which have to be individually subscribed to**: In the context of specific channels where individuals made the choice to subscribe, many respondents tended to use the language of consumer choice. At this level there was some discomfort at insisting on the application of the same level of regulation to channels which have been designed for a particular interest, and which subscribers have to actively opt in to and pay for.

- At one level, respondents felt that rules and regulations should apply to all channels and platforms but the important issue was that any member of the audience could be vulnerable at any point and at a moment which was not the point at which they had made the decision to subscribe to any programme or channel package. Therefore, all of the protection provided by regulation should be available all of the time, regardless of channel.

Reactions to the draft Code

- “Responsibility” - Throughout all the groups, respondents felt that programme makers and broadcasters should treat belief, faith and spirituality with seriousness and respect, unless the programme was specifically described as ‘light-hearted’ or a ‘comedy’. They expected that individual ‘voices’ would be balanced by objectivity, and within a discussion or debate type programme they anticipated contrasting and opposing views would be heard. Where balance wasn’t provided within the programme there should be clear programme information provided to this effect.
• “Views and beliefs must not be abused” - In the context of views and beliefs, respondents expressed the need for programme makers and broadcasters to conduct proper research, and to ensure that participants, commentators or ‘voices’ within that programme would do the same.

• “Due accuracy and fairness” - When asked about “due accuracy and fairness” respondents thought that this should operate on a number of levels depending on the type of programming. Where the programme is more about ‘witnessing’, respondents felt that fairness and accuracy would be reliant upon the testimony, story or storyteller and thus not directly the responsibility of the broadcaster. In contrast, where the programme was an educational or informative documentary or discussion, respondents felt that the ‘normal’ rules of objectivity and fairness should apply, particularly given that belief was recognised as such a sensitive topic. For the third type of programme, where religious or faith-related topics were incorporated within mainstream programmes, respondents felt that there should be a requirement that storylines and characters should not be too ridiculous or extreme, as was sometimes the case in soaps.

• “A programme espousing religious views or beliefs must make the identity of the religion and/or denomination clear” - The importance of providing information on the identity of the religion and/or denomination has already been identified as a priority by the respondents for the ‘witnessing’ type programmes. For discussions and documentaries respondents expected programme contributors to be identified, because in this context they judged it even more important to know who was putting forward a particular view, because of the potential for audiences to receive these programmes as authoritative statements. In relation to dramas, or other mainstream programmes with religious storylines or characters, respondents felt this was unnecessary as it would be ridiculous to reveal the plot in order to fulfil this part of the Code.

• “Making the purpose clear when it is to convey religious views or seek recruits”
  
  • Across all groups this section of the Code caused absolute consternation, confusion and in the end, anger, following directly from the strength of their feelings, already repeatedly expressed, about how religious and faith based television should be used for sharing beliefs, not setting one set of beliefs over another or trying to persuade viewers and listeners to join that faith. They associated this kind of behaviour with the extremes of belief, not with a legitimate, active, open-minded, tolerant faith. Hence, they tended to react violently, disbelievingly and very, very negatively to the suggestion that this could be allowed.

  • Similarly, respondents were also very concerned with the proposition that programme-makers could be allowed to ask for donations. They felt that appeals for charity were already done well on television and asked why any community would want to raise money for themselves, rather than for a charity.

  • While most of these respondents were unhappy at the idea of recruitment per se, and certainly in relation to terrestrial and bundled satellite or cable channels, some changed their deeply held views when considering individual opt-in channels. Most wanted the rules to apply across the board, even to opt-in channels, since the point of viewing was never the
point of purchase, and because the viewer may have become more vulnerable since their original decision to subscribe.

- “Should not improperly exploit the audience by preying on their susceptibilities” – Respondents generally interpreted “should not improperly exploit the audience by preying on their susceptibilities” to mean that programme makers would not be allowed to recruit or solicit donations. As previously mentioned, there was a feeling that normal critical faculties have to be set aside to truly benefit from a faith-based, witness type programme and respondents were again concerned that we could all be vulnerable at some point when engaged in this kind of programme.

- “Programmes which contain claims of special powers or abilities” – The issue of how to deal with programmes that contain claims of special powers or abilities was rarely brought up spontaneously. Claims to such powers proved to be very controversial amongst respondents. Certainly they all felt that people or groups claiming special powers had to be treated very carefully in programmes. Respondents were nervous about the inclusion of such people on any programme, but most particularly religious programmes, precisely because of the ‘suspension of critical framework’ which sometimes accompanies such programmes, and which they felt was appropriate when viewing/listening to such programmes.

Industry professionals

- The industry professionals’ view of the current state of religious programming was very much in line with audience findings but often put in much stronger terms. However, they felt that Christian worship was dealt with well (certainly in comparison with the way it was handled in the past) and that the worship and the Songs of Praise audiences need to be protected.

- There was a consensus that the audience was currently poorly served by religious broadcasting on a number of fronts including a lack of interfaith dialogue and debate, and the poor levels of research and credibility of these religious programmes. However, there was a view that the broadcasting output was changing rapidly as broadcasters found more innovative, entertaining and relevant ways to explore religious issues and themes.

- They were concerned about any ground being given to allow requests for donation or recruitment on any of the platforms, although they had mixed views on the acceptability of these practices on subscription or opt-in channels.

- Industry professionals, like the consumers, recognised the importance of programme information across the different forms of religious broadcasting e.g. polemic, docu-drama, and that this should be applied consistently across the platforms.

- There was also some concern about the consistent application of regulation across the platforms, specifically cable, satellite and subscription channels, and whether these channels would have to play by the same rules as terrestrial channels. Industry professionals felt that if there were to be obligations for public service broadcasting to include religious broadcasting, there would need to be
some support so that these channels would not be operating with unfair constraints in the digital world.

- Regarding donations and recruitment the religious and non-belief leaders reiterated all that had been voiced by the consumers in the focus groups.

- Religious and non-belief leaders felt that there was potential for real improvement in religious broadcasting. They anticipated a greater diversity of views, more vigorous debate and the inclusion of religious views in more mainstream programming. However, there was a concern that allowing any recruitment or donation would eventually lead to US-style tele-evangelism, a prospect that they were not comfortable with.
Section 2

Background & research objectives

Background

Having replaced the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC), the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and the Radio Authority (RA), Ofcom published a draft Broadcasting Code in Summer 2004. One section of this draft code was concerned with religion and religious broadcasting and it incorporated some significant proposed changes to the previous regulation. It outlined the following principles:

- To ensure that a proper degree of responsibility is exercised by broadcasters regarding the content of religious programmes;
- To ensure that the religious views and beliefs of a religion or religious denomination are not abused;
- To ensure that audience members are protected from improper exploitation.

In addition to the consultation process following the publication of the draft Ofcom decided that it was important to conduct some systematic research amongst broadcast audiences in order to solicit feedback on their attitudes towards the regulation of religious programming.

Research objectives

Ofcom commissioned Counterpoint Research, an independent market research agency, to conduct the study and to inform understanding around the following key areas:

- To investigate perceptions, both at a consumer and citizen level, of religious programmes on TV and radio, in its narrowest and widest forms in order to develop a definition of religious broadcasting;
- To assess the impact of the potential change in regulation of religious broadcasting and to assess the potential risk to minority/susceptible groups;
- To explore the role of, and attitudes towards, religious programmes amongst different groups, including the positive and negative elements of current output;
- To investigate perceptions of religion/religious broadcasting and its perceived value;
- To understand how religious broadcasting could be developed in the future to maximise relevance/accessibility;
- To investigate, via the use of creative techniques, alternative formats or programme ideas that seek to broaden the appeal/relevance of religious broadcasting.

Methodology

Three stages of research were conducted: desk research; interviews with professionals; and group discussions amongst consumers.
Stage 1 – Desk research
A review of the literature was conducted to inform the discussion guide for each of the groups of interest.

Stage 2 – Group discussions
The main stage was a series of 18 two-hour group discussions with consumers.
A broad cross-section of the UK population was included in the research, including the following specific groups:

- Weak, lapsed or non-believers of traditional religions
- Christian (including denominations) believers
- Followers of major world faiths (referred to as other faiths throughout this report) as listed below:
  - Islam
  - Hinduism
  - Judaism
  - Sikhism
  - Buddhism

The following table provides a detailed breakdown of the sample:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mixed groups of weak, lapsed &amp; non-believers of traditional religions</th>
<th>Medium-Strong Christian believers</th>
<th>Other faiths: Medium-Strong believers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female Pre-family Including 2 ex-Jewish Edinburgh</td>
<td>Male Pre-family Bristol</td>
<td>Muslim men 25-50, BC1C2 Birmingham</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male Pre-family Including 2 ex-Muslims Edinburgh</td>
<td>Female Pre-family Cardiff</td>
<td>Muslim women 30-55, C1C2D Leeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male With children Including 2 ex-Sikh Birmingham</td>
<td>Female With children North London</td>
<td>Hindu men and women 25-55, BC1C2 Camden</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female With children Including 2 ex-Buddhists London</td>
<td>Male With children Protestant Belfast</td>
<td>Sikh men and women 25-55, C1C2D Hayes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Empty-nesters Including 2 ex-Muslims Cardiff</td>
<td>Female Empty-nesters Catholic Belfast</td>
<td>Buddhist men and women 25-55, BC1C2 Bristol</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female Empty-nesters Including 2 ex-Hindus Newcastle</td>
<td>Male Empty-nesters Newcastle</td>
<td>Jewish men and women 30-60, C1C2D North London</td>
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Stage 3 – Interviews with professionals
20 in-depth interviews were held with representatives from the media (programme commissioners and producers) and leaders of faith communities and other belief systems. This process provided contextual depth and a framework against which the discussions and findings from the groups could be assessed.

The research fieldwork was conducted between 18 November and 16 December 2004.

This document reports on the findings of this study and represents the views of the respondents participating in stages 2 & 3 of the research.
Section 3

Programme Code review

General attitudes to regulation

When thinking about regulatory issues, participants felt that religious or faith-based programmes were quite different from mainstream programmes on a number of levels. They therefore felt it was only right that separate rules should apply to such programmes.

“I think there have got to be guidelines, because people would get away with too much.”
(Male, Empty Nester, Christian, Newcastle)

“I think they need to regulate it differently; if you want to discuss religion, you have to show the whole picture and cannot leave things out.”
(Buddhist, Bristol)

One important difference about religious programmes, consistently given throughout the groups was that audiences were often more ‘open’ when watching/listening such programmes and therefore needed to be protected from programme makers abusing this more sensitive state. Respondents felt that when watching/listening to religion or faith based programmes they were often more likely to be in a different mindset and to suspend their critical disbelief.

“They have to take responsibility because they are influencing people.”
(Female, Empty Nester, Weak-no belief, Newcastle)

“I feel they have to be as responsible as everyone else. Religion is a very delicate subject and it’s got to be scrutinised by somebody. You can really affect people with religion.”
(Female, Empty Nester, Weak-no belief, Newcastle)

There was consensus that religion is still regarded as one of the three great taboos and that people (albeit usually described as “other people”) could be very sensitive when discussing religious affairs and this needed to be acknowledged by programme makers.

In terms of exploitation the participants were aware and anxious about the potential misuse of religious programmes by what they called ‘con-men’. There was a strong sense amongst respondents that television in particular is a powerful medium and when viewed in the context of religious and faith based programmes it would be very important that the access of such people would need to be restricted.

“I don’t feel I would be taken in by these programmes that are seeking to recruit, but some people are susceptible.”
(Male, Children at Home, Protestant, Belfast)

Having discussed in detail the fact that audiences were more ‘open’ when engaging in religious programming they felt particular groups would be more vulnerable to
being manipulated, particularly as the respondents viewed potential ‘con-men’ as usually very articulate.

“Some people might be caught in a difficult moment and might therefore be very vulnerable.”
(Male, Empty Nester, Christian, Newcastle)

“It’s hard for them to tell exactly who the audience is. There are gullible people for whom it should be labelled.”
(Male, Children at Home, Protestant, Belfast)

Respondents felt children and the elderly were vulnerable groups. Importantly, in the context of religious programming participants felt the term ‘vulnerable’ could apply to a much wider audience such as those who may be depressed or ‘down’. Respondents were honest in saying that given the stresses of life (work, finances, etc) they too could be ‘down’ at some point in their lives and therefore could be vulnerable. Thus, respondents argued that regulation was required to protect these vulnerable people.

“I know that I definitely wouldn’t want that broadcast to my children … I might even be caught at a weak moment, we all have life-changing situations and things like that, I think that’s where it should be regulated.”
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

Throughout the discussions of what religious broadcasting is, and more importantly, what it should be, respondents spontaneously identified a series of rules and regulations which they felt programmes makers should observe when making such programmes.

“They can’t threaten you, brainwash you, they can’t scare you, they can’t ask for money, manipulate, incite riot or hatred, break the law.”
(Female, Empty Nester, Catholic, Belfast)

The audience argued that programmes should never put down, be disrespectful or dismissive of others’ beliefs and thus most programmes were expected to be serious. However, some felt that it was also important that programmes should occasionally include a lighter look at various faiths, cultures, values, morals and ethical approaches. The consensus was that while such programmes may be tongue in cheek, they would need to be mindful of others’ feelings about their own faith, beliefs or religion. Crucially such programmes should certainly never be serious about their own faith, whilst being less so about alternative faiths. Where comedic approaches were adopted respondents argued that there should be clear programme information to this effect and therefore taking the programme outside the genre of ‘religious broadcasting’.

Participants felt that religious and faith-based programmes should always be both ‘reasonable’ and ‘fair’. To this end participants stated that programmes should, as far as possible, be well researched and reliable in their portrayal of a faith.

“I think offence comes from sweeping statements which are a product of ignorance.”
(Buddhist, Bristol)
If a programme was going to be explicitly and solely the portrayal of one faith (such as ‘witnessing’ programmes), then sufficient programme information should be provided so that people could choose to watch it with an appropriate level of openness or with their critical framework in place.

Respondents also felt that faith-based programmes and religious broadcasting should present their own beliefs, culture and values without presenting them as being better than other faiths or beliefs. They also felt that it is important that programme makers or participants in programmes should not be allowed to use programmes (on either radio or television) to ‘preach at’ or try to get members of the audience to join their faith. This was a strong theme which underpinned most of the spontaneous discussion of faith-based or religious programmes.

“I don’t want to see hard sell, I want them to say their point of view but I do not want to see that one is better than the other.”
(Buddhist, Bristol)

Respondents were realistic about the difficulties that programme makers faced when trying to abide by regulations and they reiterated again and again how important it was to appreciate a number of factors. Firstly, they recognised that no programme could ever be ‘pure’ or completely ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and that there would therefore always be grades of interpretation and competing interpretations. Further, they accepted that it was inevitable that compromises and slight distortions would appear in these programmes.

“Its difficult isn’t it … there’s us sat here now and I bet not one of us has got the exact same thoughts, the same beliefs, how do you please everybody?”
(Female, Pre-family, Christian, Cardiff)

Respondents were also keenly aware of how religion, faith, morality and ethics etc., were all extremely sensitive subjects as well as being deeply personal, individual decisions and that therefore it would be inevitable that some people’s feelings would run high. However, they argued that this was something to be expected and that programme makers should not shy away from such a response.

“I think you have to have outspoken people, if you didn’t then we would never know about some things.”
(Male, Empty Nester, Christian, Newcastle)

Respondents argued that there would always be someone who watched a programme and who would find something offensive and that this was an inevitable consequence of engaging in religious broadcasting. However, respondents insisted that people ‘taking’ offence was different to either allowing a programme maker to actively try to offend others (particularly where negative comments are aimed at a particular faith or belief system) or causing offence because of either poor research or an unfair portrayal of a faith.

It was felt by the respondents that if programme makers followed these guidelines, with the right attitude and the proper commitment to research and fairness, and if sufficient programme information was given (particularly where it was a ‘witness’ or polemical programme), then generally those who were offended had “decided” to “take” offence and that they should therefore be given little credence.
Worship or ‘personal witnessing’ type programmes

Given the personal and subjective nature of this type of programme, and the possible accompanying relaxation of critical filters from the audience watching and/or listening, respondents suggested that programme makers would need to abide by special rules. They expressed a requirement for programme makers to provide clear programme information when presenting a personal view, as witnessing and not recruiting, and to ensure that such programmes do not allow the person witnessing to denigrate others’ faith or beliefs.

“You need to prevent a free for all slagging match … have the opportunity to define your belief, but not at the expense of other religions.”
(Male, Children at Home, Protestant, Belfast)

Respondents welcomed the possible polemic nature of such a personal view. They knew that these views exist, that they are a part of our society and felt that it was no use pretending that people do not hold these positions and indeed that it was important to hear these views. However, there was again recognition that as a polemic these programmes would need to be subject to certain checks and balances. To this end, they felt the programmes would need to be part of a regular series that reflected and represented a variety of faith and belief positions; would need to have sufficient information to indicate which denomination is being represented; and clear information when presenting a polemic rather than a debate. Further, they took the view that the participants in the programme should be British, and again, giving this platform to an ordinary citizen, rather than a religious leader, should support the inclusive nature of the programme. This would also serve to make the programme more accessible.

“I think it is important to see British Muslims. I’d like to see them with British accents, how often do you see that?”
(Male, Muslim, Birmingham)

In summary, respondents would like programmes that show both the big events and tiny observations of a person’s beliefs in action, whether that of an atheist, Hindu, Sikh, Pagan or born-again Christian. To see and hear about the actual lived experience of one person’s faith and belief, they felt, is to more accurately reflect the true nature of faith and belief. Worship, the believers in particular felt, was something very personal and ‘in person’, and not quite suitable for television broadcast. Sharing the role and implications of beliefs or faiths in daily life was much more suited to broadcast.

“The more you find out, the less intolerant you become – if everyone gets their time slots, and if there’s a foreword to it, you can listen to what they have got to say. Religions exist and are all different from one another, I have got to be in a position to say, well if that’s your faith, that’s your faith.”
(Female, Empty Nester, Weak-no belief, Newcastle)

“There’s a lot of people who are changing from the Christian faith to other faiths, so I think if that sort of thing was on the screens more, it would give people a more broad and settled understanding of other faiths.”
(Female, Empty Nester, Weak-no belief, Newcastle)
“Nothing is going to be served by hiding it away, this stuff goes on in society anyway, we have got to learn to be accepting”.
(Buddhist, Bristol)

“There are some pretty weird views out there, so let’s hear them, as long as it’s reasonably respectful and not inciting, let’s have it.”
(Buddhist, Bristol)

Perceptions of channels and platforms

At one level, respondents felt that the rules or regulations that they had outlined themselves should apply to all channels and programmes, whatever their type. The language of ‘choice’ and consumer as regulatory determining factors did not emerge spontaneously when talking about religious programmes.

“I think it has to be everywhere. I don’t know why subscription TV should be different.”
(Female, Empty Nester, Weak-no belief, Newcastle)

The important issue here was that any member of the audience could be vulnerable at any point and at a moment which was not the point at which they had made the decision to subscribe to any programme or channel package. Therefore, all of the protection provided by regulation should be available all of the time, regardless of channel.

Secondly, respondents felt that their suggested rules were simply responsible and sensible, and that it was difficult to imagine broadcasters and programme makers not wanting to abide by those rules.

In terms of regulation all of the rules that applied to terrestrial television were expected to apply to all of the channels, all of the time.

Non-terrestrial television channels (non-subscription)

Those respondents who were satellite or cable subscribers tended to report having come across tele-evangelism and religious channels as part of their overall package.

If these respondents encountered, by chance, a channel they felt had inappropriate content, such as tele-evangelists trying to preach at their audience or attempting to get them to join that denomination, then they reported simply switching over to another channel. However, everyone felt that because such channels were accessible to any subscriber at any time, whether young, old, lonely, depressed etc., then the same set of rules should apply to such channels.

“The ones that tend to be on satellite can very pushy I think.”
(Male, Children at Home, Protestant, Belfast)

Across the board, most respondents felt that there was an opportunity for most of the terrestrial and non-terrestrial channels to produce and broadcast a range of the more widely defined faith-based programmes,

Therefore it is unsurprising that most respondents expected all of the rules for the production and broadcast of those programmes to apply to all of the channels all of the time.
Non-terrestrial television channels (individually subscribed to)

As previously mentioned, at one level, respondents resisted having a different set of rules for a given channel, based on the reasoning that the potential vulnerability of the audience cannot be judged at the point of purchase alone, and given their clear hope for responsible broadcasting in this context.

It was, however, in the context of specific channels where individuals made the choice to subscribe, that many respondents tended to use the language of consumer choice. At this level there was some discomfort at insisting on the application of the same level of regulation to channels which have been designed for a particular interest, and which subscribers have to actively opt in to and pay for.

“I’m going on like my gran, I don’t mean to be so conservative, I’m not conservative, I’m just really, really uncomfortable with the idea of them trying to convert people to their cause so to speak, even if it’s a channel someone’s wanted so much they’ll pay extra just for that channel.”
(Female, Pre-family, Weak-no belief, Edinburgh)

“I think it might be alright to allow a slightly different set of rules for those channels, although I’m not happy about that … I can’t really tell you why I’m so unhappy about it.”
(Female, Children at home, Christian, North London)

“Yes, because people are subscribing to those, they know enough about it, they’re choosing to find out more by subscribing.”
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

Programme information

The role of programme information was confusing for respondents and to some extent they were almost contradictory about it. In the context of ‘witnessing’ type programmes respondents felt it was proper, necessary and generally a good idea for programme information to be provided, since there was no balancing voice within the programme. However, respondents were also nervous about the potential for broadcasters to abuse the use of programme information by using it as a justification for getting away with less responsible programme making. Another issue of concern was that programme information signifying more challenging content could be picked up by those who were vulnerable.

Therefore, respondents felt that programme information should also be regulated to some degree. Principally, the feeling was that it should be kept fairly low key and low tech. The purpose of programme information should mainly be limited to identifying programmes for people as opposed to stirring up controversy. However, in those circumstances where in-programme balance was really not possible respondents argued that information should definitely be provided e.g. for polemics.

“I’d like to know what I was watching, I think it’s responsible to tell people what they are watching.”
(Male, Children at Home, Protestant, Belfast)

“It’s not good thinking it’s going to be about one religion and it turning out to be about another.”
(Male, Empty Nester, Christian, Newcastle)
“I think it depends, I think you can go either way, because programmes may be able to get away with a lot of things because it has been labelled that way. Or, it could be labelled in a way that people are unsure what they are getting and will go and watch it anyway, it’s about people’s perception.”
(Female, Empty Nester, Catholic, Belfast)

Reactions to the draft Code

The draft code was introduced half way through the group sessions, and by this point most groups had already spontaneously identified much of the following as being important. When matched against the Code these reactions break down as follows:

“Responsibility” - 4.1 of the draft code

Throughout all the groups respondents felt that programme makers and broadcasters should treat belief, faith and spirituality with seriousness and respect, unless the programme was specifically described as ‘light-hearted’ or a ‘comedy’. They stated that individuals’ ‘voices’ should be properly heard and not overly edited, cut short or subject to too much expert confrontation. Within a discussion or debate type programme they expected contrasting and opposing views to be aired. Where balance wasn’t provided within the programme there should be sufficient programme information to this effect. If the programme was a polemic then respondents felt that balance (which was important to them) should be provided by including other perspectives in a series.

“Nothing biased, not just talking about one religion.”
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

“Views and beliefs must not be abused” - 4.2 of the draft code

In the context of views and beliefs, respondents expressed the need for programme makers and broadcasters to conduct proper research, and to ensure that participants, commentators or ‘voices’ within a programme would do the same. By doing this respondents felt that any representation of faiths or beliefs could therefore be defended as a ‘reasonable’ and ‘fair’ portrayal of those views, (albeit there will be a range of views within any ‘system’, or community).

They anticipated that the forum in which this should be done should allow each person to be given the chance to air their views, and to politely and reasonably state why they think their view is the right one, without being disrespectful to the other’s belief system or community. They felt that everyone who participates in a faith or belief-based programme should be willing to participate on that basis and that polemics which allow freedom of speech should be subject to the conditions outlined above.

“You should not be allowed to slander any other religion, that’s how you’d follow it, not to bad mouth anybody else’s beliefs, by doing that you are only saying what you believe, not what you think about other beliefs.”
(Female, Pre-family, Christian, Cardiff)
“It shouldn’t be like the Today programme, they’re not politicians, they believe in something, so you should at least allow them to express their views”
(Jewish, North London)

“Due accuracy and fairness” - 4.3 of the draft code

When asked about “due accuracy and fairness” respondents thought that this should operate on a number of levels.

Where the programme is more about ‘witnessing’, respondents felt that fairness and accuracy would be reliant upon the testimony, story or storyteller and thus not directly the responsibility of the broadcaster. Respondents understood that this was not a traditional form of programme, but one that they felt was important and interesting, and valid programming for today.

In contrast, where the programme was an educational or informative documentary or discussion, respondents felt that the ‘normal’ rules of objectivity and fairness should apply, particularly given that belief was recognised as such a sensitive topic.

For the third type of programme, where religious or faith-related topics were incorporated within mainstream programmes, respondents felt that there should be a requirement that storylines and characters should not be too extreme, as was sometimes the case in soaps. The reasoning behind this point was that the paucity of reasonable coverage of the role of spiritual faith in characters lives, meant that the topic needed to be introduced per se, before the ‘edges’ could be represented or explored. The most common examples objected to were Islamic fundamentalist plots and suicide pacts. These were deemed unreasonable even though the story might purport to be about a wing or faction of a religion that actually existed.

“In the soaps as well, they’ve never portrayed a Muslim family correctly, in the ways that we expect to see them.”
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

“Yeah, they give the names that are clearly Islamic, like Tariq, like in Eastenders, but they don’t act like an Islamic family.”
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

“They all get tarnished with the same brush – it’s like white hooligans that go to football matches, that’s not us is it, we don’t want to be tarnished with the same brush, I don’t think that all Muslims are terrorists.”
(Female, Children at Home, Weak-no belief, Leeds)

There was an understanding amongst these participants that ‘due fairness and accuracy’ rules, as outlined above, do apply, but rather differently in different contexts.

“A programme espousing religious views or beliefs must make the identity of the religion and/or denomination clear” - 4.4 of the draft code

The importance of providing clear information about the identity of the religion and/or denomination has already been identified by the respondents as a priority for the ‘witnessing’ type programmes.
For the second category of programmes (i.e. discussions and documentaries) respondents expected programme contributors to be identified, because in this context they judged it even more important to know who was putting forward a particular view, because of the potential for audiences to receive these programmes as authoritative statements.

In relation to dramas, or other mainstream programmes with religious storylines or characters, respondents felt this was unnecessary as it would be ridiculous to reveal the plot in order to fulfil this part of the Code.

“Making the purpose clear when it is to convey religious views or seek recruits” - 4.5 of the draft code

The first part of this section of the draft code, “to convey religious views or beliefs” was felt to be synonymous with “espousing” and had thus, they felt, been covered already (4.4, see above). However, the second part of this section of the Code caused absolute consternation, confusion and in the end anger. This followed directly from the strength of respondents’ feelings, already repeatedly expressed, about how religious and faith-based television should be used for sharing beliefs, not setting one set of beliefs over another in terms of trying to persuade viewers and listeners to join that faith. Their understanding of the existing regulation is that this is not allowed at present. They associated this kind of behaviour with the extremes of belief, not with a legitimate, active, open-minded, tolerant faith. Hence, they tended to react violently, disbelievingly and very, very negatively to this suggestion within the Code.

During the groups respondents really struggled to believe that the seeking of recruits on television or radio might happen. There was a strong sense that this would just be so “un-British”. They argued that the context of British culture and broadcasting was one characterised by tolerance, understatement and responsibility, and this was something that they appreciated and wanted to protect.

Proselytising television was considered to be part of what they intensely disliked about American religious broadcasting. Respondents expressed real concern about this perceived American influence, namely that it was “pushy”, “intolerant”, “unthinking”, “bullying”, “brain-washing television” encroaching on their schedules. Respondents argued that seeking recruits on television was wholly inappropriate since programme makers cannot actually see their audience and therefore they cannot guarantee that they will be treating them appropriately.

“A lot of people with mental health problems do turn to religion, they’re looking for answers.”

(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

Television was felt to be so powerful a medium that it cannot help but exploit the vulnerable, whatever the good intentions of the programme makers in relation to recruiting. In this context there were concerns about radio too.

“I know that I definitely wouldn’t want that broadcast to my children … I might even be caught at a weak moment, we all have life-changing situations and things like that, I think that’s where it should be regulated.”

(Female, Muslim, Leeds)
Crucially, respondents were very concerned about how seeking recruits could be regulated, and questioned what measures Ofcom could really take to ensure that responsible proselytising was taking place.

**Recruitment on television channels individually subscribed to**

Whilst most of the respondents were uncomfortable with the idea of recruitment per se, and certainly in relation to terrestrial and bundled non-terrestrials channels, some changed their deeply held views when considering channels individually subscribed to. Most wanted the rules to apply across the board, even to subscription channels, since the point of viewing was never the point of purchase, and therefore the viewer may have become more vulnerable since their original decision to subscribe.

This group of respondents concluded that any attempt to ‘preach at’ the audience or argue that one religion or faith was ‘better’ than another, or directly recruit the audience was unacceptable. Moreover, they felt that such broadcasting was both unprofessional and unhelpful, and went against the whole thrust of what they wanted faith-based programmes to be. This is not to say that they did not want life-changing programming, they just did not want people to be subject to what they called “potential brain washing” or “probably emotional blackmail”.

Other respondents found it much more difficult to object to a more direct approach to the audience. Their view was that since the audience had knowingly, consciously and voluntarily opted in and presumably knew what they would be getting. However, they still were not particularly comfortable with this idea. They took their references from what they had heard about coverage of American tele-evangelism or channels such as Al Jazeera (although few had seen any specific programming), and so there were concerns. However, they questioned whether their objections were reasonable because they were reluctant for regulation to limit individuals’ choice.

“You know what you’re tuning into, so I suppose it wouldn’t be so out of the ordinary.”

*(Female, Pre-family, Christian, Cardiff)*

Across the board, respondents were comfortable with the idea of signposting, such as ‘find out more information if you’re interested’, being given at the end of a programme. Respondents considered that the effort involved in finding out about further information, and the cooling off period between the programme ending and the decision made to obtain further information, were important mitigating factors. Additionally, the fact that the potential recruit would be talked with, face to face, was also an important point for many respondents.

**Asking for donations**

As with recruitment, asking for donations caused great concern throughout the groups and respondents asked many questions. They felt that appeals for charity were already done well on television and asked why any community would want to raise money for themselves, rather than for a charity. There were also some queries as to why a channel would want to ask for donations for themselves when they already had funding from the licence fee in the case of the BBC, from advertising or from subscription in the case of some non-terrestrial channels.

“It’s just about big business and money … religions shouldn’t be about this, it’s something to be followed, God isn’t for sale.”

*(Female, Muslim, Leeds)*
Respondents also felt that there were many stories of con men and were very uncertain how Ofcom could ensure that the money that was being asked for was for a legitimate cause and would be properly used – and not to exploit audiences.

“It will irritate the hell out of everybody, if I wanted to give a donation I’d give through the church, and I think that doing it through the telly they’re wasting money and influencing the wrong people, older people who don’t have the money to give it, and they can be sucked in by cons. Religion is not about money, they’re giving out the wrong message.”
(Female, Pre-family, Christian, Cardiff)

Television was considered to be particularly suspect given that it was seen as such a powerful medium, (e.g. Live Aid, Princess Diana’s funeral and the events of 11 September 2001.) Given what respondents had mentioned earlier about the different mindset audiences would be in when watching religious programming they felt they could be ‘ripped off’ and the idea of religious programmes being used regularly for appeals for donations was very strongly resisted.

“It’s really dodgy, they shouldn’t bring money into religious programmes.”
(Female, Pre-family, Christian, Cardiff)

However, some felt that in the context of non-terrestrial channels subscribed to individually, there might be an argument to allow this, but again almost all disapproved of the motivation behind it.

Most respondents felt that if any religious channel was allowed to directly appeal for recruits and donations then all should be allowed. However, the idea of some of the other belief systems appealing on air was worrying to some - although they could not justify a different set of rules for different belief systems.

“Should not improperly exploit the audience by preying on their susceptibilities” – 4.6 of the draft code

Respondents generally interpreted “should not improperly exploit the audience by preying on their susceptibilities” to mean that programme makers would not be allowed to recruit or solicit donations.

As previously mentioned, there was a feeling that normal critical faculties have to be set aside to truly benefit from a faith-based, witness type programme. The respondents argued that you have to be prepared to ‘come out’ of your normal frame of reference to try to understand something from another point of view. They were again concerned that we could all be vulnerable at some point when engaging in this kind of programme. In terms of those identified as ‘most susceptible’ respondents clearly took it to mean the lonely and elderly people who they considered the most regular consumers of religious programming; young people who are not capable of weighing up the believability of what’s being claimed; and the depressed who are actively looking for something to solve their problems, quickly. Therefore, generally, respondents felt that a ban was required on appeals for recruits and donations.

Additionally, clear information around ‘witness’ type programmes, careful scheduling of such programmes, and objectivity, fairness and balance in discussion and documentary type programmes were thought appropriate to minimise the potential for exploitation.
“Programmes which contain claims of special powers or abilities” – 4.7 of the draft code

The issue of how to deal with programmes that contain claims of special powers or abilities was rarely brought up spontaneously. Claims to such powers proved to be very controversial amongst respondents. Certainly they all felt that people or groups claiming special powers had to be treated very carefully in programmes.

Respondents were nervous about the inclusion of such people on any programme, but most particularly religious programmes, precisely because of the 'suspension of critical disbelief' which sometimes accompanies such programmes, and which they felt was appropriate when viewing/listening to such programmes.

The various groups were full of stories of fakes, failures and some very disappointed people. They wanted programme makers to try their best to assess whether the claims had any validity. Respondents certainly wanted such programmes to be screened when children were not in the audience, and whenever they were broadcast they wanted clear programme information to be provided.

“Its not right for children to see people to see people doing healing or whatever.”
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

“For children it can come into their minds in a different way.”
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

“It should be like with the films when they say ‘this programme may contain such and such.”
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

Whilst most respondents accepted that much more controversial material was available via the internet, they argued that television and radio were much more accidental in terms of potential viewing/listening, and generally quite benign when compared with the internet, therefore material such as this was more credible in this context.

Generally, most of the respondents accepted that the ‘digital age’ meant that considerably more material was available to more people. However, in keeping with their hope that faith-based programming would be more respectable and serious in content, they were uncomfortable with the idea of broadcasts containing claims of special powers or abilities.

How does the audience feel about different belief systems (including Scientology, Paganism, Voodoo, Satanism, Humanism, and Secularism)?

The discussions across the groups flowed from a conviction that they needed to experience and learn more about other faith and belief systems, about alternative ways of expressing faith, and about people who have faith or belief. At this level, respondents argued that everyone should have the right to express their belief or non-belief. Therefore, every type of faith or belief system should be able to be at least the subject of discussion in documentary type programmes (where the checks and balances are internal to the programme). However, having rationalised themselves into this position there was clear discomfort with the 'giving' of air time to some of these belief systems.
Their main reason for discomfort within the groups sprung from a strong personal disapproval of them, in particular, Scientology, Voodoo and Satanism. There was also a strong sense that these three belief systems should be scheduled carefully to ensure that programmes avoided exposing the vulnerable to them. Respondents were also much more nervous of these belief systems being covered in the ‘witnessing’, “personal” type programmes, where they felt there was more potential for polemic or one-sided arguments being put forward.

However, the consensus was that there were no good arguments against the inclusion of Satanism, Voodoo or Scientology in programmes, so long as audiences were given sufficient information and programmes were appropriately scheduled.

Within their broader definition of ‘faith or belief-based’ programmes, almost all felt it was appropriate to explore atheism, humanism, secularism etc.

**Differences in specific groups**

**Jewish respondents**

The Jewish respondents shared almost everything in common with the more liberal Christian and other faith groups.

They argued that Britain was a genuinely multi-faith society, but that the dominant and historical church was Christian and as such, given the limited number of hours allocated to religious broadcasting, it was not surprising that the main religious programmes would be Christian.

The Jewish respondents were slightly different than the other faith groups as they argued that a good sense of humour was crucial to life generally, and was certainly also appropriate to some of the discussions of faith and their culture. Therefore, they hoped that the serious consideration of individuals’ faiths would not be confused with a complete lack of a sense of humour in relation to religion.

This group were also absolutely appalled at the idea of allowing direct appeals for recruits or donations on television and radio. They felt the whole idea of ‘preaching at’ the audience, putting pressure on them to consider their view ‘the right one’, was a dreadful potential development, and one to be resisted most vigorously.

**Sikh respondents**

Most of the Sikhs in the groups were 2nd, 3rd or 4th generation British Asians and many felt that as a group they had a qualitatively different life and treatment in the UK compared with their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. This group therefore pointed to much which had changed in terms of the visibility and audibility of the Sikh point of view.

Again, they were shocked by the proposal to allow direct appeals for recruits and donations on television or radio.

“That’s why we all sit on the floor, kings and paupers, because no-one is better than another, and it’s the same with religion. I might think I’ve got gold and you’ve got stone, but as long as you follow your path devoutly, then we’ll both get there”
(Sikh, Hayes)

**Hindu respondents**

The Hindu respondents started by talking about how narrow and unhelpful the current definition of religious broadcasting was and how important the more general notion of spirituality was. They argued that popular religious broadcasting would be more satisfying if it addressed a broader spiritual remit.

Hindus, like all the other groups, were particularly appalled by the proposal to allow direct appeals, since they had spent quite some time talking about the need for programmes to be far less about consumerism and greed, and to be much more concerned with the spiritual side of life.

**Muslim respondents**

Muslim respondents shared many of the views and concerns about the state of religious broadcasting of the other groups, particularly comments relating to terrestrial programming and channels. However, Muslims had one set of particular criticisms related to portrayal and representation.

In terms of the nature of portrayal, this group voiced strong concerns about representational bias in programming overall, and that Muslims were chiefly portrayed as extremists of one form or another. They also remarked upon the extent of inaccuracies in the portrayal of everyday Muslim life in Britain e.g the Muslim family in *Eastenders*. This resonated with their concern about the tangible lack of representation on British programming of their experience as British Muslims.

“Not exploiting one area of a religion, it may be a minor area of that religion, but they may exploit it to make it look more important than it is … it’s a minority of people that are very fundamentalist.”

(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

Other concerns focused on balance, in terms of marginalised scheduling and again the paucity of programmes about their own and other faiths.

“They should not just push Songs of Praise and put any Islamic programme on at 12 o’clock at night or 8 o’clock in the morning.”

(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

All these concerns were heightened in the context of the events of 11 September 2001, where it was felt that more accurate and balanced representation would serve a number of purposes. Within the Muslim community there was hope that more accurate and balanced representation would help to inform and educate young people about mainstream Islam and pass on religiously informed values to their young people. For the wider community, they hoped that fairer representation and balance would go some way towards educating, informing and countering ignorance and prejudice against their community, and therefore improve social cohesion and integration.

“Not everybody knows what Islam is about, Islam is a peaceful religion, and that’s not being portrayed on the news or anywhere … they [Religious Programmes] should go back to the roots, tell the facts, particularly because some young people are forming their own opinions,
especially with the world the way it is, with the Iraq war, with the Americans, and they don’t know what Islam is actually about.”  
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

“I came to this country two years ago and I worry that my 15yr old son is loosing touch with his faith, so I do make sure that whenever there is a something on about our faith that we sit down together and watch it, and we do discuss it … we watched a programme recently about Arafat after his death.”  
(Female, Muslim, Leeds)

For many, the perceived marginalisation of Islam, in terms of programming and the lack of fair, balanced and informative representation, was felt to have encouraged reliance upon non-terrestrial channels within their community.

**Buddhist respondents**

This group shared the views and concerns about the state of religious programming as of the other faith groups.

They also felt that programmes showing their faith were inadequately researched with little consultation or comment from their experts.

**Respondents in Northern Ireland**

They expressed a desire for less antagonistic, oppositional religious programming in order to reflect what they perceived as their changing political climate. Therefore, they voiced a strong desire for more reasonable and informed interfaith dialogue.

**Non-believers**

Amongst non-believers there was an acceptance of the role of religious programmes to address the needs of people of faith and to inform and educate the wider community. Again, they shared the same concerns about current religious programming. However, there was a very clear call for religious programming to be balanced by the inclusion and representation of non-religious positions.

The more informed amongst these respondents felt that they were not receiving a broad portrayal of faiths, and that this was to the detriment of social cohesion and integration, particularly in relation to Islam.
Section 4

Professionals’ views

Industry professionals

Industry professionals voiced concern about any ground being given to allow requests for donation or recruitment on any of the platforms, although there were mixed views on the acceptability of these practices on subscription or opt-in channels.

“It would be rather opening the door for something difficult to police. I’m not happy having my programmes available for people to recruit.” (Industry Professional)

“Because of the nature of religions, there is not a proven or unproven, it is therefore easy to make one susceptible. Regulation should be required to ensure that the not so savvy, vulnerable viewer is not taken advantage of, whether on terrestrial or elsewhere.” (Industry Professional)

“(Donations) to fund programme making is not appropriate, it sets the programme up in a different way if it is a PSB, it puts the programme editor in a quasi-commercial environment and is undermining the responsibilities of a PSB broadcaster. It is contradictory to its purpose.” (Industry Professional)

“If their (subscription/opt in channels) very survival is threatened by not being able to compete on an equal footing, then it (seeking donations) seems difficult to object to.” (Industry Professional)

As with respondents from the focus group, industry professionals recognised the importance of programme information across the different forms of religious broadcasting e.g. polemic, docu-drama, and that this should be applied consistently across the platforms.

“I would expect to label differently according to format, but especially if the programme is only presenting one particular standpoint or belief.” (Industry Professional)

“I think that it is accepted that labelling is appropriate if the broadcaster is making a lateral show, or if tackling sensitive issues.” (Industry Professional)

There was also some concern about the consistent application of regulation across television platforms, specifically cable, satellite and subscription channels, and whether these channels would have to play by the same rules as terrestrial channels.

“Non-terrestrial in particular, we need to make sure that we regulate it now, before its too late, they need to be fully regulated, subject to the same guidelines as terrestrial.” (Industry Professional)
The future of religious broadcasting

The participants anticipated a growth in religious niche channels both on subscription and free to air channels, but this raised the question of how the plethora of channels that would be coming on-stream post-switchover would be monitored and regulated. The concern here was that deregulation may irrevocably open the doors to programming that would be very difficult to police.

“I would hope that the channels with a PSB remit would protect the number of hours devoted to religious programming.”
(Industry Professional)

“Where you have a niche genre, in the end, these will thrive. For terrestrial broadcasting channels, our obligation will decline, as there is an increase in niche programming, but we will continue to reflect key events.”
(Industry Professional)

“Its only a matter of time, as it gets cheaper too, for these (niche/specialist) channels to take off.”
(Industry Professional)

Leaders of faith communities and other belief systems

The views of leaders of faith communities and other belief systems on how the audience is currently served by religious broadcasting closely echoed much that was said by the respondents in the focus groups. Regarding donations and recruitment, the religious and non-belief leaders reiterated all that had been voiced by the audience.

“Shades of Swaggart will haunt us if we go there.”
(Faith community/other belief system)

“Programmes should be made to inform, overt proselytising is wrong. It’s not like seeing a political broadcast, religion is much closer to us in life and values and destiny and has a potential to intimidate.”
(Faith community/other belief system)

“Potentially everyone has some challenge that rocks them or their beliefs, I’d be very worried about the vulnerability of people to such appeals, regardless of whether they are watching a programme on a subscription channel.”
(Faith community/other belief system)

For this group, there were some specific concerns over religious broadcasting guidelines per se; specifically, those guidelines covering the need for broadcasters to consult with representative bodies were inadequate. This group was also unclear about the nature of any appeals process and the criteria upon which an appeal would be upheld or dismissed.

They also expressed concern over the looseness of guidelines for broadcasters to follow, and whether this would result in irresponsible broadcasting, their fear being that much of the terminology appeared to be open to interpretation.
“The wording in the draft code is unfortunate. Parts use ‘beliefs’ as in religious beliefs, and other parts refer to ‘religious beliefs and belief systems’, it’s not consistent.”
(Faith community/other belief system)

Some feared that the more affluent and politically influential religions would benefit most from being able to solicit money and recruit.

“Those religions that don’t have the wealth of the Christian church are at a disadvantage, which would be exacerbated if they were allowed to recruit and ask for donations on air.”
(Faith community/other belief system)

“My concern is that some groups may use their dominance in this country to recruit and affect the population of other religious communities.”
(Faith community/other belief system)

“As an abstract issue, there is nothing wrong with it, but if you look at the context in Britain where we have a dominant Christian community and very diverse religious communities as well who do not share the former’s infrastructure, you can see the difficulty.”
(Faith community/other belief system)

The future of religious broadcasting

Leaders of the faith/belief organisations were concerned that allowing any recruitment or donation would eventually lead to US-style tele-evangelism, a prospect that they were not comfortable with.

“My concern about religious broadcasting on specialist channels is that they are about reinforcing people’s narrow and comfortable beliefs, and entrapping people at a low ebb, the opposite of what I would expect responsible programming to be.”
(Faith community/other belief system)

“I worry that the combination of a reduction in religious belief in society, with an increase in more fundamental or evangelist extreme positions amongst believers, we will see much more proselytising religious programming across all platforms rather than the communal, community part of religion.”
(Faith community/other belief system)

“I’m really excited about the future; I think we’ll see more imaginative religious programming, and more subscription TV channels that aren’t reliant upon importing US evangelical broadcasts.”
(Faith community/other belief system)