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Secular Voices on Air: The British Debate on *Thought for the Day*

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Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) is among the many popular ideas that originated in Great Britain and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) continues to be a role model for other PSBs to this day. Like other European PSBs, the BBC has historically been deeply intertwined with the dominant religious groups in their respective countries. This is best exemplified by the fact that, in the early years of the corporation, the BBC would not broadcast before 12:30 pm on a Sunday, so that, rather than listening to the radio, people would go to church (Hull, 2013; see also McDonnell, 2009, and Hunt, 2011).

To this day, much like other PSBs, the BBC features specifically Christian programmes, such as *Songs of Praise* or *Sunday Worship*. In recent years, however, the BBC has embraced a more multi-religious approach to religious broadcasting and many current programmes tend to be about religion, rather than religious (Hunt, 2011, p. 29). At the same time, the overall broadcasting time for programmes on religion was cut back and many of the remaining programmes were put to the margins of the schedule. More and more of the so called “God slots” disappeared completely from national as well as local stations (Mitchell, 1999, p. 107). It was thus for fear of a gradual extinction of religious programming on PSB that it was decided, in 2003 – after extensive lobbying by religious groups – to make religious programming obligatory for PSBs and to put this obligation into the new Communications Act. Section 264, 6 (f) of the Act states that PSBs must provide services of “a suitable quantity and range” dealing with a number of subjects including “religion and other beliefs”. A “belief” is defined in Section 264, 13 of the Act as “a collective belief in, or other adherence to, a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles or of mystical or transcendental doctrines.”

***Thought for the Day* – The God of the Slots**

This reference to “other beliefs” and the legal definition given in the Communications Act revived a debate that had been going on for decades: the debate about whether or not to include contributions from non-religious belief groups in the popular *Thought for the Day* programme. This programme is one of the longest running, most popular and best known religious programmes in Great Britain. It is broadcast Monday to Saturday at about 7:50 am as a distinct slot within BBC Radio 4’s popular *Today* programme. Each episode features approximately three minutes of reflection on current issues, written and presented by alternating representatives of religious groups. Started as an Anglican-only programme in 1939 and initially called *Lift Up Your Hearts*, contributions from other Christian denominations and, later, Non-Christian traditions were gradually added, including Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism.¹

However, and despite constant campaigning to the contrary from as early as the 1960s, secularist groups have not been added to the programme. The two main bodies sponsoring this campaign are the National Secular Society (NSS) and the British Humanist Association (BHA). The NSS is the elder of the two, having been established in 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh, a leading atheist of 19th century England. Today, the NSS, according to their website, “works towards a society in which all citizens, regardless of religious belief, or lack of religious belief, can live together fairly and cohesively.” They campaign “for a secular democracy with a separation of religion and state” and challenge for what they deem a “disproportionate influence of religion on governments and in public life” (<http://www.secularism.org.uk/about.html>). The BHA, which took its name in 1967, has its roots in the Union of Ethical Societies first founded in 1896. Like the NSS, the BHA “campaign[s] for a secular state, challenge[s] religious privilege, and promote[s] equal treatment in law and policy of everyone regardless of religion or belief” (<https://humanism.org.uk/about/>). Differences between NSS and BHA include a stronger

emphasis on Humanism as a belief system alternative to religious beliefs on the part of the latter: “We promote Humanism, work on behalf of the non-religious, and support those who wish to live humanist lives” (<https://humanism.org.uk/about/>).

Sample & Methods

In the struggle of the NSS and BHA to get secular voices included into *Thought for the Day* and the BBC’s refusal to do so, both parties make use of the term secular in highly different ways and thereby reveal different notions and understandings of the term. The conflict on *Thought for the Day* can thus be understood as a discursive space in which the term secular is variously filled and contested. In the following, I aim to extrapolate these contested notions of secular by way of a document analysis based on textual material which was, for the most part, produced by the BHA and the NSS on the one hand and the BBC on the other hand between 2003 (the year of the Communications Act) and 2013. This analysis forms part of an ongoing study in which the British debate on *Thought for the Day* is compared to other debates revolving around religion on PBSs from Great Britain, the Netherlands and Germany.² The form of qualitative text analysis applied here roughly follows concepts borrowed from Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). Text passages were first pointedly labelled and then compared with one another in a continuous process, adding more material over time and transforming initial labels into more abstract categories over time. As this analysis is part of a larger study, grounded theory methodology implies that findings may have to be refined through further analysis.

The selection of documents for analysis³ was guided by an orientation on a number of “milestones” representing important developments or activity within the larger conflict:

- In 2003, BBC Director of Factual & Learning Glenwyn Benson undertook a formal review of the issue, following a formal complaint submitted by the NSS (Benson, 2003). As this report concluded that secular groups should not be included on

Thought for the Day, the NSS appealed against the decision; an appeal which would eventually be turned down by the BBC Board of Governors.

- In 2005, a Select Committee of the House of Lords undertook its customary review of the BBC Royal Charter – the document on which the BBC is founded. Part of the review was a thorough examination of the general state of religious broadcasting in BBC programming, including an extensive discussion of *Thought for the Day*. In this context, both BHA and NSS produced comprehensive memoranda which were submitted to the Select Committee for consideration. In addition, the Select Committee held oral hearings to which representatives of the BHA, the BBC and representatives of religious groups were invited (Select Committee Report, 2009). The Select Committee would eventually recommend in their final report “that the BBC should review its programme output to ensure that it complies with the Communications Act 2003 by providing services of a suitable quality and range dealing with religion and other beliefs” (Communications Act. Section 264, 6 (f))., but this did not lead to any changes in the BBC policy concerning *Thought for the Day* (Select Committee Report, 2009, p. 45, para 166).
- In 2009, the BBC Trust took the matter into consideration with both the Editorial Standards Committee (ESC) and the General Appeals Committee (GAP) discussing a total of twelve appeals against the non-inclusion of secularists on *Thought for the Day* (ESC/GAP Review, 2009). In conclusion, the Committees judged that “it is a matter of editorial discretion for the Executive as to whether the BBC broadcasts a slot commenting on an issue of the day from a faith perspective” (ESC/GAP Review, 2009, p. 10, para 5.b) effectively leaving the matter as it was.
- In 2013, the BBC Trust commissioned Stuart Prebble, an accomplished TV producer, to undertake a general analysis of the breadth of opinion reflected in the BBC Output focusing on religion as one of the main topics (Prebble, 2013). Prebble touched upon

the issue of *Thought for the Day* in the report after talking to the parties involved and concluded that he saw “no difficulty in including a Humanist or Secular contribution within *Thought for the Day*” (Prebble, 2013, p. 51). The Trust, however, did not follow Prebble in this respect, stating “we do not propose to revisit the issue of atheists or humanists taking part in *Thought for the Day*” (Prebble, 2013, p. 67).

The body of documents analyzed here is related to these “milestones” and comprised of:

- (a) the complaints and position papers submitted from BHA or NSS to the BBC
- (b) the review reports prepared by the BBC (Benson, 2013; ESC/GAP review, 2009; Prebble, 2013).
- (c) further correspondence between BHA or NSS and the BBC either in response to or in preparation of (a) or (b)
- (d) the memoranda submitted by BHA and NSS to the Select Committee
- (e) the minutes of the Select Committee Hearings. In addition to the hearings of the BBC and the BHA respectively, I will also on occasion touch upon the Select Committee Hearing of representatives of religious groups

Notions of *secular*

Findings show that neither BHA and NSS, nor the BBC act upon a coherent definition of the term secular or related concepts. At times, all three organizations employ variations of “secular”, “humanist”, “atheist”, “unbeliever” and “non-religious”, sometimes using two or more of these terms interchangeably. At other times, the parties involved do distinguish quite strictly between individual terms and concepts to the point of accusing the other side of an inappropriate usage: “Your examples indeed betray a confusion of atheism and Humanism” (Stinson, 2003a, p. 1) or: “One moment you talk about non-religious beliefs and then we suddenly switch over and you are talking about humanists” (Select Committee Evidence,

2006, p. 42, Q 67). Given the inherent ambiguities of the terms and concepts in question, this confusion is hardly surprising. Despite these difficulties, it is possible to identify certain patterns within the material, lines of reasoning that are frequently evoked and which can also rather easily be ascribed to the respective conflicting parties. Specifically, the following five notions can be distinguished:

1. Secular as opposition to religion.
2. Secular as absence of religion.
3. Secular as irrelevance of religion.
4. Secular belief systems as equals of religion.
5. Secular values as common among the non-religious.

(1) Secular as opposition to religion

In 1995, BBC Head of Religion, Reverend Ernest Rea took the position that “allowing atheists to present [*Thought for the Day*] would turn it into an exercise in God-bashing” (Donovan, 1997, p. 172). Such strong language is absent from the more recent documents analysed here and throughout the material, BBC representatives do not take the position that allowing secular voices to contribute to *Thought for the Day* would necessarily result in anti-religious propaganda. However, it is possible to detect a related notion: the notion that secularism equals opposition to and criticism of religion. This is evident in the material whenever a BBC official argues that whereas secular contributions were indeed excluded from *Thought for the Day*, secularists, atheists or humanists – these terms characteristically used interchangeably in this line of reasoning – had ample opportunity to voice their alleged oppositional stance towards religion in other BBC programmes:

“Outside *Thought for the Day*, the BBC’s religious output maintains a balance of religious and non-religious voices, through programmes such as *Sunday, Beyond Belief, The Moral Maze, Belief*, and *Devout Sceptics*. In these programmes, atheists,

humanists and secularists are regularly heard, the religious world is scrutinised, its leaders and proponents are questioned and the harm done in the name of religion is explored” (Benson, 2003, p. 3)

In an extensive appendix to the report, Benson lists a number of “programmes featuring voices opposed to religion” (Benson, 2003, p. 11). She also lists programmes that “draw attention to the harm done in the name of religion” (Benson, 2003, p. 12) referring to “[t]he powerful peak-time BBC One drama ‘Sinners’ [...] which portrayed the inhuman treatment by the Catholic Church of single mothers in Ireland in the 1960s” (Benson, 2003, p. 12) and similar examples. In an almost paradoxical twist, Benson even mentions an episode of *Sunday* which centred on the *Thought for the Day* debate and featured members of the NSS making their case for inclusion into the programme (Benson, 2003, p. 12).

The argument exemplified here by Benson’s report resonates through a number of other BBC documents as well. For example, in a letter to the BHA from August 2003, Greg Dyke, then director-general of the BBC, also mentions the *Heaven and Earth* show as an example for a BBC programme in which secular voices can be heard (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 35). The same is true for Dyke’s successor Mark Thompson in a letter to the NSS from September 2004, in which he explicitly refers to Benson’s investigation (Thompson, 2004, p. 14). However, the understanding of the secular perspective as opposition to religion was perhaps best expressed when the Select Committee met with representatives of secular organizations. In a question directed at those representatives and referring to their wish to be included into *Thought for the Day*, a committee member said: “It is a little bit like saying that there is a pet lover programme on the BBC and they should give equal time to those who dislike pets” (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 43, Q 74).

(2) Secular as absence of religion

The second main line of reasoning put forward by the BBC against secular contributions to *Thought for the Day* can also be exemplified by quoting from Benson's report: "The vast swathe of general programmes make little reference to religion, but approach the world from an overwhelmingly secular perspective, e.g. news, current affairs, documentaries, talks, science, history" (Benson, 2003, p. 3). According to Benson, the lack of secular contributions to *Thought for the Day* is thus not only compensated by the appearance of critics of religion in other programmes related to religion (see above), but also by all those programmes, which are not related to religion at all and can hence be deemed *secular*. What appears to be quite an original argument is actually one that is very often put forward by the BBC. In the ESC/GAP review from 2009, several BBC officials are quoted in line with this understanding. For example, the then Head of Religion and Ethics, Michael Wakelin, is quoted to have written to one of the appellants in 2008 that "the vast majority of BBC output had nothing to do with religion (citing *Newsnight*, *Any Questions*, *Question Time* etc)" (ESC/GAP review, 2009, p. 50, para 16.6). Similarly, the then BBC Controller of Knowledge and Commissioning is quoted to have explained to the same appellant "that the vast majority of BBC programming is secular" (ESC/GAP review, 2009, p. 51, para 16.9). In the Select Committee Hearings, Alan Bookbinder summed up the BBC's position by saying that *Thought for the Day* was a slot "designed precisely to be a moment for religious and spiritual reflection in the middle of an entirely secular programme."

The notion that most of the BBC output was *secular* is held not only by BBC officials, but also by religious representatives. However, their use of the term is slightly different and amounts, as it were, to a combination of the two different understandings of secular described so far. An example for this can be found in the Minutes for the Select Committee Hearings. When the Bishop of Southwark, representing the Anglican Church, was asked to weigh in on the issue, he answered:

“I think my own reaction to that would be that they have an enormous amount of time because the kind of standard mindset of the media, and particularly the broadcasting services, is the mindset of metropolitan secular humanism. [...] Therefore the question of the alternative religious perspective on the world perhaps does need careful attention, because it is counter-cultural in our own society.” (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 6, Q 4)

By calling the religious perspective “counter-cultural”, the Bishop seems to imply that the absence of religion in most of the BBC output is not “neutral” but does in itself amount to an oppositional stance towards religion – a position quite closely resembling Talal Asad’s understanding of “the secular” discussed in the introduction. At the same time, the bishop restrains from claiming that the majority of the BBC output was critical towards religion or even anti-religious. This latter view, however, appears to be common among very religious people in Britain. As audience research from Prebble’s report showed in 2013, a majority of respondents classified as “very religious” were of the opinion “that the BBC is not just neutral but actively non-religious or secular in its attitude” (Prebble, 2013, p 54.).

(3) Secular as irrelevance of religion

Perhaps not surprisingly, secular groups take the opposite position, claiming that the BBC output, rather than being “actively non-religious” is shaped by an affirmative attitude towards religion. In a memorandum submitted to the Select Committee, for example, the BHA argued that the BBC “acts as a promoter of religion, especially Christianity, by providing its proponents with extensive broadcasting time, including unchallenged platforms, and by deliberately refusing time for non-religious beliefs” (BHA Memorandum II, 2005, p. 23). They also voiced the opinion that “it should not be the role of a public service broadcaster in an open society artificially to sustain religious belief” (BHA Memorandum I, 2005, p. 22,

para 12). On this basis, then, the BHA as well as the NSS argue for inclusion of secular voices on *Thought for the Day*. In the memoranda, letters and other documents prepared by these organizations, they often directly engage with the notions put forward by the BBC and provide alternative understandings of the term secular and related concepts.

First, BHA and NSS reject the notion that secularism can be reduced to an oppositional stance towards religion. In a memorandum for the Select Committee hearings, for instance, the BHA claimed that the programmes they sought were not meant to be attacks on religion “any more than Christian programmes are attacks on Islam” (BHA Memorandum II, 2005, p. 29).

Similarly, in a submission for Prebble’s report, the NSS made clear that they were not “asking for anti-religious voices to appear on *Thought for the Day*” (NSS Submission to Prebble, 2013, p. 5). In the same document, the NSS also straightens out that they were not suggesting that religion was supposed to be “banished from the airwaves” (NSS Submission to Prebble, 2013, p. 2), a claim also made by the BHA during the Select Committee Hearings: “We are not anti-religious and we are not anti-religious broadcasting” (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 39, Q 57).

Accordingly, BHA and NSS do not agree with the BBC’s position that the secular viewpoint was sufficiently represented in BBC programmes which feature secularists who are given the opportunity to counter religious claims. This is exemplified in a letter Hanne Stinson of the BHA wrote to Greg Dyke, then director-general of the BBC, in 2003:

“A recent Heaven and Earth Show put an atheist up against believers in a confrontation. It was not a programme about atheism but about belief. Similarly, the first two, at least, of the Radio 4 series *Amongst the Unbelievers* are devoted to people reflecting on the religions they have lost (Catholicism and Judaism), and *Devout Sceptics* generally has that same religion-centred focus” (Stinson, 2003b, p. 1)

In another letter, the BHA counters the frequent references of the BBC to secular voices on *Heaven and Earth* and other programmes by saying that those programmes are “mainly about religion and its rejection, not about the positive alternative of Humanism” (Stinson, 2004, p. 1). Thus, the relationship the secular organizations claim to have towards religion was perhaps best expressed in the Select Committee Hearings, when a BHA representative stated: “For humanists and for man in his natural state almost, religion is an irrelevance. We do not define ourselves by reference to religion” (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 43, Q 73).

Notably, the BHA uses the term “humanism” here rather than “secularism”, which is something they often do throughout the material and also in other contexts. Whereas the BBC uses the terms secular, humanist and atheist widely synonymously, the BHA tends to differentiate between them and most often uses “humanist” for its own self-description. This could indicate that the organization, too, feels that the term secular is indeed strongly associated with either an opposition to religion or the absence of religion. Thus, rather than “filling” the term secular with their own definition, the BHA tends to avoid it, while dismissing the definitions of the term given by the BBC. Interestingly, this is one of the few aspects in which BHA and NSS differ – with the NSS being much less concerned with putting forward any positive belief system, and more with ending what they feel is a discriminatory policy by the BBC as a matter of principle.

(4) Secular belief systems as equals of religion

Much as BHA and NSS counter the understanding of secular as opposition to religion, they also counter the understanding of secular as absence of religion. Examples for this are numerous. In a response to Benson’s report, a representative of the NSS stated:

“The fact that most programmes approach life from a ‘secular perspective’ does not translate as looking at non-religious philosophies or ethical systems. [...] It is not appropriate to compare, for example, news and current affairs programmes with the

wholly different ‘reflective’ quality of *Thought for the Day*” (NSS response to Benson, 2003, p. 2).

The BHA’s perspective is most potently expressed in a position paper first published in July 2009. It is also one of the rare occasions in which one of the conflicting parties explicitly engages with the term secular:

“In this context, the term ‘secular’ is being misused to suggest that a humanist thought would be properly categorised as analogous to the news, sport and weather rather than suited to *Thought for the Day*. The word can indeed be used to denote that which simply is not religious, and therefore literally anything in the world that is not religious (not just on the *Today* programme) would be described as secular. However, this meaning originates in the contrast between the eternal concerns of religion and the merely temporal (secular) ones of everyday life. In that sense humanist thought is not ephemeral but belongs to eternity” (BHA position paper, 2009, p. 2).

The secular, thus, should not be equated with the sheer absence of religion, and humanism, as a secular belief system, should be considered to be very much like a religion, just not as religious. As it says in a BHA memorandum submitted to the Select Committee Hearing: “We want the BBC to cease discriminating against non-religious beliefs by recognising that they are part of the same spectrum as religion and should be treated on equal terms” (BHA Memorandum II, 2005, p. 29, para 32). During the hearing, Hanne Stinson, representing the BHA, elaborated on that passage from the memorandum and stated:

“I would say my nonreligious belief, my humanism, is as powerful a force for me as a religious person’s religious beliefs are. What we are talking about is the way I view the world, or a religious person views the world. It is a life stance, it is a basic philosophy, it is the way we understand the world. Some people have a religious way

of understanding the world and some people have a non-religious way of understanding the world, and on that basis it is a spectrum.” (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 43, Q 74)

It is on the basis of this understanding of equality of religious and non-religious perspectives and against the background that such a programme exists for a number of religious perspectives in the form of *Thought for the Day* that the BHA demands programmes “in which humanists broadcast directly to a humanist audience about Humanism” (Stinson, 2003a, p. 2). Or shorter: “humanists talking humanism to humanists” (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 39, Q 52). This, in turn, is what the BBC is not prepared to give them, precisely because the Corporation does not accept the premise that religious and non-religious beliefs are two variants of the same thing. In Prebble’s report, for example, Christine Morgan, who is responsible for the radio output of the BBC’s Religion and Ethics Department, is quoted as follows:

“She would regard the introduction of Atheists as altering the fundamental basis of the slot, which is to be religious, into something entirely different. It would culminate in the dilution and eventual demise of a unique and valuable part of the BBC service.” (Prebble, 2013, p. 53)

The conviction that religious and non-religious beliefs are “entirely different”, rather than equals, is also held by the Bishop of Southwark, who offered a telling analogy in the Select Committee Hearings. Asked why humanists should be excluded from *Thought for the Day*, he answered:

“It would be something else. Twenty-five past seven is always the sports programme and it is like asking why it is always about sports. Why can they not have somebody on there who is going to be talking about some other hobby such as bird watching?”

They could, but it would no longer be the sporting slot.” (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 18, Q 43)

(5) Secular values as common among the non-religious

The third line of reasoning the BHA and NSS put forward in demand of inclusion into *Thought for the Day* differs from the second one to the point of contradiction. As seen above, both BHA and NSS object to the idea that literally all non-explicitly religious content of the BBC can be reasonably considered secular. The BHA in particular counters such ideas by claiming that there are distinct secular belief systems such as Humanism which, much like religious beliefs, need separate and explicit attention by programme makers. However, while insisting on the distinctiveness of Humanism on the one hand, the BHA regularly claims to be speaking for all non-religious people on the other hand. Typically, the BHA (or, on occasion, the NSS) would preface their memoranda or position papers by referring to statistical data in order to demonstrate that whereas numbers for church attendance, belief in god or other indicators for the significance of religion in society are decreasing, the number of people who do not believe in god or otherwise claim a religious affiliation is growing. These people should therefore be considered “a large minority if not the majority of the population” (BHA Position Paper, 2009, p. 2). Remarkably, then, the BHA would go on by claiming that it is not only those people within the larger group of non-believers, who hold distinct belief systems such as Humanism, who are discriminated against by the BBC’s policy on *Thought for the Day*. Instead, they claim that all non-religious people, including those with “confused and unarticulated world view at best” (BHA Memorandum II, 2005, p. 29, para 33), are subjected to such discrimination. As the BHA’s reasoning goes, taking their turn at offering quite an original argument, it is their experience that “the majority of people without religious beliefs, when they hear what Humanism is, say they have unknowingly long been humanists themselves” (BHA Memorandum I, 2005, p. 20) and that “people encountering us for the first

time reacted with something like joy” (Stinson, 2004, p. 1). Learning about humanism is thus described, as it were, as a Damascene conversion, resembling, paradoxically, a religious experience. At the same time, the BBC is held responsible for allowing too few people to have such an experience: “Awareness of humanism is very, very low and one might suggest that the BBC is partly to blame for that” (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 37, Q 49).

The contradiction here is actually twofold. First, it lies in the fact that the BHA takes pains explaining that humanism is a distinct belief system on a par with the complex theological traditions present on *Thought for the Day* while at the same time arguing that Humanism is a world view so vague and amenable that a large number of people can reasonably be expected to be humanists without even knowing. Second, if the BBC were to concede that the majority of non-believers in Britain are unknowing Humanists (which they certainly do not) (Dyke, 2003; reprinted in BHA Memorandum II, 2005, p. 35), they might as well claim that, assuming that people tend to take their values from the media, such proto-Humanists have probably adopted their humanist values from nowhere else than the BBC. Such a view is not put forward in the material by the BBC itself. But in the Select Committee Hearings, a committee member prefaced a question to the present BHA executives with developing such a thought exactly:

“It seems to me that there is an assumed value system in the BBC which quite often irritates its critics, which is, if not humanist, essentially humanistic. There seems to be a belief in enlightenment and the perfectibility of society; there seems to be a belief in rationality, there seems to be a belief in tolerance and diversity, there seems to be a belief in respecting the planet” (Select Committee Evidence, 2006, p. 38, Q 52)

Conclusion

This document analysis has demonstrated that secular organizations, the BBC, and religious groups apply widely different notions of the term secular, when they engage in

discourse about allowing secular voices to contribute to the BBC programme *Thought for the Day*. Arguing against a change in their policy on the programme, the BBC commonly puts forward an understanding of secular as either opposition to religion or absence of religion. In the former case, the BBC argues that secular viewpoints are present throughout the BBC output whenever religion is criticized or opposed. In the latter case, the BBC considers all their output minus the explicitly religious parts to be secular, suggesting an over-representation of secular perspectives on the BBC, rather than the opposite. BHA and NSS counter these arguments by claiming that, first, their secular perspective is not reducible to an opposition to religion. Whereas religion is indeed often criticized by secularists in practice, it is an irrelevance to them in principle. Second, according to BHA and NSS, it is inappropriate to consider all non-religious output of the BBC “secular”, since their efforts for secularists to be included on *Thought for the Day* is clearly directed at distinct secular belief systems, such as Humanism, that should be considered on a par with religious belief systems and treated accordingly. In addition, the BHA in particular claims that their particular belief system, Humanism, is implicitly shared by a large number of non-religious people and that it is the BBC’s task to help secular people discover Humanism as a way to better express their secular beliefs. The position of religious groups on the issue, which could only briefly be touched upon here, should be explored in more detail in further research. Apparently, religious groups tend to adopt the BBC’s position rather than that of BHA and NSS, but go beyond the BBC’s stance by claiming that the absence of religion in most of the BBC output is actually a token for the Corporation’s opposition towards religion.

It is impossible to speculate on whether (and in what way) the conflict could be resolved were the conflicting parties to agree on a mutual definition of secular. More importantly, it should be noted that the conflict is by no means a conflict on semantics alone, as there are conflicting interests involved (Bartley 2009). Perhaps most importantly, the very fact that both BHA and NSS have been campaigning in this matter for so long and the BBC

has so often rejected the idea, has made it a “national cause célèbre” (NSS Formal Complaint, 2009, p. 3). It is therefore safe to assume that the issue has, by now, become very much a matter of principle. And yet, at the same time, a conflict over 2:50 minutes of speaking time on a radio programme stretching over decades can only ever be explained culturally. This is only very rarely verbalized in the documents by the conflicting parties. But at one point during the Select Committee Hearings, the Reverend Edwards, representing the Evangelical Alliance in the United Kingdom, summed up the issue rather pointedly:

“At the heart of this challenge—should secular humanists be a part of *Thought for the Day* or not?—is a very important debate about assumptions, about what religion is and therefore what are sacred spaces and how you differentiate between *Thought for the Day* as a kind of neutral zone for erudite ideas about current affairs, as opposed to what is a zone for theological reflections and there may be a deeper debate here which is beyond our particular remit.” (Select Committee on BBC Charter Review, 2006, vol. 2, , p 18, Q 44)

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Most of the analyzed documents are publicly available online as noted. I am grateful to Andrew West of the BHA, Alastair Lichten of the NSS and Sue Halwa of the Archives at Conway Hall for providing further documents and information at request. Each of the below sections is ordered chronologically.

BBC reports and reviews:

- (1) Bensons' report: *Report on Thought for the Day*, written by Glenwyn Benson, dated 31 March 2003, available at Conway Hall Archives.
- (2) ESC/GAP review: *Findings of the Editorial Standards Committee and General Appeals Panel. Appeals Regarding Inclusion of Non-religious Content in Programming and Specifically Thought for the Day*, document not dated (original session of the Committee on 5 November 2009). [Online]. Available at: <downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/appeals/esc_bulletins/tftd.pdf> [Accessed 18 June 2015].
- (3) Prebble's report: *A BBC Trust Review of the Breadth of Opinion Reflected in the BBC's Output*, dated July 2013. [Online]. Available at: <downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/breadth_opinion/breadth_opinion.pdf> [Accessed 18 June 2015].

Publications from the Select Committee on the BBC Charter Review:

- (4) Select Committee Report: *Select Committee on the BBC Charter Review. 2nd Report of Session 2005–06: Further Issues for BBC Charter Review*, Volume I: Report, HL Paper 2005-06, 128–I, dated 3 March 2006. [Online]. Available at: <www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbbc/128/128i.pdf> [Accessed 18 June 2015].
- (5) Select Committee Evidence: *Select Committee on the BBC Charter Review. 2nd Report of Session 2005–06: Further Issues for BBC Charter Review*, Volume II: Evidence, HL Paper 2005-06, 128–I, dated 3 March 2006. [Online]. Available at: <www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbbc/128/128ii.pdf> [Accessed 18 June 2015].

BHA documents:

- (6) BHA Memorandum I: *Memorandum by the British Humanist Association*, dated May 2005. Available at BHA Archives and reprinted in (5), pp. 20-22.
- (7) BHA Memorandum II: *Supplementary Memorandum by the British Humanist Association*, dated 9 October 2005. Available at BHA Archives and reprinted in (5), pp. 23-37.
- (8) BHA Position Paper: *Thought for the Day. An Argument for the Inclusion of Non-religious Contributors and Humanist Thoughts*, dated July 2009. [Online]. Available at <humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BHA-Position-Paper-Thought-for-the-Day-FINAL.pdf> [Accessed 18 June 2015].

NSS documents:

- (9) NSS Formal Complaint: *Formal Complaint about Thought for the Day*, dated 29 April 2009. Available at NSS Archives.
- (10) NSS Submission to Prebble's report: *BBC's Review of 'Breadth of Opinion'. NSS Response. Prepared by NSS President Terry Sanderson*, dated 20 November 2012. [Online]. Available at: <<http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/nss-response-to-bbc-review.pdf>> [Accessed 18 June 2015].
- (11) NSS Response to Benson's report: *Response to BBC's Report on its Policy in Relation to Thought for the Day*, document not dated. Available at Conway Hall Archives.

Letters:

- (12) Stinson to Dyke I: Letter from BHA Executive Director Hanne Stinson to BBC Director-General Greg Dyke, dated 30 July 2003. Available at BHA Archives and reprinted in (7), pp. 34-35.

- (13) Dyke to Stinson: Letter from to BBC Director-General Greg Dyke to BHA Executive Director Hanne Stinson, dated 28 August 2003. Reprinted in (7), pp. 35-36.
- (14) Stinson to Dyke II: Letter from BHA Executive Director Hanne Stinson to BBC Director-General Greg Dyke, dated 15 October 2003. Available at BHA Archives and reprinted in (7), pp. 36-37.
- (15) Stinson to Bookbinder: Letter from BHA Executive Director Hanne Stinson to BBC Head of Religion and Ethics Alan Bookbinder, dated 9 January 2004. Available at BHA Archives.
- (16) Thompson to Wood: Letter from to BBC Director-General Mark Thompson to NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood, dated 21 September 2004. Reprinted in (9), p. 14.

¹ For an overview of the programme and its history see Mitchell,(1999, pp. 107-142), Hendy (2007, pp.325-331). Lizzie Clifford (2009) gives a useful overview of the programme's history as well as of the debate on the possible inclusion of secular contributions in an account for *Ekklesia*, an organization which presents itself as "an independent, not-for-profit think tank which orients its work around the changing role of beliefs, values and faith/non-faith in public life" (see <http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/about>). As Clifford (2009, p.13) points out, her account is supposed to give a fair overview of the debate, while acknowledging that *Ekklesia* has positioned itself in favour of opening *Thought for the Day* for secular contributions.

² For more information on this ongoing project, see XXX (anonymized for review)

³ *Most of the analyzed documents are publicly available online as noted. I am grateful to Andrew West of the BHA, Alastair Lichten of the NSS and Sue Halwa of the Archives at Conway Hall for providing further documents and information at request.*