



Archbishop Justin Welby praised 'stunning' examples of religious broadcasting at the Sandford St Martin Awards at Lambeth Palace last night.

Read the Archbishop's speech at the awards ceremony:

I am very pleased to welcome you to Lambeth Palace, scene of many a historic event - of which tonight is obviously just the latest, and of course far from the least.

I came straight in here rather than joining you at the party earlier; judging from the noise, although you were not physically in the flesh with me at evening prayer – surprising for a religious broadcasting group – you were certainly with me in the spirit. [Laughter] It's wonderful to have you here and this is a really important occasion. The Sandford St Martin Trust does a huge amount around supporting religious broadcasting.

Identity clearly matters, and with it history – an appropriate place to do so is this quasi-Hogwarts environment of Lambeth Palace. [Laughter] As I have recently discovered, knowing who you are can be quite important, which – it might surprise you to hear – is where religious broadcasting comes in.

BBC charter renewal and questions about the ownership and purpose of Channel 4 have focused to some degree on the identity and the diversity of people who make up our islands – and who constitute the audience of our broadcasting institutions. If diversity is to mean anything, it must mean more than differences in ethnicity or personal tastes, or even morality and values.

Despite easy assumptions of secularity, true diversity also means paying proper attention to religion. After all – and this should not really need stating – it is impossible to understand the world today without understanding religion. Not religion as an exercise in private piety that needs to be covered simply to keep some strange people happy; but because religion is a prime motivator of behaviour for both individuals and communities.

A religious commitment or worldview shapes the ethical choices, political priorities, economic preferences and cultural expressions of whole societies. We cannot hope to understand why people do the things they do if we don't understand what drives them – consciously or unconsciously.

You could argue that one of the great crises of our times is that we are facing religiously-motivated threats for the first time in more than 200 years, and broadcasters have neither the images nor the interpretative skills needed to face them.

Historian Simon Schama put it like this: "My generation grew up thinking that religion was completely marginal to British life, which, as for the rest of the world, has been proved to be more and more wrong..."

A.A. Gill wrote in March 2014 that: "Religion has never been more tangible in world affairs and public life. Not having more sensible and serious

religious broadcasting isn't modern, it's a failure to face modernity."

How does one explain a movement rising out of several western wars or western-sponsored conflicts, which believes that the end of the world is at hand, and that death does not matter, and sees the issues as those of personal salvation? How do you explain the splits over human sexuality dividing almost every faith tradition and almost every Christian church globally, unless you are content to explain away conservative views on the basis of undeveloped ignorance?

Which is why the Sandford St Martin Trust is in good company in arguing for the BBC not only to inform, educate and entertain, but also to interpret. The BBC charter white paper proposes a reshaping of the BBC's public purposes. Surely there must now be a place for religious literacy in there – to improve people's understanding of the modern world.

This is not about evangelism, any more than explaining about Europe automatically makes you pro- or anti-leaving. Indeed, as the white paper states, "the BBC should reflect the diversity of the UK both in its content and as an organisation. In doing so, the BBC should accurately and authentically represent and portray the lives of the people of the UK today, and raise awareness of the different cultures and alternative viewpoints that make up its society."

Religion and its consequences stand at the heart of any notion of diversity, either in belief or in rejection of faith. The Guardian argued the other day that we need Christian faith to underpin values; most of its readers seemed to disagree, judging by the comments afterwards.

But how and where do we find moral values in a society that detaches itself from faith and from faith traditions, even if not active faith? I'm not saying it's impossible, but when does it happen? That's a cause for explanation and thoughtfulness.

How do we deal with the beginning and end of life – is it mere self-interest and utilitarianism? John Maynard Keynes remarked, in a letter to Virginia Woolf in the early 1920s, that they were the lucky generation, with the good behaviour accumulated from the Judeo-Christian tradition and without the need for them to obey it too much. He saw the future darkly. Maybe his timing was out, but his insight may not have been.

So our broadcasting environment needs effective explanation and interpretation of religion – including explanation of the rejection of religion – if it is to be useful for wider society. And I support the case that the Trust is making that the promotion of religious literacy should be a specific duty for the BBC across its broadcasting services.

In this context, recent debates – for example about charter renewal and the fate of Channel 4 – are more than simply arcane arguments about economics, competition or even recipes. They raise important questions of media independence and proper accountability within the context of a public service remit unique on the planet.

For explanation to be effective there needs to be an improvement in religious literacy across the media. Commissioners, editors and producers are essential in this respect. Religion is about the stuff of life; it's about people, and communities, and what drives them. And, as has been argued many times before now: religion needs to be treated with the same seriousness as other genres like sport, politics, economics or drama.

So I admire those whose work in this area will be rewarded and celebrated this evening. There are some stunning examples of great religious broadcasting and great broadcasting about religion on show here. If anything, they should make an articulate case for more.

Or, as Ian Hislop put it in the Radio Times in March 2014: "All programme-makers are ultimately looking for good stories to tell, and audiences are looking for good stories to watch. There are few richer repositories of stories than the world's faiths and the extraordinary ways that human beings have attempted to find meaning through them."

Amen to that. Have a wonderful evening in this extraordinary place.

6 min read

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