

47 Rosenthal Road, London SE6 2BX  
[hesterbrown@btinternet.com](mailto:hesterbrown@btinternet.com)

Tony Hall, Director-General,  
James Purnell, Director, Radio and Education,  
& Sarah Sands, Editor, Today programme  
BBC Broadcasting House  
Portland Place, Marylebone  
London W1A 1AA

14 August 2018

Dear Tony Hall, James Purnell and Sarah Sands,

### **Time for BBC to include Humanists on Thought for the Day**

Today the South East London Humanist Group (SELHuG), holds its third demonstration in support of our campaign calling on the BBC to open Thought for the Day to humanists and holders of other non-religious beliefs. Please see our campaign statement below.

It is good to see that TFTD is back under the spotlight with the National Secular Society campaign which we support, and the Today programme itself examining the question of whether TFTD privileges religion in Saturday's discussion between John Humphrys and Giles Fraser.

Please consider that this is the moment to end the discrimination and re-engage the public in philosophical discourse. We need good ideas on how to live and they emerge in non-religious as well as religious traditions.

The correspondence we have had with James Purnell (though weirdly only with our supporters, not directly with me despite several letters) is encouraging in that you are seeking contributors from a wider range of beliefs including humanism, which suggests you accept that humanism is a 'belief', and that you are talking to Humanists UK.

However, it also reveals the contortions the BBC is having to perform in order to justify its policy on religion and ethics, ie yoking ethics to religion, and still viewing non-religious beliefs from the platform of religion rather than philosophy or belief.

You argue that TFTD is justified because religion is distinctive, and it is for speakers from the world's major faith traditions. But religion is just one part of the spectrum of human responses to the human quest for knowledge, meaning and answers to the question 'How to Live?'. The other part is non-religious. And the most distinctive non-religious tradition is today known as humanism. It is certainly major and global and as ancient as religion.

So if religion deserves a TFTD, but needs to be ring-fenced because of its distinctness, then surely the courtesy should be extended to non-religious traditions. And then the contortion becomes clear. It would be silly to have two separate TFTDs; it would become immediately apparent that they belong together, they grow from and address the same human concerns.

They are part of one discourse. They are currents in one sea, influencing each other, merging and separating, strengthening and weakening.

The BBC's position is untenable. It belongs to the past when religion was privileged and we were told that society would break down if we stopped believing in God. It is odd that British children today are not taught about humanism at all. Most people do not know what it is. Yet the tradition of scepticism, search for evidence and reliance on reason and human capability to solve problems, build a responsible society and live a good life which flowered in ancient Greece and Rome has been informing civilisations ever since.

Humanism is exciting because it reconnects us with nature and philosophy, friendship and celebration, and all the things we need to live a full life individually and collectively. As the Anglican church withers and more fundamentalist traditions isolate their followers, the religious source of useful values and community life that was mainstream is no longer nourishing (and of course it wasn't and isn't nourishing in many cases). Put religion back into conversation with other beliefs and we can celebrate what is good in both religious and non-religious traditions and develop a more knowledgeable, less tribal approach. I think I might be arguing alongside Giles Fraser on this!

We would very much appreciate the opportunity to meet you: we could be on the cusp of a really positive development in British society.

STATEMENT BY SOUTH EAST LONDON HUMANIST GROUP (SELHuG) July 2018

## **It is time for BBC to include Humanists on Thought for the Day**

We are calling on the BBC to open their flagship reflective slot *Thought for the Day* to humanists.

Religion doesn't hold a monopoly on ethical worldviews. There is another mainstream tradition as old as religion, called humanism.

Humanism is a positive, everyday philosophy which encourages us to value ourselves and recognise that other people are as valuable as we are. That has deep implications for the way we treat each other and our environment.

The BBC is failing in its legal duty to treat non-religious beliefs equally with religious beliefs, 'belief' being defined as "a collective belief in, or other adherence to, a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles or of mystical or transcendental doctrines" (Communications Act 2003).

The BBC is also failing its remit to reflect the diversity of beliefs of its audience and the wider population. Over half the British population do not belong to any religion<sup>1</sup> and around half of those have a humanist worldview<sup>2</sup>. In Scotland where Humanist weddings are legal, more people choose them than ceremonies conducted by the Church of Scotland or any other denomination or faith. Amongst under-30 year olds in the UK, 70% have no faith<sup>3</sup>.

To argue, as James Purnell (Director, Radio and Education, BBC) does, that non-religious views are sufficiently represented across 'the whole of the BBC's output' is to miss the point – that humanism is an equal partner in the 'belief' category.

We call on the BBC to address this injustice and include humanists and holders of other non-religious beliefs on Thought for the Day.

---

<sup>1</sup> 53% describe themselves as having no religion: [British Social Attitudes Survey's 2016 report](#), published 2017

<sup>2</sup> Half of those who do not follow a religion say they hold humanist beliefs: [Humanists UK survey on beliefs and values](#) carried out by YouGov, published in June 2017

<sup>3</sup> 70% of young Britons (16 – 29 year olds) identify as having no religion: [‘Europe’s Young Adults and Religion: findings from the European Social Survey’](#), a report by St Mary’s University, Twickenham and the Institut Catholique de Paris (ICP) published March 2018.

Yours sincerely,

Hester Brown  
Chair of [South East London Humanist Group \(SELHuG\)](#)  
07791 460552