

## English Bishops: BBC's cuts to religion aid extremism

Bishops have warned the BBC it risks turning its back on efforts to tackle extremism and aid integration by slashing spending on religious programming. The Telegraph understands the corporation is preparing significant cuts to its religion and ethics budget despite accusations that it has already sidelined faith issues at a time of massive global upheaval. It comes just days after the corporation was lambasted for scheduling only minimal new religious broadcasting over Christmas this year when repeats are discounted.

“It has already been reduced certainly in terms of its scope as an independent part of the BBC, at a time when we already need – as everyone acknowledges – more religious literacy in the nation.” Bishop of Norwich, the Rt Rev Graham James. The first female cleric in the House of Lords, the Bishop of Gloucester, the Rt Rev



Rachel Treweek, remarked that the decision had presumably been taken “to reduce the possibility of offending people with too much God stuff over the holiday”.

Earlier this year the corporation also faced outrage from faith leaders after stripping its head of religion, Aaqil Ahmed, of his decision-making role in the commissioning of programmes as part of a shake-up of senior posts. The first Muslim to hold the role, Mr Ahmed fought off calls to turn Songs of Praise into a multi-faith programme, rather than a purely Christian production.

Earlier this year he saw down criticism from politicians for the controversial decision to broadcast hymns from the Calais migrant camp. But it is understood that further cuts to its Religion and Ethics department are due to be finalised in the new year. A spokeswoman confirmed that the BBC was planning to “look at ways we can reduce costs” as it faced “huge financial challenges” but added that cuts would come from across the corporation. The Bishop of Norwich, the Rt Rev Graham James, the Church of England’s lead spokesman on media issues, said the move could threaten something which was “fundamental to our public life”.

“It seems to me that religion has already taken a hit,” he said.

“It has already been reduced certainly in terms of its scope as an independent part of the BBC, at a

time when we already need – as everyone acknowledges – more religious literacy in the nation.”

He added: “It can’t be a coincidence that there is so little religious broadcasting this Christmas at a time when the commissioning has been reduced.”

But he warned that further cuts could “inevitably” endanger its work off camera to improve religious literacy, through training efforts.

He added that a further reduction in religious programming could hamper not only not only efforts to tackle extremism but ignorance about religion at a time when world events make religious literacy all the more important.

“What we need is intelligent religious broadcasting that runs counter to the narrative that religion is always extremist,” he said.

“Most religion in the world is not extremist at all.

“One of the great things about the way in which the BBC has done its religious broadcasting over the years is that it has been intelligent, illuminating and entertaining.

“That is a counter to extremism itself.

“And the less religion that will be seen on the television and radio the more it will be seen to be extremist.”

He added: “The BBC reaches something like 97 per cent of the population [each week] - it has enormous cultural power, there is no doubt about that, which of course is why politicians and other parts of the media look enviously upon it.

“But along with that power – and the licence fee – comes all sorts of responsibility.

“You have only got to look at the way commercial TV has pretty much marginalised religion to know that what the BBC does is fundamental to our public life.”

The Rt Rev Nick Baines, the Bishop of Leeds, and chair of the Sandford St Martin Trust, which promotes religious broadcasting, welcomed the fact that religion is not being specifically singled out for cuts but emphasised that world events show that programming about religion is more needed than ever.

“At a time where religion and the understanding of the world through religious eyes has never been more important it would be somewhat irrational to diminish religious and ethical broadcasting,” he said.

“One cannot understand the modern world without understanding religion, not only as a phenomenon

but as a primary motivator for human and social behaviour and public service broadcasting has a unique and vital role in ensuring that that process is interpreted to viewers and listeners.”

A spokeswoman for the BBC said: “The BBC is committed to producing religious and ethics programming and will continue delivering a range of content that both reflects, celebrates and debates religion and ethics across BBC TV, radio and online.

“However the BBC is facing huge financial challenges and needs to make savings in excess of £550 million by 2020 to 2021.

“This means we are having to look at ways we can reduce costs across the corporation, but we want as much of our money to be spent on programmes and services as possible.”

John Bingham, BBC Religious Affairs Editor