

# BBC Royal Charter Review: Written Evidence Submission by Theos on BBC's Religion & Ethics Coverage

## About Theos

**Theos is the UK's leading society and religion think tank.** Since our founding in 2006, we have published more than a hundred research reports, briefings and books. Our research and commentaries appear regularly across numerous news outlets from *The Guardian* and *The Spectator*, to *The Times*, *The Financial Times* and *The Economist* and have made us a trusted national authority on issues relating to religion, faith and society.

## About this Submission

We are responding to the BBC's Royal Charter Review, its Green Paper and public consultation, through the submission of evidence focusing specifically on the **BBC's religion and ethics coverage**. We argue that given:

- growing religious diversity in the UK
- the inadequacy of religious education (RE) across schools and growing importance of informal religion and ethics education
- increasing political polarisation and rising levels of hate crimes against religious minorities
- evidence that entertainment shows can reduce prejudice against minority groups
- and the increased interest in religion and spirituality—particularly amongst young people

that:

**Religion and ethics content is vital for ensuring that the BBC meets its mission purposes to:**

- a) represent and service all communities
- b) support social cohesion

We therefore call upon the Government to **make explicit provision for the protection of religion and ethics coverage in the renewed BBC Charter.**

## The Evidence

### a) An Increasingly multicultural and multifaith UK

According to the National Centre for Social Research, **almost 1 in 10 Britons now identify as belonging to a religion other than Christianity**, and a third of those attending weekly religious services are doing so in religious buildings other than churches<sup>i</sup>. Our 2020 report, *Religious London: Faith in a Global City (2020)*<sup>ii</sup> suggested this was even more the case in London, where 1 in 4 attend a religious service at least once a month, and argued that **“improving religious literacy is paramount” (p.87) to ensure community cohesion.**

## **b) Inadequacy of RE across schools and importance of informal religion and ethics education**

However, despite this growing religious diversity and the legal obligation for state schools to provide RE, a recent Ofsted report (2024)<sup>iii</sup> concluded that “the RE curriculum often lacked sufficient substance to prepare pupils to live in a complex world”. Our 2020<sup>iv</sup> report, *Worldviews in Religious Education*, similarly highlighted that RE “**does not engage adequately with the real religion and belief landscape**, both in the wider world and amongst the pupils that it should be serving” (p.109).

This means **informal religion and ethics outside schools has become even more important**. Our 2025<sup>v</sup> report, *Beyond the Classroom: Informal Religion and Worldviews Education in the UK* found that **reality TV shows** were becoming an **important source of informal religious education** by including participants of different faiths. Many of the examples of this highlighted, were BBC shows, including *The Traitors* and *Gladiators*, suggesting **that the BBC is an important source of this kind of informal religious education**.

This supports recent evidence from the University of Leeds (2025)<sup>vi</sup> which suggested that streaming platforms were much weaker on religion and belief content and highlighted **that BBC iPlayer was “the only platform that gave prominence to the arts, international issues, religion and belief on its homepage in significant numbers”** which presents “significant risks to the ongoing provision” of such content going forwards (p.4).

## **c) Increasing political polarisation & hatred against religious minorities**

Meanwhile, **hate crimes against religious minorities have risen**. In the year to 2025, hate crimes targeting Muslims rose 19% and 2024 saw a record 113% increase in hate crimes against Jewish people<sup>vii</sup>. This has been accompanied by **growing political polarisation and social divisiveness** on issues like immigration, with recent data suggesting that 98% of Reform voters believe immigration is too high, compared to just 18% of Green Party voters<sup>viii</sup>.

Against the backdrop of this, are **growing concerns about the rise of Christian Nationalism** in the UK and abroad, with Tommy Robinson—co-founder of the English Defence League and Britain’s leading far-right activist— announcing his conversion to Christianity in prison. His “Unite the Kingdom” rally saw over 100,000 people in attendance, many carrying crosses and some in crusader costumes<sup>ix</sup> This led to senior church leaders across denominations issuing an open letter, cautioning against the “co-opting or corrupting” of the Christian faith and symbols to exclude others<sup>x</sup>. In this landscape, it is more important than ever that the public are educated about religion and ethics in a balance and impartial way.

## **d) Media & Entertainment as an anti-hate crime strategy**

There has been growing evidence **that media and entertainment can be valuable way of reducing prejudice and hostility between groups**. Results of a 2018 study suggested that exposure to diverse characters can reduce implicit and explicit prejudice indicators more than

other established methods.<sup>xi</sup> Similarly, research into the signing of Muslim footballer Mohammed Salah to the Liverpool football team, evidenced a 53% fall in anti-Muslim tweets by fans after the signing and 18.9% fewer hate crimes than were predicted for the given period<sup>xii</sup>. This, as we argued in our aforementioned [2020](#) report, supports the parasocial hypothesis that exposure to positive role models can reduce prejudice and hate towards groups to which the role model belongs.

#### **e) Increased interest in religion and spirituality amongst young people**

Leaving aside the arguments for social cohesion, the **growing interest of young people in religion and spirituality** also means broader religion and ethics coverage could **be a key area for growth for the BBC**; particularly given **lower levels of youth engagement with the broadcaster**<sup>xiii</sup>. According to a survey of 100,000 adults across the UK, only 13% of young people under 25 identify as atheist<sup>xiv</sup>. Such is the growing interest of young people in religion and spirituality, that **Gen Z have been dubbed “the most religious generation alive”**, with 37% of UK 18-24 years reporting a belief in God—outstripping even the over 65s.<sup>xv</sup> Bible sales have more than double in the past five years<sup>xvi</sup>, mirroring trends in the US which saw a 27.7% increase in US bible sales in the year 2025-6 and an 106% rise since 2019<sup>xvii</sup>. The UK Charts have even announced a new Christian and Gospel Singles Chart in recognition of the growth of the faith-based music sector.<sup>xviii</sup>

Despite all this, **UK-produced religion and ethics content across public service broadcasters has been cut by 85% since 2011**<sup>xix</sup>

We therefore urge DCMS to make explicit protections for both informal and formal religion and ethics coverage in the renewed BBC Charter.

We believe there is compelling evidence that such coverage supports social cohesion and that—if done properly— could be a key growth area for the BBC going forwards. Protecting and expanding such coverage will help to maintain the BBC’s position as a world-leading broadcaster; one which serves the needs of British public for generations to come.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Curtice, J. (2025) 'Is there a religious revival in Britain?', *National Centre for Social Research*, <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/there-religious-revival-britain>
- <sup>ii</sup> Bickley, P. & Mladin, N. (2020) 'Religious London: Faith in a global city', *Theos*, <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Religious-London-FINAL-REPORT-24.06.2020.pdf>
- <sup>iii</sup> Ofsted (2024) *Deep and Meaningful? The religious education subject report*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report>
- <sup>iv</sup> Cooling, R., Bowie, B & Panjwani, F. (2020) 'Worldviews in Religious Education', *Theos*, <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Worldview-in-Religious-Education---FINAL-PDF-merged.pdf>
- <sup>v</sup> Rich, H. (2025) 'Beyond the Classroom: Informal Religion and Worldviews Education in the UK', *Theos*, <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2025/11/13/beyond-the-classroom-informal-religion-and-worldviews-education-in-the-uk>
- <sup>vi</sup> Benest, G., Birchall, C., Johnson, C. & Theodoulides, A. (2025) 'Behind the Screen: How streamlining is changing public service media', *University of Leeds & International Broadcasting Trust*, <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/229430/1/Behind%20the%20Screen%20-%20Final.pdf>
- <sup>vii</sup> Campbell, A. & Comerford, R. (2025) 'Hate crime in England and Wales rises for the first time in three years', *BBC NEWS* [Online], 9<sup>th</sup> October 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp3vg33nje4o>
- <sup>viii</sup> Bale, T. (2026) 'The two bloc polarisation of Britain's voters and Party members', *LSE British Politics* [Online], 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2026, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-two-bloc-polarisation-of-britains-voters-and-party-members/#:~:text=But%20as%20Tim%20Bale%20argues%2C,two%20bloc%20of%20political%20Parties.>
- <sup>ix</sup> Maqbool, A. and Wyatt, C. (2025) 'Tommy Robinson supporters are turning to Christianity, leaving the Church in a dilemma', *BBC News* [Online], 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy4p42kydx9o>
- <sup>x</sup> Church of England (2025) *Do not 'co-opt' the cross to divide: Bishops join church leaders in message after rally* [Online], 21<sup>st</sup> September 2025, <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/do-not-co-opt-cross-divide-bishops-join-church-leaders-message-after-rally>
- <sup>xi</sup> Murrar S. & Brauer M. (2018) 'Entertainment-education effectively reduces prejudice', *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 21(7), 1053–1077. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1368430216682350>
- <sup>xii</sup> Alrababa'h, A., Marble W., Mousa, S. & Siegel, A. (2021) 'Can Exposure to Celebrities Reduce Prejudice? The Effect of Mohamed Salah on Islamophobic Behaviors and Attitudes', *American Political Science Review*, 115(4), 1111-1128.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ofcom (2024) *Ofcom Annual Report on the BBC 2023-2024*, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/tv-radio-and-on-demand/bbc/bbc-annual-report/2024/ofcoms-annual-report-on-the-bbc-202324.pdf?v=408350#:~:text=In%20delivering%20its%20remit,%20the,50%25%20for%20all%20UK%20adults.>
- <sup>xiv</sup> Burgess, K. (2025) 'Gen Z half as likely as their parents to identify as atheists', *The Times* [Online], 25<sup>th</sup> January 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/religion/article/gen-z-half-as-likely-as-their-parents-to-identify-as-atheists-wp2vl0l29>
- <sup>xv</sup> Beaumont, H. (2026) 'How did Gen Z become the most religious generation alive?', *Sky News* [Online], 11<sup>th</sup> January 2026, <https://news.sky.com/story/how-did-gen-z-become-the-most-religious-generation-alive-13492027>
- <sup>xvi</sup> Cooper-Fiske, C. (2026) 'Bible sales at their highest in almost three decades', *The Independent* [Online], 9<sup>th</sup> March 2026, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/bible-sales-quiz-nielseniq-bookdata-b2934305.html>
- <sup>xvii</sup> Grossman, C. L. (2026) 'Bible Sales Break Records in U.S., U.K.', *Publishers Weekly* [Online], 9<sup>th</sup> January 2026, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/99415-bible-sales-hit-records-in-us-and-uk.html>
- <sup>xviii</sup> Hill, M. (2026) 'Official Charts Company launches new Official UK Christian & Gospel Singles Chart', *Official Charts* [Online], 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2026, <https://www.officialcharts.com/chart-news/official-charts-company-launches-new-official-uk-christian-gospel-singles-chart/>

---

<sup>xix</sup> Ashworth, P. (2026) 'BBC religious broadcasting 'poor and underfunded' Archbishop of York says', *Church Times* [Online], 5<sup>th</sup> March 2026, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2026/6-march/news/uk/bbc-religious-broadcasting-poor-and-underfunded-archbishop-of-york-says#:~:text=Figures%20show%20a%20dramatic%20decline,shifts%20in%20technology%20to%20digital.%E2%80%9D>