

SECTION 12: RELIGION

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

The BBC respects the fundamental human right to exercise freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This includes an individual's freedom to worship, teach, practise and observe.

There is no longer an offence of blasphemy or blasphemous libel in any part of the UK, but religious beliefs are central to many people's lives and arouse strong views and emotions. We should take care to avoid unjustified offence. We aim to achieve this by ensuring our output is not used to denigrate the religious beliefs of others, while upholding the right to freedom of expression. Under the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, "*The religious views and beliefs of those belonging to a particular religion or religious denomination must not be subject to abusive treatment*"¹. In law, the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, which applies to England and Wales, forbids a person from using threatening words or behaviour or displaying written material that is threatening "*if he intends thereby to stir up religious hatred*".

The BBC also has a duty to protect the vulnerable and avoid likely harm. The Ofcom Broadcasting Code requires that religious output "*must not seek to promote religious views or beliefs by stealth*"², nor "*improperly exploit any susceptibilities of the audience*"³.

For the purposes of the BBC Editorial Guidelines, religious output is defined as output dealing with the religious views and/or beliefs of a religion or religious denomination as the central subject or a significant part.

This section of the Guidelines has considerations both for religious output and any other output concerning religion. Such output should also take account of all other sections of the Editorial Guidelines and, in particular, Section 4 Impartiality and Section 5 Harm and Offence.

12.2 PRINCIPLES

12.2.1 The beliefs and practices of religions and denominations must be described with due accuracy⁴.

¹ Rule 4.2, Ofcom Broadcasting Code

² Rule 4.4, Ofcom Broadcasting Code

³ Rule 4.6, Ofcom Broadcasting Code

⁴ See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.1

12.2.2 The religious views and beliefs of an individual, a religion or denomination must not be misrepresented or abused, as judged against generally accepted standards⁵.

12.2.3 We must be aware of the religious sensitivity of references to, or uses of, names, images, deities, rituals, scriptures and language at the heart of the different faiths and ensure that any uses of, or verbal or visual references to, them are editorially justified within generally accepted standards. Examples include the Crucifixion, Holy Communion, the Qur'an, the Jewish Sabbath and similar.

12.2.4 We must consider the religious sensitivity surrounding the observance of holy days and the principal festivals of the great world faiths to avoid unnecessary offence from material that might be more acceptable at other times.

12.3 MANDATORY REFERRALS

(Mandatory Referrals are part of the BBC's editorial management system. While they will not, in themselves, meet the Principles in the Editorial Guidelines, they are an essential part of the process to ensure compliance and must be observed.)

12.3.1 Any content dealing with matters of religion and likely to cause offence to those with religious views and beliefs must be editorially justified as judged against generally accepted standards and must be referred to a senior editorial figure or, for independents, to the commissioning editor.

(See 12.4.5)

12.4 PRACTICES

12.4.1 When a religion or denomination is the subject of religious output, the identity of the religion or denomination must be clear.

12.4.2 Religious output should not be used to recruit, for example by making direct appeals to audiences to join a particular religion. References to the positive effects of belonging to a particular religion will normally be acceptable.

12.4.3 We should treat any claims made in our religious output for the special powers or abilities of a living person or group with due objectivity. Such claims should not be made when significant numbers of children may be expected to be watching television or when children are particularly likely to be listening to the radio, or in online content likely to appeal to a high proportion of children.

12.4.4 Contributors to religious output should not be allowed to undermine or denigrate the religious beliefs of others. Religion and religious views may be criticised but we should ensure there is appropriate context and critical views are open to challenge.

⁵ See Section 5 Harm and Offence: 5.1 Generally Accepted Standards

12.4.5 Any content dealing with matters of religion and likely to cause offence to those with religious views and beliefs must be editorially justified as judged against generally accepted standards and must be referred to a senior editorial figure or, for independents, to the commissioning editor.

12.4.6 Drama, comedy and other genres may legitimately cover matters relating to religion, but we should always be aware of the potential for offence. Specialist advice is available from the Religion and Ethics department and from colleagues in the World Service as well as from Editorial Policy.

12.4.7 With user generated content on religion, care is necessary to strike the right balance between freedom of expression and avoiding unnecessary offence. We are more likely to achieve this balance if:

- the space is actively hosted
- we select a suitable form of moderation
- on occasion, we make a rapid intervention – unless, for example, the online community has already responded robustly and in an authoritative way to an offensive comment.

(See Section 17 Interacting with our Audiences: 17.4.37)

(See Guidance online Moderation, Hosting, Escalation and User Management