



Reporting on religion in Australia today – ABC changes reflect a deeper problem

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No doubt there are many secularists who are cheering to hear that their eight cents a day will no longer be going into funding Radio National's *The Religion Report*. Indeed, there might also be a good number of people of faith who are of the same opinion. It certainly wasn't everybody's cup of tea when it came to religious programming. But the ABC's decision to axe this program, along with other specialist RN programs, should give us pause to consider the state of reporting on matters of religion and faith in Australia today.

The 2006 Census tells us that about 70 per cent of Australians identified themselves with a religious faith. So in theory at least, seven in 10 people will have a nominal interest in seeing, hearing or reading about matters of religion. A quick glance at the ABC's own website comments on the demise of the *Religion Report* tells us that people identifying as agnostic and atheist also tuned in to the program to gain some insight into the goings on in the world of faith. This is not surprising, because religious faith is not only of interest to those who hold such faith, but to the wider society as well. Why? Because religious faith has a social dimension. It is not purely personal. It calls for engagement with one's neighbour, and in the Christian tradition from which I come, this has meant that for more than 2000 years, religion has been at the forefront of public discussion. It is no different in 2008. Any serious observer of society can see that we need more informed reportage of the complex dynamics of religious faith, secularism and atheism, not less.

The ABC, as the national broadcaster, should be leading the way in specialist reporting. Without the commercial imperatives of its competitors, the ABC is not only free to put more resources into less populist areas, but it has an obligation to do so. We can get more than enough of the latest celebrity gossip or political PR manoeuvres via other outlets. It's precisely for specialised coverage of under-reported areas that we should be able to turn to the tax-payer funded ABC and particularly to Radio National. The ABC management's decision to scrap the specialist programs on RN in favour of a more generalist approach to fit in with its new online environment also seems strange. The current wisdom says that in the online world where everyone's an instant expert on everything, news outlets will distinguish themselves from the din of the blogosphere precisely by specialisation and quality, informed journalism.

Can religion be covered by generalist reporters? Of course it can, on one level. It's no different to any other 'round' in that regard. It's part of a journalist's job to ask questions

about things on which they are not expert. I've been interviewed by many fine generalist reporters, and I've also been interviewed by many who have very limited knowledge of even the basic differences among denominations. But when it comes to thorough analysis and deeper reflection on questions of religion, specialised knowledge is required. It's the same as politics or economics. Any journalist can report on the changing fortunes of government or a stock market crash, but when we seek the deeper story behind the headlines we tune in to the specialists, the political correspondent or the economics editor on AM or the 7.30 Report.

Sadly the ABC is not alone in its lack of attention to the 70 per cent of Australians who identify with a religious faith. From my experience, I can think of only two truly specialist Religious Affairs reporters working on newspapers in this country at the moment, both from Fairfax publications. Who knows what the current upheavals at Fairfax will mean for specialist reporting into the future?

I am delighted that Communications Minister Stephen Conroy has released a discussion paper for public comment on the future direction of public broadcasters in the changing media environment. I hope that many Australians, regardless of their religious faith or non-faith will place submissions arguing strongly that now is not the time to abandon specialist reporting on religion or other areas of interest to our society. Rather than abandon specialty religious programming the ABC should seize this opportunity to make it better - more relevant, less trite and clichéd, and more truly reflective of the religious experience of people in this country and in the world. Then we would have a national broadcaster which was truly fulfilling its charter.