



Guidance Notes

**Section 4:
Religion**

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Guidance

This guidance is non-binding. It is provided to assist broadcasters interpret and apply the Broadcasting Code. Research which is relevant to this section of the Broadcasting Code is indicated below.

Every complaint or case will be dealt with on a case by case basis according to the individual facts of the case.

We draw broadcasters' attention to the legislative background of the Broadcasting Code which explains that:

“Broadcasters are reminded of the legislative background that has informed the rules, of the principles that apply to each section, the meanings given by Ofcom and of the guidance issued by Ofcom, all of which may be relevant in interpreting and applying the Code. No rule should be read in isolation but within the context of the whole Code including the headings, cross references and other linking text.”

Religious Programmes

The meaning of religious programmes demonstrates that this section of the Code does not apply simply to a programme containing devotional material, an act of worship or prayerful reflection, but includes other types of programming, including for example, current affairs programmes or history programmes where religion or belief is a *significant part* of the programme.

The meaning given in this section does not include comedies, drama or general entertainment programmes demonstrably of a non-religious nature.

Ofcom acknowledges that religion in itself is not harmful. However, Parliament, in this area, has specifically required Ofcom to set standards to protect listeners and viewers from the failure of a proper degree of responsibility, improper exploitation and abusive treatment of the religious views and beliefs of those belonging to a particular religion or religious denomination.

Rule 4.3 and 4.4 The identity of a religion

Ofcom research shows that audiences of all faiths and none are prepared to accept another belief-system making clear its beliefs in its own terms, provided they know who is addressing them and why (e.g. what religion or denomination). What is of concern to audiences (and particularly for those that are vulnerable) is when a programme or item aims subversively to promote a religion.

This rule does not apply to drama and entertainment programmes.

Research: Religious Programmes: a report on the key findings of a qualitative research study

Rule 4.5 Seek recruits

Recruitment is a *direct* call to action from a person or within a programme that the audience consider actively the possibility of joining a particular religious group or subscribe to a particular religious doctrine.

Many religious programmes may involve some level of suggestion concerning the positive, life-affirming nature of the belief featured, or at least an un-stated wish that an audience might subscribe to the views being expressed. This is not, in terms of the Broadcasting Code, recruitment.

Recruitment, where this Code is concerned, is therefore best described as the difference between a direct appeal to an audience that they should, ought or need to join a faith and the proclaiming of benefits of a particular doctrine or belief-system.

Rule 4.6 Improperly exploit...susceptibilities

Respondents to Ofcom research on religious programmes believe that all people are susceptible at one time or another. There are times when it will be clear to the broadcaster that they are soliciting an actual response from their audience. At these times broadcasters need to take care and recognising the possible risk to audience members particularly the vulnerable.

'Proper exploitation' includes, for example, where, a religious radio or television service solicits contact from people interested in furthering their understanding following an item or particular point of view expressed in a programme.

'Improper exploitation' would for example include the abuse or denigration of a person's belief in order to convince that person that they should change their beliefs and subscribe to the beliefs of the person challenging them, on the grounds that if they don't, some negative outcome might result.

Rule 4.7 Special powers and abilities

The purpose of this rule is to prevent the susceptible from being abused, by those who purport to have gifts and abilities of a religious or similar nature in order to encourage people to support them e.g. financially.

Such programmes may not be shown when children, who are as yet unable to form mature judgements on such matters, may be watching in significant numbers, or are particularly likely to be listening.

This rule does not apply to the founders of recognised religions and/or belief-systems (for example Jesus Christ and Buddha).

Specialist religious licence

Broadcasters who wish to label their output more clearly as religious, who wish to proclaim or expound their doctrines and beliefs at the lowest risk of giving offence, and/or who wish to appeal for a response from the audience (for example a direct call to prayer or appeal for recruits) usually apply for a specialist religious licence.