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Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.

Mark Thompson on the BBC and religion

Interview by Timothy Garton Ash, director of Free Speech Debate

TGA: Mark Thompson our seventh principle is, “We respect the believer but not necessarily the content of the belief.” Would you agree with that?

MT: Yes, my view is that’s the right place to end up. In other words, the aggregate benefit of being able to freely debate beliefs and to look at the cut and thrust of the argument between beliefs is so great that, although one would hope that in the broader sense that discourse happens in the context of respect for all of the participants, that that respect should not extend as it were necessarily or in anything other than the sort of contingent way to the content of the belief. Though when we come to talk to religion, I think that raises some quite complex issues.

TGA: For example?

MT: I think one of the issues is that not all but almost all people who have religious beliefs are realist about the belief. In other words, that they believe that their faith refers to things which have an objective reality. And so, for example, they regard blasphemy as causing objective harm. So it’s not just that a blasphemous statement or act would hurt their feelings or anger them because it went against their opinions; it would do actual objective harm. That offending of an act of sacrilege against the god head or religious figure, actually creates harm in the world as it were and might be as heinous or more heinous than harm to a human being.

TGA: But a liberal multicultural open society can’t accept that as its premise, can it?

MT: No, I think just so. But I think you have to be quite careful here. In other words, there isn’t actually agreement between a secularist and someone with religious belief necessarily on the status of a speech act or a depiction whereas one might one say, well it’s clearly in the realm of one sort of expression just like every other. For the person with religious belief, it might be much more weighty than that. I think the reason, although I do accept the principle you’ve outlined, I think you have to tread really quite carefully and sensitively because of the character. The point is that for a Muslim, a depiction – particularly a comical or demeaning depiction of the Prophet Muhammad – might have the force, the emotional force, of a piece of a grotesque child pornography. One of the mistakes seculars make is I think not to understand the character of what blasphemy feels like to someone who is a realist in their religious belief

TGA: But if you go that route, then you put, in a sense, the judgment in the eye of the beholder, in the subjectivity, the feelings, of the person. I mean, suppose I said, “I am mortally and profoundly humiliated and degraded by the statement that two plus two equals four.” Sounds absurd but we have no way of judging the one against the other. And in a sense are you not giving what in American free speech jurisprudence has called “the heckler’s veto”?

MT: No. Well, I want to say I think a couple of things about that. Firstly, I think again it’s important to realise that religion as it is lived is not simply about a kind of interplay of propositions: two plus two equals four, versus two plus two equals five. It’s a felt experience with a big emotional charge. And what I want to say is – I mean, to repeat – I think in the end the aggregate benefit, for me, in the end means that freedom of speech wins. I think there’s some complexity in there but I think it wins. What I want to say though is that the kind of constraints that most people accept around racial hatred: the fact that it may be in certain forms of expression or certain forms of depiction may be outlawed because of the way in which they go to racial hatred and potentially the promotion and incitement of racial hatred. I think religion should never receive that level of protection or sensitivity but I think it’s wrong to imagine that it therefore goes into the general swim and that a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad is no more challenging than a debate about what two plus two equals.

TGA: The BBC’s editorial guidelines on religion say, I quote, “The religious views and beliefs of an individual or a religion or denomination must not be misrepresented or abused as judged against generally accepted standards.”

MT: Yes, it’s one of those great phrases, which...Well, my view about our guidelines is that what they actually invite is the application of common sense and judgment usually, and what that’s implying to me is the knowledge that there’s a boundary or a zone at which you’re having to begin to weigh different qualities. So, for example, if we take a comedy which features religious figures or religious material, it’s reasonable to ask whether the level of offence that’s likely to be caused – as it were in the name of making people laugh and entertaining them – is justified by the intended artistic expression involved versus a little offence. And I think it’s possible for a comedy to fail that test. There was an animated comedy the BBC made called Popetown which, bluntly watching it, I and others judged in the end that the, if you like, the creative ambition and indeed achievement of the piece didn’t justify the level of offence that was likely to be caused by it.

TGA: Was it broadcast?

MT: No.

TGA: One thing that was broadcast was Jerry Springer: The Opera.

MT: Yeah.

TGA: Tell us that interesting story. First of all, when did it first come to your desk?

MT: Well, Jerry Springer: The Opera I'd been aware of for some years before it came to my desk. I had heard about it being a great success at the Edinburgh Festival. It transferred to the National Theatre where it began to garner not just very good reviews but awards and eventually transferred to the West End. Indeed, I went to see it in the West End.

TGA: What did you think of it?

MT: I thoroughly enjoyed it.

TGA: And you didn't find it offensive as a practicing Christian?

MT: I'm a practicing Catholic and I would probably describe myself as a critical realist in religious matters but I'm a realist and I believe, as it were, that the truths of the Christian faith are objective truths, rather than being entirely subjective. I'm not, as it were, a cupid-like figure. I was not in any way offended by the piece even though as it happens I feel myself to be quite personally sensitive to a mockery of religious images. For example, I've never watched *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I tend to avoid films or books, which I think might upset me.

TGA: Has the BBC shown *The Last Temptation of Christ*?

MT: It has been shown in the UK, I can't remember which broadcaster showed it. To repeat, I'm not against it being broadcast. The fact that I personally might decide not to watch a programme does not mean I don't think it should be broadcast. Indeed I would always urge people if somebody thinks that they're going to find a programme offensive, the best advice you can give them is don't watch it. And *The Life of Brian* I never watched. That hasn't been shown by the BBC and I would certainly defend our right to show it. And if I had to watch it for professional reasons I would but, as it happens, I've chosen not to watch it.

But Jerry Springer I saw without feeling that it was offensive to me because the intention of the piece was so clearly a satire about an American talk show host and his world rather than the religious figures as such. Now I readily accept that that's a matter of opinion but that was my view. But I went to see it, not for a moment thinking it would come up as an editorial decision, but our head of music Peter Maniura thought it would be a good idea to put it on the air. Roly Keating who was then the controller of BBC Two agreed, and so the plan was made for it to be shown on BBC Two. And understanding it would be shown quite late at night, quite careful warnings would be given to the public before it was shown, and so forth. When it became clear it was going to be shown, I mean this was a piece of musical theatre which had very, very extensive outings in all sorts of different guises without any significant public protest.

But a particular Christian movement, quite a small movement, Christian Voice, I think it's fair to say broadly evangelical in character with some connections to what sounded like some quite tough-minded evangelical websites in the States, mounted a campaign for us not to broadcast Jerry Springer. And given the scale of the campaign, ultimately there was something like 60,000 complaints and nowadays the numbers begin a kind of mechanisation – the kind of machine gun character of the email means

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that you sometimes have to take such numbers with a pinch of salt – but nonetheless clearly it was a marvellous window to see people burning their licences outside the front door of the BBC. So it was clear there were quite a few people unhappy with the idea we should broadcast it.

TGA: Did it come to your home?

MT: Well a number of us in various ways were threatened. I mean they put some private addresses on the web.

TGA: Did they find your home phone?

MT: I received some phone calls from a chap called Stephen Green who ran Christian Voice. I had a number of not to say completely civilised conversations. Roly Keating got a slightly more alarming set of messages including a threat to, you know, to burn him and his wife and his children in their house. So there was some intimidation. I wouldn't for a moment argue that the majority of people who were upset about the idea of broadcasting it were people who were threatening violence, but it was little bit of that and a little bit of menace; in the end it was, you know, we had a security guy outside the door for a bit.

But I looked at the programme and at this point it seemed to be sensible to rather short circuit things. I looked at the programme myself and it was very much how I remembered it from the theatre. I thought it was a piece of – whatever you might think – it's manifestly an artistically serious and interesting piece of work and we probably should have the right to choose whether to watch it or not and so we stuck to our guns. We made sure they were very careful warnings on BBC Two before it was broadcast and to be honest the moment that we broadcast things got a lot quieter. The overwhelming majority of people who complained of course complained not having seen it, or being aware of its content, but on the basis of reports on what it contained, most of which had been almost entirely inaccurate and once it was actually broadcast the thing rather went away.

But I mean I thought that was an example where I think you should be careful. I think religious figures of any major religion, if you're going to show them in demeaning circumstances, I think you need to ask yourself, you know, to what end, as it were? This is not about, Tim, it's not about in a sense the containment of an argument – I mean I don't think that anyone every really worries very much about you know the sort of “there is no supreme being” stuff, I mean the theoretical, though you know in the world of theoretical and ontological we debate about you know eschatology and whether there's a God or not – people don't worry about that. It's more about on whether people's visceral response is such that you have to weigh that against other factors. In the case of Jerry Springer I felt very strongly that the public's right, freedom of expression, is not only about the freedom to express, it's about the freedom to hear and to listen and to experience. That very clearly militated the transmission.

TGA: I watched it again the other night and the Jerry Springer character says at one point, “A person with less broadcasting experience might feel responsible.”

MT: It's a funny piece. It's a good and funny piece in my view.

TGA: It's extremely funny. It's obviously satirising Jerry Springer and the whole cultural world. I mean it's absolutely clear. But it is the case, isn't it, that the BBC wouldn't dream of broadcasting something comparably satirical if it had been the Prophet Muhammad rather than Jesus?

MT: I mean I think essentially the answer to that question is yes. I mean it's worth saying that when I was controller of BBC Two some years earlier – we're talking now about the middle 90s – we broadcast a programme called Goodness Gracious Me, which was a sketch comedy programme made by a group of Asian writers and performers, Meera Syal was one of them, for example, which had some quite strongly satirical material about all of the great religions of South Asia, including Islam. It was done, you know, in a context which was itself encoded and it was really about different kinds of South Asian immigrant groups and it was really making fun of them rather than of their religions, but there were a number of moments where we got fairly large scale complaints about material. But because in the sense it didn't come to the attention of Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail and so on, it never got that large and explosive sort of cultural and moral panic which Jerry Springer did do.

TGA: But of course that was back then, what's happened in the mean time...

MT: Post-Satanic Verses, so if this debate in broadcasting or in British cultural life suddenly got energized by the Satanic Verses, that was an absolute watershed I think for us. It was after that but of course it was before 9/11 and the sense and fear, and so forth, in the sense that some of this could lead to direct violence against individuals.

TGA: If your starting point is the intensity of the feelings of those affected then that almost invites...

MT: Our consideration, I think, and a consideration rather than a complete sort of joker that is played.

TGA: But it is an ace, isn't it? And a rather nasty ace if people say, "I feel so strongly about that; if you say it or broadcast it, I will kill you."

MT: Well clearly it's a very notable move in the game, I mean without question. "I complain in the strongest possible terms" is different from "I complain in the strongest possible terms and I'm loading my AK47 as I write." This definitely raises the stakes. But I think there's two or three things going on, so manifestly a threat to murder, which by the way is quite rightly a crime, massively raises the stakes.

TGA: What, if I may just interrupt for a moment, what are the areas in your experience, your great experience as a broadcaster, have you experienced threats of violence, threats to murder?

MT: Well, the coverage of Israel-Palestine, and one or two other conflicts in the world, can lead to and have in my case led to threats of violence. Our editorial decision-making, where someone has come to believe you are not doing it fairly, or maybe likely not to do it fairly, have been threatened once, twice in my career about

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one or two major conflicts, which have some of the same features: a sense of victimhood, a sense of conspiracy – you know conspiracists who believe everyone else is conspiracist, and so forth – and a sense that the desperation or the circumstance means that the normal don't apply.

But I also want to say, though, a thing about religion. I think it is very different to talk about Christianity in the United Kingdom: a very broadly, literally established, but also metaphorically established, part of our kind of cultural built landscape. A religion which is actually for all sorts of reasons, in many ways a lot of our thinking about human rights comes out of the Christian tradition; I would argue, a broad-shouldered religion, compared to religions which in the UK have a very close identity with ethnic minorities, where, you know, it's not as if as it were Islam is randomly spread across the UK population. It's almost entirely a religion practiced by people who may already feel in other ways isolated, prejudiced against, and where they may well regard an attack on their religion as racism by other means.

And although it would be nice for the argument to elegantly separate religion out and say, "No, religion is about propositions, about belief and it's got a different category." Again, at an ontological level it's completely bound up with identity and particular racial identity, and the idea that you might want to – not just for Muslims but for Sikhs, Hindus, for Jews – Jews would be an interesting example here, I think – to think quite carefully about whether something done in the name of freedom of expression might to the Jew or the Sikh or the Hindu or the Muslim who receives it, feel threatening, isolating and so forth. I think those are meaningful considerations. They make the argument much more complicated, but that's how in my experience it plays out.

TGA: I still wonder if you're not privileging too much two things. One, the subjective feelings of the person affected and, two, the threat of violence, because it's a combination of those two things, which makes the whole area of the portrayal of Islam so sensitive, isn't it? I mean there are things that could be said about almost every other religion, I think it's fair to say, and certainly Hindus and Sikhs feel this, and some of them have said to me, "Well, why are people paying so much attention to Muslims?" It's because they make such a fuss.

MT: So it's said, so it is believed – I think in my view wrongly – an arms race. And some Christians believe that and certainly it was said extensively in the protest about Jerry Springer: The Opera the point you made: well this would never happen about another religion, in particular Islam. Well I think what I want to say is that in the end with Jerry Springer, I felt that freedom of expression and the right of the public to judge the thing themselves was the trump card. That's almost always been my view. But I have a slight different approach to this than your set of principles suggests, which is that I think there are multiple considerations; that it's not unreasonable to ask what the consequences of broadcasting something, or writing something will be for a particular individual or for a community, especially communities who may reasonably – I think that's perhaps an important word to use – reasonably take the thing to be an attack, or to be threatening.

TGA: Could I just come in there because it's a very interesting point. So what we have is an interlocking set of principles, which have to be read together. Another one is we neither make threats of violence nor accept violent intimidation.

MT: Yeah.

TGA: And one of the worrying things about this area specifically in relation to Islam is a lot of people feel it is threatening in the face of violent intimidation.

MT: Yes, they do. I think what's quite interesting – and I was looking at the principles – what's so interesting is I think that to a Muslim and potentially also to a Christian, there are certain as it were quasi-blasphemous things or blasphemous things that could be said, which would themselves feel to them very like a threat of violence.

TGA: For example, for a Christian?

MT: I think there were some people who felt that about Jerry Springer: The Opera. The depiction of Jesus Christ, as an adult in a nappy is so utterly disrespectful of the Son of God, that that constitutes a kind of objective threat against, or desecration of, a religion.

TGA: But don't you think Mark that you have to hold the line at that? I mean, let me give you a comparison....

MT: I think I did actually.

TGA: Yes, you did indeed.

MT: But I think what I'm saying, Tim, is I think it's a difficult line. It's not an easy line and I think that the application of your principles is not quite as straightforward as the principles themselves might lead you to believe.

TGA: But, the principles are only the starting point, it's clearly not everything. The devil is not only in the detail – everything is in the application. But to give you another example: when Catharine MacKinnon famously said, "Pornography is sex," which, in a way, is a functional equivalent of your statement about how the blasphemous depiction. If one accepted that leap from the depiction to the thing itself, I think you are undermining the very foundations of free debate.

MT: If you go as far as that I think you would. But I don't think I do go as far as that. I mean, for example, I welcome the fact that one of the outcomes in Jerry Springer: The Opera was because Christian Voice attempted to sue me amongst other people for the crime of blasphemous libel. The effect of that in the appeal court was ultimately to overturn the law of blasphemy for – perhaps not yet for books – but certainly for television, film and theatre. That's now left, essentially left our law. Well I rejoice in that fact. I do not think that it's appropriate that there should be laws inhibiting freedom of speech in the interest of protecting religions. That doesn't mean I think necessarily you should publish or broadcast anything. And so firstly, in the sense that in terms of whether the civil power should be prohibiting these things, I would say absolutely not. I think it is also appropriate to say that editors, including my job as

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editor-in-chief for the BBC, should think quite carefully about these issues. And I will say to that extent I don't believe that the blasphemy constitutes a crime like a crime of violence. I don't think pornography and presumably she meant almost criminal sex for sex or something. I don't think the two are the same. I think it is reasonable to ask and every sensible person thinks quite carefully about what the likely consequences of any speech act are.

TGA: You raised a very interesting issue, which is that Islam at least in the 90s and the last couple of decades has been the religion of arguably a vulnerable minority in this country and there's a distinction – in this country obviously, not in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia – between the vulnerable minority and the secure majority. Don't you think that probably in many cities in Britain there are more actively practicing Muslims than Christians?

MT: I didn't know that to be a fact but it's very possible.

TGA: Certainly in Bradford, for example. And our society is clearly becoming so much more diverse that I wonder whether this way of thinking, which has secure majority vulnerable minority, is not somehow being overtaken by a genuinely multicultural reality.

MT: In the same way the character of not everywhere in the UK but in London, for example, of the way a kind of multi-ethnic society and in particular the very high proportion of people amongst ethnic minorities of mixed race in this country. They also dilute in a sense some of the anxieties about racial identification. So in both cases there are a lot of similar developments. These may become less pressing issues and therefore the privileging to the degree you do it may become less important.

TGA: I think this is a really important part, that we have a whole way of thinking, which is about taking care about the feelings of vulnerable minorities. Mainly it's about mass migration. Now, like you said in London, we're getting so mixed up together, there are so many multiple identities, that in a sense one has to go a step further and say there has to be a set of rules which in principle apply to all individuals.

MT: Yes, and it may be that the UK, which is a remarkably secular society – the underlying host culture is remarkably secular, one of the most secular cultures probably anywhere in the world – nonetheless I think it's an open question about whether that very strong background assumption of a kind of secular view of the world, will stay at its current level, will take over completely as a kind of form of manifest destiny, which many secularists believe, we don't know. Around the world, it would appear that, if anything, secularism is rather in decline.

This is a transcript of the interview prepared by a member of our team. In case of doubt, the spoken version is authoritative.