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‘Religion on the Radio: Using Christmas religious broadcasting to reframe the sacred-secular interface’

Christopher Deacy

Summary

This article examines the breadth and depth of religion in British radio by means of a case study of eight different BBC stations on 25 December 2015. It draws on previous research by Knott and Gill where pre-established definitions of religion, in which the category of ‘Conventional Religion’ is prioritized, have tended to obscure and underestimate the location and place of religion in British media and makes the case for utilizing a tighter rationale and methodology to better examine the relationship between religion and so-called ‘secular’ media. Using a comparative content analysis across 22 individual programmes and 44.5 hours of broadcasting, this article proposes that, with a more nuanced methodology, alternative and more challenging ways in which to seek, find and interact with religion on the radio can be identified, with key implications for both the category of religion and the BBC’s own definition of the remit of ‘religious broadcasting’.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate the role, function, context and quantity of religion in the British media, with specific reference to national, regional and local radio. It will examine the extent to which previous research which has focused on the presence of religion in the popular and broadsheet press as well as on terrestrial television, using pre-established definitions of religion, has tended to underestimate the degree to which matters of faith, identity, beliefs and values can be located. Indeed, previous studies have tended to work on the assumption that religion’s contours and parameters are unequivocal and clearly demarcated. Robin Gill has, for instance, undertaken three surveys over the last forty years, the most recent of which was in 2011, in which he chose eight English national newspapers and recorded daily, over a set period, the proportion of total page space given to religious issues. Gill addressed how he at first struggled to find a satisfactory way of defining the term ‘religious content’ in the light of Thomas Luckmann’s groundbreaking study *The Invisible Religion* (1967) where it was posited that “The norms of traditional religious institutions – as congealed in an ‘official’ or formerly ‘official’ model of religion – cannot serve as a yardstick for assessing religion in contemporary society” (Luckmann 1967: 91). Seeing religion as an “anthropological category” (ter Borg 2008: 229) and as “essentially a phenomenon of the ‘private sphere’” (Luckmann 1967: 103), Luckmann was inclined to move away from a focus on the role of institutionalized religions which, as Lynch contends, “misses the bigger picture of the way people’s values and beliefs take shape in a secularized modern society”, with “the most pressing questions about the stories, values and meanings that shape many people’s lives today” (Lynch 2007: 130) needing to be apprehended elsewhere. In the end, however, Gill opted to reject “the sort of wide definition adopted by Luckmann” due to what Gill sees as its tendency to impose “labels upon others which they personally reject” (Gill 2012: 46). In place, then, of such a “doubtful sociological practice”, Gill concluded that “a narrow, conventional definition” – namely, “items referring explicitly to religious institutions, their functionaries, or their central transcendent beliefs” (ibid.) – would after all be most suitable. There is an obvious utility in this approach as exemplified by the potential dilemma Gill faced in popular newspapers such as *The Sun* and *The Star* where “horoscopes were given as much space proportionately as the total religious content” (Gill

2012: 46). Rather than let this skew the data, Gill is simply able to exclude such astrological phenomena: “given my definition *above* horoscopes were not deemed to be ‘religious’” (ibid.).

In this article I take issue with this method, on the grounds that it is the very material that is discarded from analysis once an exclusive focus is accorded to formal and institutional manifestations of religion that may supply us with a no less prolific, if unexpected, site of religious agency, experience or values. Using Gill’s methodology *The Star* is “the newspaper with the lowest overall content” and has a “tendency to ignore most items of news relating to Christianity”, but his conclusion that this particular tabloid “gives more than twice as much space to astrology as it does to religious issues in any form” (Gill 2012: 54) stands or falls on the exactitude of the implicit premise that horoscopes and religion are diametrically at odds with one another and serve different, even antithetical, constituencies. The problem here is that inferences are being drawn about the whereabouts and extent of religious presence in the media by approaching the data with a pre-set criteria of what religion is and where it may be found. Accordingly, in line with Edward Bailey’s work in *Implicit Religion* (2006), the secular may be found to have an important contribution to contemporary religious debate in its own right and not simply because it stands in direct contrast to the realm of the religious, with important implications as we shall see for how the BBC construes religious broadcasting, and the demarcation thereof, as religion may be functioning in a wider sense outside of such official jurisdiction.

Methodological questions

In order to more accurately assess whether or not, as Knott puts it, “media coverage supports assumptions about secularization and the declining significance of religion” (Knott et al. 2013: 1) – this is, after all, a time when, as we know from Day’s research, “three-quarters of the UK population selected ‘Christian’ as their religious identity on the national census, yet fewer than 3 per cent attend church regularly and participation in other Christian rites such as baptism, confirmation, weddings and funerals is declining” (Day 2013: 62) – or, indeed, conversely, whether “society is being re-sacralized” or even that “religion is now more visible” (Knott et al. 2013: 1), a tighter rationale and methodology is required in order to best examine the relationship between religion and the media. The work of Kim Knott is especially germane to this end as her 2008-9 project on how religion and secular beliefs and values are delineated in one local and two national British newspapers over a two month period in October-November 2008, and across three television channels over a seven day period in February 2009, presents us with a more nuanced picture of the religion-media interface and which is, moreover, “open to consideration in other contexts, times and places” (Knott et al. 2013: 189). One of the merits in Knott’s research, which used quantitative content analysis to count all references to a wide range of keywords associated with religion, is that there is a more considered emphasis on whether only brief references to religion should be factored into the data as opposed to entire articles or programmes (see *ibid.*: 8). Even here, though, Knott follows a similar path to Gill in that she looks at “occurrences of words or relevant images” (Knott et al. 2013: 11) as the primary means of tabulating the presence of religion, using 49 categories and 410 subcategories to encompass a range of Conventional Religion (such as references to Christianity, Islam and Hinduism), Common Religion (which includes magic, witchcraft, fortune telling, gambling and folk religion) and the Secular Sacred (which includes references to secularism, atheism, humanism and the sacred) (see *ibid.*: 191). Due to the vast range of material that falls under these categories her project does not fall into the trap of more limited approaches which presume “agreement on the content and salience of key terms” (Day 2013: 63), but the downside is that there is a uni-

directional dimension to the research whereby religion is *read into* the programmes and articles concerned, according to pre-established criteria, without there being concomitant scope for allowing religion or religious agency to be apprehended or *read from* sources which do not specifically utilize the vocabulary that is being sought.

This problem of making the data fit the terminology rather than, as I will propose, studying the programmes or articles first and allowing the terminology to fit the actual data, is endemic in research that has been conducted to date. Knott claims that “Religions provide valuable material and personnel for dealing with crises”, as well as offering “myths and rituals, moral teachings and norms, as well as those who do the work of preaching, teaching, counselling, and theology” (Knott et al. 2013: 4), but this substantive approach does not adequately account for all manifestations of religion, such as those where religion is ‘merely’ apprehended in an implicit category. How might we deal, for instance, with a more functionalist approach whereby an interactive television phone-in in which religion is not specifically referenced may nevertheless constitute a source of virtual community for viewers and which may bring them together and unite them in a manner consonant with how for Durkheim the influence of the group over the individual comprises a shared, symbolic account of one’s place in the world (see Deacy 2016 (a): 18)? To be categorized as religious by Knott there would have to be a specific “number and frequency of ‘references’ to various aspects of religion and the secular sacred” (Knott et al. 2013: 40) in the press articles or TV shows themselves. Such a privileging of the ‘content’ of religion over the function or effect of religion means that, potentially, countless manifestations of religion are being overlooked as the resources are not in place to adequately observe them. Superficially impressive though it may therefore be to learn that “In 2008-2009, a total of 4,370 references to religion and the secular sacred were identified in one month’s copies of *The Times*, *The Sun* and the *Yorkshire Evening Post* and one week of television on BBC1, BBC2 and ITV1”, some of these references pertain only to “a single word, phrase or image” (ibid.) or to banal and oblique figurative language whereby, for example, “a footballer scored a ‘magic goal’ or a reviewer considered a show ‘magical’” (ibid.: 44).

Welcome though Knott’s inclusion of the category of the Secular Sacred is in her data, so as to “gather and analyse references to secularism, atheism and other deeply held philosophical perspectives which do not make reference to or depend upon supernatural agents such as God, Allah, spiritual forces or people” (ibid.), this model is still beholden to the Conventional Religion category which remains the benchmark in relation to which a secular analogue or manifestation of religion is being invoked. Referring, for example, to that which is ‘religion-like’, Knott identifies “those references where something unambiguously this-worldly or non-religious was referred to, *but using religious terms*” (ibid.: 45; my italics), such as Marxism or the environment. A more suitable model for ascertaining the scope and presence of religion in the media would be one in which the terminology of religion is not always being used or invoked, whether explicitly or figuratively, and cannot simply be ‘read off’ from the data. Religion may be intrinsic to the Christmas celebration, but the festival’s secular components – including a radio programme such as ‘Junior Choice’ – paradoxically amount to its most salient and fertile manifestation (Deacy 2016 (a)), not least in terms of the ‘community’ or ‘ritual’ dimensions of religion that this ‘secular’ programme offers its ‘devotees’. It is ironic that the BBC’s charter requires that 110 hours in its schedule per year should consist of religious broadcasting (see Knott et al. 2013: 54) when, even when applying a more rigid criteria to the one that I am advocating, Knott points out that “most references to religion... were made in articles and programmes where religion was not the main issue: 95 per cent of all references to religion on television were of this kind, and 80 per cent of those in the newspapers” (ibid.: 55). Building on Knott’s claim that “many religion references go

unnoticed because those monitoring them focus solely on articles and programmes where it is not the major focus of attention”, my aim is to demonstrate that if we are to properly understand “the place and role of religion in everyday mediated experience” (ibid.) then we need to sharpen our methodological tools further and work towards a more two-way, dialogical approach which allows for religion to be located in a bottom-up capacity, respecting the integrity of the programmes themselves, rather than in a top-down normative model where the ‘objective’ term religion needs simply to be ‘found’ and ‘applied’ to the data at hand.

Why radio?

The decision to focus on radio is two-fold. Firstly, radio has been neglected as a medium for its coverage of religion even though it is second only to television in terms of being regarded as “the most trusted UK media outlet” (Knott et al. 2013: 6), with newspapers in fourth place behind websites. Yet, Knott’s own research decided against looking at radio “as newspapers and television had become the traditional fare for media researchers”, with “the latter being increasingly favoured for analysis of popular culture” (ibid.: 9), even though radio is acknowledged to be “of central importance” for learning about “public discourse on religion and its place in contemporary culture and society” (ibid.: 22). Secondly, radio, as we shall see, is able to go further than other media in terms of shedding light upon the communal and ritual dimensions of religion, as identified by Ninian Smart, in keeping with Smart’s claim that many people “see ultimate spiritual meaning... in relationships to other persons” (Smart 1998: 12). Susan Douglas’ comprehensive study of American radio has shown, for example, how “Few inventions invoke such nostalgia, such deeply personal and vivid memories, such a sense of loss and regret” and that “there are few devices with which people from different generations and backgrounds have had such an intimate relationship” (Douglas 2004: 3). As well as shaping our desires, fantasies and images of the outside world – indeed, “our very imaginations” – she sees radio as having helped us to “create internal maps of the world and our place in it, urging us to construct imagined communities to which we do, or do not, belong” (ibid.: 5). For Barnard, also, “For most of us, life without radio is difficult to imagine” and, of “all the major mass communications media, radio is perhaps the most ubiquitous and most easily available..., punctuating, enlivening and infiltrating the lives of its listeners” (Barnard 2000: 2). Scannell likewise draws attention to “the sociable dimension of radio and television broadcasting as its basic communicative ethos” (Scannell 1996: 4), while Shingler and Wieringa, despite their reservations about how authentic a virtual community can be vis-à-vis its physical counterpart, nevertheless acknowledge the role that radio can play in transcending “the boundaries separating individuals and provide them with a sense of being part of a community: a listening community” (Shingler & Wieringa 1998: 122), that is “part of our daily routines” with its concomitant “organising structure and timetable” (ibid.: 110). Marshall McLuhan construed radio as “the tribal drum” (McLuhan 1964: 135) due to its ability to promote a sense of collectivism among people that harkened back to “the ancient experience of kinship webs” (ibid.: 139), in a manner consonant with how for Douglas radio carries people “back into the realms of preliteracy, into orality, to a mode of communication reliant on storytelling, listening, and group memory” with the audience then “unified around” a “common experience” (Douglas 2004: 29).

Ironically, one of the reasons radio tends to be overlooked as a medium, and not just in previous quantitative and qualitative studies in religion and media, is precisely what makes radio such a significant medium for the articulation, dissemination and, crucially, the *ongoing creation* of religious values and experiences. As Fleming attests, “Because it is a medium that can be used while doing other things – whether driving the car or reading a book – it is

widely regarded as a secondary medium which implies it is somehow less important than other media or lacking in some way” (Fleming 2002: 1). Yet, radio can also function as a tradition-supplying resource which, in addition to transmitting religious *content*, along the lines of what newspapers and TV are shown to do in the research by Gill and Knott, is able to *mediate* and *engender* religious experience. According to Stewart Hoover, “The realms of ‘religion’ and ‘media’ can no longer be easily separated”, as he sets about trying to “chart the ways that media and religion intermingle and collide in the cultural experience of media audiences” (Hoover 2006: 1), as they “occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity” (ibid.: 9). With this in mind, radio is not just about *broadcasting* religion in a manner which corresponds with the 110 hours of content per annum stipulated in the BBC’s charter, but it is about *doing* religion. As with so much of what religion purportedly does with its adherents through community, radio “creates a unique intimacy with its listeners who can interact with it through their imagination” and, as a companion, can be “used as a friend to provide company, buck us up when we are feeling down or relax us when we are tired and tense” (Fleming 2002: 1). Crucially, as Douglas sees it, “Most modes of listening generate a strong feeling of belonging” (Douglas 2004: 8) in a manner which accords with the findings of Day’s research that people tend to identify “their human relationships as most important to them in informing their beliefs and morality” (Day 2013: 68) and that, asked what they believed in, many of her informants would answer that they believe in their relationships with other people as the most important values in their lives. This shift in the understanding of *transcendence* from a theocentric to an “everyday, human, social” (ibid.: 71) context helps us to understand how, through radio, we have ties to a virtual community of people who share our same tastes and predilections – Douglas refers to when “40 million people, for example, tuned into exactly the same thing” and there is an almost sacred dimension to her talk of how in the “act of listening itself” one knows that they “and other listeners are experiencing that very moment of [their] lives in exactly the same way” (Douglas 2004: 24) – and to presenters who often speak to us “in the most intimate, confidential, and inclusive tones” (ibid.: 22). Loviglio goes even further, arguing that “the shared ritual of listening, even in our own driveways, reminds us at moments when it is most tenuous, *that something called society still exists*” (Loviglio 2013: 40; my italics). For Barnard, similarly, “the radio day runs parallel to the flow of daily life itself” which thereby “means bringing organization, coherence and meaning to it, in a manner that the listener understands and relates and responds to” (Barnard 2000: 197).

The data

What follows is a comparative content analysis across a range of BBC national, regional and local programming on the morning of 25 December 2015, amounting to 22 individual programmes and 44.5 hours of broadcasting, the content of whose news bulletins and speech, was transcribed. The reason for choosing to look at Christmas content is twofold. Firstly, it is a day when the quantity of religious programming is disproportionately higher than at any other time in the year. This is, indeed, a cornerstone of the BBC’s Christmas output, as indicated by the Corporation’s then Head of Religion and Ethics, Aaqil Ahmed, who was quoted in a press release from November 2015 that “The BBC’s religious programming across TV and radio continues its fine tradition of bringing communities together and reflecting what is important to many of our viewers and listeners” (BBC Media Centre 2015: www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2015/religious-programming). This focus on the community side of religion seems very much in keeping with Day’s analysis of ‘believing in belonging’, though Ahmed then proceeds to delimit its effects as referring to an abundant mix of “music, tradition, reflection, conversation or live worship” (ibid.). The inference is clear:

traditional, institutional and worship-based celebrations of the Christian religion are integral to the Christmas festival. Accordingly, in choosing to look at the output of BBC radio across Christmas morning, there is going to be no shortage of relevant material on which to focus. My second criteria for choosing 25 December, however, is inversely related to the above. For, as a recent monograph on the festival, *Christmas in the Crosshairs*, has shown, Christmas may well be the second most sacred date on the calendar for Christians “but it also engages billions of people who are caught up in its commercialism, music, sentiment, travel, and frenetic busyness” (Bowler 2017: front sleeve). Similarly, in *Christmas as Religion*, I make a case for not simply limiting the contours of religion to particular manifestations and representations of institutional forms of Christianity precisely because it is the secular aspects of the festival, including consumerism, the giving and receiving of presents, and Christmas films and music that need not only warrant attention in their own right in any account of the meaning of Christmas, but are no less theologically or religiously significant in terms of the beliefs, values, sentiments and aspirations that they encompass and engender. It is this rich and often contested interplay between religious and secular, sacred and profane that makes Christmas such prime territory for any analysis of the relationship between religion and the media, and it is all the more conspicuous to this end that previous quantitative and qualitative religion and media studies have avoided the Christmas period altogether when selecting the period they wish to study. Knott’s survey entailed looking at three newspapers over a two month period, between the months of October and November 2008, as well as a week’s TV from February 2009. Similarly, the antecedent to this project, which was carried out in 1982, consisted of examining press output between the months of February and March 1982 together with a week’s TV in the April of that year. In the case of Gill’s research, he chose to focus on newspaper coverage of religion during a four week period across the months of January and February 2011, while two previous studies, employing the same rationale, were carried out by Gill over four weeks in the months of August 1969 and July 1990.

The objective in focusing only on BBC channels was to subject to a test Ahmed’s assertion that there is a causal relationship between ‘bringing communities together’ and the content, appeal and impact of the BBC’s religious programming. In the case of TV, where many programmes are pre-recorded, and newspapers it becomes much harder to assess the impact that a particular programme or feature has on wider society, unless an accompanying online blog or social media site is also surveyed. Radio, though, is an inescapably interactive medium and in collecting data from Christmas Day transmissions, 59% of which were broadcast live (i.e. 13 out of the total number of 22 shows), there is more scope for capturing the way listeners were able to engage with and even offer a critique of religious content, much of which, as we shall see, was able to be generated by the audiences themselves who as members of the virtual communities became part of the content and structure of the programmes, from having their texts or emails read out or, in a number of instances, being placed live on air. In order to ensure that a cross-section of the listening public was being captured for the purposes of this study, a range of stations were chosen. Of the eight selected channels, three had national reach across the UK – Radio 2, 5 Live and the Asian Network. Three of the stations were regional –Radio Wales, Radio Scotland and Radio Ulster. Finally, two English local stations were chosen, one based in the north, Radio Leeds, and the other, Radio Solent, broadcast in the South of England to listeners living around Southampton, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. Any programme broadcast on these networks over a 12 hour period between midnight and midday was included, although with the exception of Radio 2 not all of the stations broadcast new or original content in the early hours of the morning. In the case of 5 Live, for example, pre-recorded documentaries were transmitted up until 7am, including two sports programmes – one that explored advances in hurricane

science, ten years on from Hurricane Katrina, and another in which O.J. Borg looked at the growth in electronic sports and whether gaming can properly be categorized as a ‘real’ sport. Much of 5 Live’s night time output was also transmitted on the Asian Network, Radio Ulster, Radio Scotland and Radio Solent, as was that of Radio Leeds which additionally broadcast a tribute to the entertainer Cilla Black, who had passed away earlier in the year, at 6am ahead of the live breakfast show. Radio Wales joined the BBC World Service for its overnight transmissions. The following table displays the programmes on each of the eight networks that formed the data for this survey:

| |
|--|
| BBC Radio 2 |
| Alex Lester 12-3am, Canon Roger Royle 3-6am, The Sunday Hour with Diane-Louise Jordan, 6-8am, Good Morning Christmas with Clare Balding, 8-10am, Christmas Junior Choice with Ed Stewart 10am-12 noon |
| BBC Radio Leeds |
| Martin Kelner, 7-10am, Richard Stead, 10am – 12 noon |
| BBC Radio Solent |
| Louisa Hannan, 7-9:45am, Tristan Pascoe, 9:45am-12 noon |
| BBC Asian Network |
| Christmas Special with Danny Sarb, 6-7am, Tommy Sandhu: It’s Sandhu Claus, 7-10am |
| BBC Radio Wales |
| Mal Pope: Early Breakfast, 5:30-8am, ‘Celebration’ – Carols, songs and the Christmas message from King’s Church, Newport: 8-9am, BBC National Orchestra of Wales Christmas Concert, 9-10am, ‘Money for Nothing’ – Owen Money, 10am-1pm |
| BBC Radio Ulster |
| Radio Ulster Carol Service, Canon Noel Battye, 7-8am, Brian D’Arcy, 8-9am, ‘Kim’s Twinkly Christmas’ – Kim Lenaghan, 9-11am |
| BBC Radio Scotland |
| Christmas Morning with Cathy Macdonald and Ricky Ross, 7-9am, ‘Get It On... With Bryan Burnett’: 9-11am |
| BBC Radio 5 Live |
| 5 Live Breakfast with Dotun Adebayo and Nomia Iqbal, 7-9am, 5 Live Breakfast: Your Call, 9-10am |

The 44.5 hours of transmissions were broken down, firstly, into the content of a total of twelve news bulletins on Radio 2 (on the hour from midnight until 11am), five each on Leeds and Solent (from 7-11am), five on the Asian Network (on the hour and half hour between 7am and 9am), six on Radio Wales (from 6-11am), three on Radio Scotland (7-9am; there was no 10am bulletin), two on Radio Ulster (at 8am and 10am; there was no news at 7am or 9am) and three on 5 Live (7-9am inclusive). The objective was to ascertain, using a modified application of Knott’s tripartite structure, (i) the breakdown of content of ‘conventional religious’ stories; (ii) stories specifically tailored to the Christmas festival but without any overt conventional religious content – a category I have labelled the ‘secular sacred’ – and (iii) those stories which might be categorized as ‘ordinary secular’ as they are not germane to Christmas specifically but might deal, for example, with stories about a natural meteorological phenomenon, an explosion or fire, or a military campaign. Then, similarly, the speech content of each of the programmes was examined, again to assess the relationship between (i) the ‘conventional religious’, (ii) the ‘secular sacred’ and (iii) mundane or

‘ordinary secular’ content. This correlates with Knott’s three categories in the respect that we both have the same understanding of what comprises ‘conventional religion’, although there is a primary difference between us in the case of how we deal with the ‘secular sacred’. Whereas Knott uses it to refer to the presence of a diffuse range of non-supernatural philosophies or agencies that use religious terms (including health, individualism, the financial market, atheism, Marxism and Elvis Presley [see Knott et al. 2013: 45]), I find it to be a good fit for designating those manifestations of sacred activity which can be found across Christmas broadcasting that do not specifically invoke conventional religious beliefs and values or use religious terminology. I go further than Knott in my rendering as, to put it crudely, the ‘secular’ can be ‘sacred’ and we can find the ‘sacred’ in the ‘secular’, and it is the absence of such research to date which has had the effect of obscuring and underestimating the place of religion in British media. All three of Knott’s categories tend to amount to different ways of finding something which has already been identified as religious, whether conventionally or (as in her use of the Secular Sacred) in terms of secular analogues to that which is conventionally religious. My third criteria, the ‘ordinary secular’, does not belong in Knott’s methodology, because, to all intents and purposes, it does not appear to betoken anything that is either conventionally or unconventionally religious or sacred. It is, simply, mundane, prosaic, and ordinary, and lies outside the scope of her work which is looking for manifestations of something religious or religious-like. However, there seems little point in simply looking at the prevalence of religion as a stand-alone phenomenon (albeit one that, as Knott sees it, can be broken down into the main categories of the ‘Conventional’, ‘Common’ and the ‘Secular Sacred’) unless its presence and impact can be tabulated alongside the existence of those Christmas radio programmes of an ‘ordinary secular’ persuasion which help contextualize the extent to which ‘conventional religion’ and the ‘secular sacred’ can be identified and located, especially in view of the fact that individual news items and the speech content of the programmes studied in this survey contain an amalgamation of each of these categories, and, as we shall see, the distinctions between them are often porous.

Inevitably, there will be certain crossovers between the categories, as when a story about flooding in Cumbria (the ‘ordinary secular’) was given an additional angle in some of the news stories by reporting on the compassion and charitable work of members of the public – invariably designated as ‘guardian angels’ – who battled through the storms in order to donate a table and chairs and a cooked turkey so that those afflicted by the floods could enjoy a Christmas dinner. Depending on the slant put on such a story, this might either comprise a ‘conventional’ or a ‘secular sacred’ classification. Or, if an alternative approach were used to that of Knott, it is possible to see how, in other hands, further categories might be invoked, such as that of the ‘unconventional religious’, the ‘extraordinary secular’, the ‘secularly religious’ or the ‘religiously sacred’. But, this three-fold criteria was chosen as it corresponds to Knott’s original methodology while being sufficiently supple so as to apply in a way that hers does not quite manage to do to the nuances of the particular data at hand.

News content

| Radio 2 | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| | Number and percentage of individual news items per category | Number and percentage of total news items per category |
| Conventional Religion | 7 (35%) | 37 (45%) |
| Secular Sacred | 5 (25%) | 16 (19%) |
| Ordinary Secular | 8 (40%) | 30 (36%) |

| 5 Live | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| | Number and percentage of individual news items per category | Number and percentage of total news items per category |
| Conventional Religion | 4 (31%) | 7 (29%) |
| Secular Sacred | 4 (31%) | 6 (25%) |
| Ordinary Secular | 5 (38%) | 11 (46%) |

| Radio Leeds | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| | Number and percentage of individual news items per category | Number and percentage of total news items per category |
| Conventional Religion | 4 (36%) | 17 (55%) |
| Secular Sacred | 4 (36%) | 7 (23%) |
| Ordinary Secular | 3 (27%) | 7 (23%) |

| Radio Solent | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| | Number and percentage of individual news items per category | Number and percentage of total news items per category |
| Conventional Religion | 4.5 (32%) | 12.5 (37%) |
| Secular Sacred | 6 (43%) | 12 (35%) |
| Ordinary Secular | 3.5 (25%) | 9.5 (28%) |

| Radio Wales | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| | Number and percentage of individual news items per category | Number and percentage of total news items per category |
| Conventional Religion | 7 (32%) | 24 (43%) |
| Secular Sacred | 5 (23%) | 8 (14%) |
| Ordinary Secular | 10 (45%) | 24 (43%) |

| Radio Ulster | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| | Number and percentage of individual news items per category | Number and percentage of total news items per category |
| Conventional Religion | 4 (50%) | 7 (54%) |
| Secular Sacred | 1 (12.5%) | 2 (15%) |
| Ordinary Secular | 3 (37.5%) | 4 (31%) |

| Radio Scotland | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| | Number and percentage of individual news items per category | Number and percentage of total news items per category |

| | | |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|
| Conventional Religion | 4 (31%) | 8 (40%) |
| Secular Sacred | 3 (23%) | 3 (15%) |
| Ordinary Secular | 6 (46%) | 9 (45%) |

| BBC Asian Network | | |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| | Number and percentage of individual news items per category | Number and percentage of total news items per category |
| Conventional Religion | 4 (40%) | 12 (36%) |
| Secular Sacred | 2 (20%) | 3 (9%) |
| Ordinary Secular | 6 (60%) | 18 (55%) |

| Total | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| | Number and percentage of individual news items per category | Number and percentage of total news items per category |
| Conventional Religion | 38.5 (34%) | 124.5 (42.5%) |
| Secular Sacred | 30 (26.5%) | 57 (19.5%) |
| Ordinary Secular | 44.5 (39.5%) | 112.5 (38%) |

Radio 2

Breaking down the news content station by station, we see that on Radio 2 the most frequently reported story, which appeared in all twelve 3-minute bulletins on the network and led the news in all but four of them, was the Archbishop of Canterbury's Christmas message warning that Christianity faces elimination in the Middle East due to Islamic State. Seven of the reports made specific reference to King Herod in the context of how, according to Justin Welby, IS "is the Herod of today, igniting a trail of fear, violence and hatred", and, additionally, the 11am bulletin featured a report on the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, who had said it is sad that Christians feel "pushed out" in the land where Christianity was born. There were seven appearances of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster's Christmas address, with emphasis on the need to learn from the Nativity "to be kind to one another", with the 6am bulletin featuring an excerpt of Cardinal Vincent Nichols's sermon in which he prayed for Christians who are persecuted for their faith worldwide. The Papal Midnight Mass address, in which Pope Francis called for more sobriety in a world obsessed with consumerism, hedonism, wealth and extravagance, and a return to the "essential values of life", appeared three times, while the Queen's Christmas Day broadcast, in which Her Majesty spoke about the Christian message of light overcoming darkness, and in which she described Christmas as a time to remember "all that we have to be thankful for", appeared eight times. The other overtly 'conventional religion' story, which appeared four times (on the 2am, 3am, 4am and 6am bulletins) was how the number of Christmas celebrants were down in Bethlehem at the Church of the Nativity due to tensions between Israelis and Palestinians.

In terms of the 'secular sacred', there were several stories which had either an explicitly Christmas theme or which gave an uplifting, festive spin to an otherwise mundane or 'ordinary secular' story. Explicit 'secular sacred' stories included the four bulletins which covered the pardon given to the actor Robert Downey Jr. by the Governor of California for

drugs and weapons offences in 1996 which was one of three feel-good or conversion stories to round off the bulletins. The 5am bulletin explicitly referred to how, after nearly two decades, Downey Jr. had proven that he had “turned his life around”, while at 8am reference was made to the “request for clemency” which was then, a la Scrooge’s own conversion or redemption narrative, bestowed upon the *Iron Man* actor on Christmas morning. Analogous language appeared in the story that American victims of the Iran hostage crisis would be receiving compensation for each day they had been held in captivity back in 1979. As with the previous story, there had been a long period of time (36 years – double the length of time to that pertaining to Downey Jr.) in which a group of victims were presented as waiting for a wrong to be righted before being the recipients of a Christmas morning miracle. A similar dynamic can be seen in the story which appeared in the 6am and 11am bulletins concerning the upcoming announcement of that year’s Christmas number 1 single. The NHS Choir had released a single, ‘A Bridge Over You’, the proceeds of which were going to various charities including Carers UK and Mind. The story was given an extra feelgood dimension with the news that the other contender for the coveted chart position, Justin Bieber, had called on his Twitter fans to support the charity song and help them win. Even among stories where Christmas cheer was in short supply, as in the eleven references to the flooding crisis in North West England, in which the army had been placed on standby and the government’s emergency COBRA committee was going to be meeting at midday, the 5am, 8am and 10am bulletins delivered an upbeat narrative about how one woman and her family would be able to enjoy Christmas dinner as a chef was travelling 30 miles to Carlisle with a table and chairs and would be donating a Christmas turkey, also. On the 10am news hope over adversity, or redemption over suffering, was accentuated, as we heard this particular Cumbrian flood victim saying that “Christmas was always at my house with my children. This time it’s a change so it’ll be nice”. While the total number of ‘secular sacred’ stories, five (with 16 appearances), is fewer than both the seven (with 37 appearances) devoted to ‘conventional religion’ and the eight (with 30 appearances) ‘ordinary secular’ stories that numerically dominated the morning’s news, the four references to tornadoes ripping through the Southern states of the US and killing eleven people, or the dozens of people killed in an explosion in an industrial gas plant in Nigeria, which also appeared on four of the bulletins, or even the tragedy closer to home of how a woman died in Kent when a car crashed through the window of a coffee shop, which made the midnight and 1am bulletins, were all comfortably ‘cushioned’ by the upbeat trajectory of the Christmas Day news, with five bulletins finding humour in the revelation that British astronaut Tim Peake had sought to apologize for ringing the wrong telephone number from space.

5 Live

On the second national network to be studied, 5 Live, there was a much reduced emphasis on ‘conventional religious’ stories, from 45% of the bulletins on Radio 2 to just 29% on the rolling news and sports network. Across the three bulletins, there were a total of four individual stories which carried a ‘conventional religious’ content, none of which led any of the bulletins, in contrast to Radio 2 where two thirds of the news bulletins had a conventional religious content, reporting the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Christmas message. On 5 Live, an ‘ordinary secular’ story, the floods in Cumbria, led each of the bulletins. Both stations led on this story in their 9am bulletins, but Radio 2’s 7am and 8am news bulletins led on the “indescribable cruelty” of IS together with, in the case of their 8am bulletin, Cardinal Vincent Nichols’s plea to people to remember Christians facing persecution. In total, 46% of the 5 Live news bulletins covered ‘ordinary secular’ stories, compared to 36% on the same morning on Radio 2, though there was a slightly higher proportion of ‘secular sacred’ stories, 25% compared to 19% on Radio 2. The Queen’s message of light overcoming darkness

featured in only one of the three bulletins on 5 Live, though in the report that followed emphasis was laid on the strong Christian dimension to this story. This compares to the three references (appearing on each of the bulletins) to the reports from Nigeria that dozens of people had been killed in a huge explosion at an industrial gas plant. As a predominantly news-oriented network there was a greater variety of ‘ordinary secular’ stories which would not have been out of place on a conventional bulletin during the rest of the year, as when, in its 9am bulletin, 5 Live was the only station to feature a report by Afghan officials that the military had recaptured key government buildings in the town of Sangin. Even a story about major improvement works being carried out on several main rail lines over Christmas, which appeared on two of the bulletins, had a decidedly mundane element to it, even if there was the upbeat caveat that Network Rail had insisted there would be no repetition of the previous year’s problems. By contrast, Radio 2 did not cover this story at all, although its midnight bulletin did report that one in ten train journeys on Christmas Eve had been delayed due to flooding, signalling problems or staff shortages. The one noticeable ‘nod’ to Christmas on 5 Live was when at the end of the 8:30 news bulletin (which I did not include in the data as it was otherwise simply a one-minute summary of the 8am news) there was a report that a Christmas card with just one word, ‘England’, written on the envelope had reached the correct address in Gloucestershire from where it had been posted in Germany.

Radio Leeds

Turning to the first of the two local networks examined for this project, Radio Leeds, a markedly different emphasis can be found in the news, even if, as we shall see, it is not replicated in the speech content of at least one of the two programmes broadcast that morning. Whereas 5 Live’s ‘conventional religious’ output was only 29% there was nearly double the content of ‘conventional religion’ on Radio Leeds, at 55%. The Archbishop of Canterbury’s sermon led on three of the five bulletins and was the second story in the remaining two, the other two (at 10am and 11am) concerning the deployment of troops to help with the flood defences in Cumbria. Justin Welby’s message appeared on all five bulletins, with the Archbishop of Westminster’s address and the Queen’s message of light overcoming difficult times respectively appearing on four of the five bulletins. There was also a local conventional religious flavour to the news with the report that the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, would be leading Christmas morning service where he would be meeting prisoners and staff as part of his six month pilgrimage around the country. The 7am bulletin quoted Sentamu as saying that the people’s burdens are not being put on his own shoulders but are being directed to the one who is capable of doing that, namely, Jesus Christ. By contrast, only 23% of the content pertained to the ‘secular sacred’ (the same percentage as stories of an ‘ordinary secular’ persuasion), though again the stories that fit in this category tended to have a local dimension, as with the news in three of the bulletins that amateur athletes from across Yorkshire were gathering in a fun, relaxing atmosphere to take part in non-competitive park runs, as well as the report in the 8am and 11am bulletins that a Yorkshire TV chef was going to be cooking for 50 people who used to live in the care system.

Radio Solent

In the case of the other local radio station in the study, Radio Solent, the balance between ‘conventional religion’ and the ‘secular sacred’ was, in marked contrast to Radio Leeds, virtually tied at 37% and 35% respectively, with the ‘ordinary secular’ only a small way behind at 28%. This can be contrasted with the 46% quantity of ‘ordinary secular’ content on 5 Live and the relative paucity of ‘conventional religion’ or ‘secular sacred’ news coverage

on that network. In terms of top stories, however, ‘conventional religion’ only led two of the five Radio Solent bulletins (at 7am and 8am), in the form of Justin Welby’s sermon that Christianity is facing elimination in the very region where the faith was born and the Archbishop of Westminster’s message, delivered at midnight mass, of the need to learn from the Nativity to be kind to one another and so with integrity condemn those who perpetrate violence in the name of God. The remaining three bulletins (9-11am) led, perhaps surprisingly for a station serving the community around Hampshire, Dorset and the Isle of Wight, with the deployment of troops to help build flood defences in Cumbria where, it was reported at the top of the 11am bulletin, “People involved say they are at the end of their tether”. Further down in the bulletins, however, local ‘ordinary secular’ stories tended to predominate, with the news, for example, that a missing 70-year-old Southampton pensioner, suffering from dementia, had now been located by Hampshire police (this appeared on three of the bulletins), together with the story, which also featured on three of the bulletins, that Portsmouth police were searching for three teenagers following thousands of pounds worth of damage to vehicles in the Tipner area of the city. There was a local flavour to several of the ‘secular sacred’ stories, also, with three of the bulletins (7-9am) reporting that a gents’ barber shop in Portsmouth would be opening on Christmas morning offering free haircuts from 9am until noon to raise awareness of mental health problems, with customers invited to give a donation to the Samaritans or Papyrus charities. The 7am bulletin allied this story to the news that many people are alone and in distress and for whom Christmas is a difficult time of the year. The charitable angle was also featured in the 9am and 10am bulletins where it was reported that on the beach next to Boscombe pier more than 800 people in fancy dress would be charging into the sea in order to raise money for a special palliative care unit at Christchurch Hospital. One story which appeared on some of the other stations in the ‘ordinary secular’ category was the news that Janet Jackson would be putting her world tour on hold in order to undergo surgery, but here a ‘conventional religion’ dimension was added to the story with the announcement in Radio Solent’s 11am bulletin that the singer was asking fans to pray for her. In terms of classification, I recorded this item, which appeared only once, as being a combination of both ‘conventional religion’ and ‘ordinary secular’. This was a story that would have made the news at any time of the year, but had it not been Christmas morning it is questionable as to whether Radio Solent would have opted to focus on the prayer angle. Certainly, the other stations which featured the story, Radio 2 and Radio Leeds, did not opt to give the story a conventional religious slant.

Radio Wales

In the first of the three regional stations, Radio Wales, the statistics paint a very different picture to Radio Solent where ‘secular sacred’ and ‘conventional religious’ stories were equally matched. Here, there was exactly the same proportion of ‘conventional religious’ and ‘ordinary secular’ coverage, at 43% each, with a mere 14% devoted to the ‘secular sacred’. This was reflected in the top stories where three of the six bulletins began with ‘conventional religious’ items (with the 6am and 8am news bulletins both beginning with the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Christmas Day sermon and the 7am news giving a more regional angle, including the message of the Archbishop of Wales, Barry Morgan, that more people in Wales should show compassion towards refugees) and the remaining three bulletins focusing, by way of the lead story, on the flood defences in Cumbria. The regional angle to the ‘conventional religious’ stories continued with the Union of Welsh Independent Churches, in five of the six bulletins (one more than the number of appearances by the Welsh Anglican leader), calling on people to think about the plight of Syrian refugees and to remember that the Gospels describe Jesus and his family as refugees themselves. A regional slant was also given to many of the ‘ordinary secular’ stories that were covered on other stations, with the

flooding in the North West of England, which featured on six of the bulletins, making it the most covered story in this category, given a Welsh dimension with the news in four of the bulletins that the Met Office had issued a yellow warning of heavy rain on Christmas Day afternoon for Conwy, Denbighshire and Gwynedd. The second most popular 'ordinary secular' story pertained to a fatal fire in Rhyl. In the 'secular sacred' category, charities again predominated, with the news that more than one thousand people were expected to take part in the annual Christmas Day swim in the cold sea water in Porthcawl in aid of the town's RNLI lifeboat station and the three appearances across the bulletins of the news that a chef from Cardiff would be giving up his time to deliver a Christmas dinner to on-call ambulance crews. The 9am bulletin also featured the news that a Swansea coffee shop would be opening its doors to feed the city's homeless and the 10am bulletin ended with the story that a grandfather from Conwy was travelling to Nepal to help with the work of rebuilding the country following the earthquake that devastated the area the previous April.

Radio Ulster

Turning to Radio Ulster, only two bulletins appear in the data as the news appeared more sporadically than on the other networks, and, again, there was a clear focus on 'conventional religious' stories, with 54% of the total content of Ulster's news covering the addresses by the Archbishops of Canterbury and Westminster and the Queen. In line with the 2011 census data which shows that there is a close ratio between Protestant and Roman Catholic communities in Northern Ireland (with a 48% Protestant and 45% Catholic population) (see BBC News 2012: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20673534), it is noticeable that the Christmas messages of Justin Welby and Vincent Nichols received equal coverage. The Queen's message of light overcoming darkness was also featured, as was the additional message from Her Majesty regarding offering renewed thanks for the service and sacrifice of all those who took part in the Second World War. 'Ordinary secular' stories included reports from Nigeria that dozens of people were killed in a gas plant after a lorry carrying butane blew up as people waited to have their gas bottles refilled as well as the tornadoes in the southern United States, with a state of emergency having been declared in Mississippi. Curiously, it was difficult to extract much in the way of 'secular sacred' content, with the only material in evidence comprising the positive spin put on the floods in Cumbria, in line with some of the other networks. In contrast to 5 Live where there was a significantly smaller quantity of 'conventional religious' news content than the other two categories, on Radio Ulster there was more 'conventional religion' in the news than the 'secular sacred' and 'ordinary secular' combined.

Radio Scotland

In the case of Radio Scotland, there was again a mere 15% share of 'secular sacred' news coverage, but, as with 5 Live, there was a greater percentage of 'ordinary secular' to 'conventional religion' news stories. Indeed, the lead story at 7am was on the tornadoes ripping through seven states in the southern United States killing at least 11 people, damaging homes and leaving thousands of people without power. No other station led with this story on any of their bulletins and, curiously, the item did not appear at all on Radio Scotland's other morning bulletins which led at 8am with the Archbishop of Canterbury's warning that violence unleashed by Islamic State means that Christianity is facing elimination in the region where it was born, igniting a trail of fear, and at 9am with the Queen's Christian-themed message of light overcoming darkness. One story that was difficult to categorize was the report that followed, pertaining to the hundreds of members of the public gathering at Sandringham to catch a glimpse of Prince George and Princess Charlotte, which was a

separate-but-related story to the Queen's message. In the end I classified it as an addendum to the lead story, but had I labelled it as a Christmas-specific 'secular sacred' story, then there would have been (numerically) fewer 'conventional religion' than 'secular sacred' stories on Radio Scotland, comparable to Radio Solent (though on 5 Live and Radio Leeds they were tied at four stories apiece). Most stories (comprising 45% of all news coverage) fell into the 'ordinary secular' category – here, there is a difference with Solent where the 'ordinary secular' was the least populous category – which included the news that five health boards in Scotland were considering lifting their ban on using electronic cigarettes in hospital grounds and the tragic news that a 37-year-old woman who had been seriously injured in a crash in the outskirts of Aberdeen had died, a story which followed the inverse trajectory of the feelgood story at the end of the 9am bulletin that the Governor of California had pardoned Robert Downey Jr. for drugs and weapons offences, as well as the Queen's Christmas message, in the 'conventional religion' category, about light overcoming darkness.

Asian Network

Finally, at 55%, the Asian Network produced the highest percentage of 'ordinary secular' stories, and was the only station to have more than 50% of its news content in this category. Two thirds of the bulletins led with the floods in Cumbria, though there was a 'conventional religious' dimension to the story when it was reported in the 7am and 9am bulletins that members of the Muslim Youth Organization were distributing chocolate and Season's Greetings cards to residents affected. The Archbishop of Canterbury and Archbishop of Westminster received four and three mentions, respectively, and although the Queen's message of hope overcoming darkness appeared in three of the bulletins it was outnumbered by the four references to Her Majesty singling out the victims of the Paris and Tunisia terror attacks during her Christmas Day message. 'Secular sacred' stories constituted only 9% of the content of news bulletins on the Asian Network, including the story that a Sikh charity, which accepts only food, and not monetary, donations, was helping to feed homeless people across the UK on Christmas Day, having already provided nearly 18,000 meals over 20 weeks. For a station with a diverse religious population, many of whom would not be celebrating Christmas, it is perhaps not surprising that non-religious (whether of a 'conventional' or 'secular sacred' kind) stories should predominate, with significant time allotted to sports news, and the Asian Network was also the only station to feature in its bulletins the first visit to Pakistan by any Indian Prime Minister since 2004, together with the news that the two countries had agreed to resume peace talks with the dispute over Kashmir high on the agenda.

Speech content

It is far more difficult to categorize radio's speech content, much of which comprises random banter and is 'off the cuff' and, crucially, especially if it is live, will not always follow a set or inflexible formula but will be dependent to an extent on the audience's interaction with the programme. Yet, this is also why, in contrast to Gill's 2011 survey which dealt with only the 'objective' content of the press rather than with the reception to any of the column space accorded to religion via social media – including blogs on the newspapers' own websites – my own data is keen to move away from purely focusing on tangible and measurable content, such as the quantity of religious news items, and to pay attention to the specific context within which such material appears. Surprisingly, previous UK-based religion and media research has only tended to deal with the sort of quantitative data that we have looked at so far and has overlooked the more impromptu and organic, albeit often trivial, content which is the bread-and-butter of most stations and programmes, even those on, say, 5 Live which are

driven by a specific news and sports agenda but which invite listeners to text, phone or email the programme and where such interactions are then used to buttress, frame, contextualize or, even, critique the story at hand. Many of the programmes, as we shall see, have taken on a community and even pastoral dimension, in which lonely or isolated listeners who are bereft of family or friends over the Christmas period are accorded particular status, as when Mal Pope on Radio Wales reminded his audience that “it could make someone’s Christmas very special if you just knock on the door and say ‘You alright? Merry Christmas’” and then concluding that “If you are on your own I hope you felt part of the gang”. The drive to be inclusive permeated many programmes with a ‘conventional religious’ dimension, where, even on a Christian-centric, worship-based show such as ‘The Sunday Hour’ Diane Louise Jordan stressed the importance at Christmas of ‘family’ and how on ‘Good Morning Christmas’ one of Clare Balding’s ‘faith’ guests, the (Anglican) Rector of St. James’s Church, Piccadilly, Revd. Lucy Winkett was keen to emphasize how “Christmas is a hybrid festival, that has taken on pagan rituals” and that “we live in a very broad society, there are lots of different people who for their entire lives have no intention of becoming Christian”, to the point that her mission is not about “condemning people” or “becoming a church that puts up lots of barriers and lots of walls”. Crucially, for Winkett, “that’s not what we’re for”. There were also several instances, most notably on Radio Solent, where the presenters stressed how much of a privilege it was to be working on Christmas morning. Louisa Hannan, for example, contrasted her job with that of the emergency services, saying that her “job is easy, an absolute privilege to do it, and I would do it even if I wasn’t getting paid for it”. In view of Day’s emphasis on ‘believing in belonging’, this section will highlight some of the ways in which Christmas radio is not simply about delineating or disseminating religion, but is in itself a producer and a generator of religious engagement, encounter and experience.

Radio 2

Supplying strict percentages for the content of ‘conventional religious’, ‘secular sacred’ or ‘ordinary secular’ speech content in live radio is inevitably fraught with difficulties, but particular trends are nevertheless much in evidence. Beginning with Alex Lester’s ‘After Midnight’ on Radio 2, aside from casual or incidental references to the Nativity – as when Lester began his programme by informing his listeners that “we’ve eaten all the chocolate and opened the stable doors on the Advent Calendar” and that “It was the baby Jesus there all along so it must be Christmas” – it was the ‘secular sacred’ figure of Santa Claus that featured most prominently throughout the course of the show, bar a fleeting mention to how there was an absence of pubs in the Bourneville area of Birmingham, near where the show was broadcast, because the founding fathers of Cadbury were Quakers. Indeed, during the three hours that he was on air Lester entered the festive spirit by promising to provide updates on Santa’s whereabouts across the globe, informing his audience in the first hour, for instance, that Santa had just delivered a total of 4.1 million presents and was last seen heading from Iceland to Brazil. That said, however, the regular ‘Album of the Week’ feature had a traditional Christmas (and Christian) theme, by way of ‘The Last Noel’, leading Lester to share the origins of this song with his audience, the best known version of which, he reported, was published in ‘Carols Ancient and Modern’ back in 1823. There were also two (pre-recorded) conventional religious ‘Pause for Thought’ slots on the programme, the first by a London vicar, Canon Garth Hewitt, who stressed how Jesus is key to Muslims as well as to Christians, thus giving an ecumenical and inclusive dimension to the homily, before linking Jesus’ humble birth with those people today “who get forgotten or are oppressed, refugees, asylum seekers or the marginalized”. The second ‘Pause for Thought’ was delivered by poet and writer Paul Canon Harris who recounted his experience of putting on Nativity performances, with the message that “I was content to see adults recognize that the Christmas

message is for us all, not simply the children”. Curiously, though, these explicit manifestations of ‘official’ religion did not seem fully assimilated into Lester’s programme. Lester may have been comfortable joking about Santa’s delivery of presents but, unlike the musical content or listeners’ interactions with the show, which were all integrated and interconnected, the two ‘Pause for Thought’ features felt discrete from the rest of the proceedings, akin, functionally, to an intermission. Lester merely said, after Harris had finished speaking, “We will have a final offering from Lester’s Library fairly shortly on the programme” and the show proceeded without further comment with further anecdotes about Swedish culinary delights at Christmas, the quantity of canals in Birmingham vis-à-vis Venice, and how Lester mistook his wife for Santa Claus while he tried to get a few hours of sleep before the show, together with invitations to listeners to send in the names of songs with festive food in the lyrics or title for him to play in his ‘3-2-1’ feature after 2am. Listeners, it seems, were encouraged to contact the show about any of its features or discussions, but for the unspoken rule that the path of ‘conventional religion’ was not to be traversed.

Roger Royle’s show that followed had a very different orientation, insofar as Royle is an Anglican cleric, and one of the contributors, indeed, of *Religion in the News*, within which Gill’s article ‘Religion, News and Social Context: Evidence from Newspapers’, was published in 2012. There, Royle, a veteran of BBC religious broadcasting including as presenter of Radio 2’s ‘Sunday Half Hour’ from 1991 until 2007, wrote that “It was within the world of the popular media that I felt at home. Not for me the protected world of the religious press or even a religious radio station, which, to me, can be seen as ghetto media”, and he continued that he chose “to earn my living by being a religious broadcaster in a secular world” (Royle 2012: 154). Royle’s thesis is that “organised religion needs to work hard to make sure that it puts forward its case in a way that is understandable to the modern media” and that “Religion cannot expect to live in a private bubble protected from the rest of the world” (ibid.: 160). To an extent, Royle’s 3-6am Christmas Day programme on Radio 2 is an exemplification of this dictum, in the respect that religion appeared in a very palatable, non-confrontational and inclusive form and, especially in view of what Royle says about religion needing to be “understandable to the modern media”, the programme dovetailed perfectly with the rest of the station’s output that Christmas Day – indeed, part of the show was taken up with fellow Radio 2 presenters in pre-recorded segments talking about and then playing their favourite Christmas songs. But, the ‘conventional religious’ content, while discernibly present, did seem watered down and lacking in depth. After playing ‘The Carol of the Bells’, for example, Royle dedicated the song to campanologists and to those people who would be spending Christmas in their church towers, while after playing fellow Cardiff-born musician Shakin’ Stevens’s ‘Merry Christmas Everyone’ Royle referenced how the singer’s mother was a member of the Salvation Army while his uncles were Primitive Methodist preachers. The religious content was situated within the context of charitable and social work, such as Royle’s disclosure that he is Honorary Chaplain of the Royal Variety charities, and that he would be visiting the residents in their homes later on Christmas morning, as well as that he has enjoyed participating in carol services over the years with various hospice charities. He then signed off at 6am with the expression of hope that “whatever you’re doing this Christmas Day it’s a happy one, it’s a contented one, you’re feeling the warmth of love that is at the centre of the Christmas message”. In terms of what the content of that ‘Christmas message’ is, though, the programme fell short. The closest Royle came to delineating this was when, shortly before the end of the programme, he offered one, solitary explicit avowal in support of a conventional, confessional approach to religion in stating that “One thing I do believe that should be at the centre of any Christmas celebration is some

thoughts about Bethlehem”. What stood out from the programme was a drive to juxtapose and accommodate ‘conventional religion’ with the ‘secular sacred’, as when Royle invited his listeners at one point to take a look out of the window to see if Santa had gone past yet. The three interviews that Royle carried out, on the other hand, belonged to the category of the ‘ordinary secular’. Here, Royle spoke to dance choreographer and Radio 2 ‘Artist in Residence’, Tommy Small, about how he got involved in ballet and contemporary dance, to the artistic director of the Globe Theatre on the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare about how the world is a more cohesive place due to knowledge about the playwright (with particular reference to the importance of getting young people involved), and to the food historian Annie Grey who advocated returning to the “heyday” of Christmas in the medieval period where there was twelve days of “gargantuan feasting”, culminating in a “blow-out meal” at the feast of Epiphany.

In a similar vein, in ‘The Sunday Hour’ Diane Louise Jordan did not belabour the festival’s ‘conventional religious’ *raison d’être*. Despite beginning with the explanation that “Long, long ago and far away a child was born, and when he grew up he changed the world, and that child is the one we’re celebrating today”, Jordan proceeded to emphasize the more secular variations and adaptations of the Nativity story, such as *The Snowman* and *The Nutcracker*. Indeed, whereas “in Dickens’s version of Christmas that you get through *A Christmas Carol* there is obviously an element of religion and Christianity”, Jordan stressed that “the real message is about good will and kindness and interacting with others”. Accordingly, when, at the end of the story, Scrooge appreciates “the power of good will” then, it is claimed, “He has been redeemed in a way”. The programme included an interview with Professor of Literary History and Hermeneutics at Chichester, Bill Gray – though simply referred to here as a “fairy tales expert” – according to whom fairy stories appeal to us “because they are gorgeous, magical and mysterious” and “they reach the places other stories cannot touch”. Although, here, Gray made a tentative link with the Christian narrative when he put forward the case that such stories are about “this magical moment in which suddenly out of the dullness, the dreariness, the despair, hopelessness of our lives... there’s just this glimmer of hope”, the ‘conventional religious’ angle was played down by stressing that this narrative trajectory “appears in many different cultures, different contexts” and by paraphrasing Tolkien that this is “the basic story that all human beings need”. A similar approach was taken when Jordan later interviewed Frank Cottrell Boyce about why the Nativity story has endured for so long and he explained that it is “because it’s a reflection of us, because it’s a family, these are very ordinary people, it’s a teenage mother and a father and they’re refugees and they’ve got no money and anyone can identify with the struggles that they’ve got”, and that “nothing in the whole cosmos could be more important than the birth of a child... Everybody can identify with a baby being born”. For Boyce, it is an uplifting narrative “irrespective of whether you are Christian or not”. The relative elasticity of the ‘conventional religious’ nature of Christmas was then further exhibited when Jordan read out listeners’ letters on the subject of what Christmas means to them, and they took the form of people wanting to wish Happy Christmas to those who have supported them and have not let them down over the years, with the presenter adding “we all need friends like that, don’t we?”

In a similar vein, ‘Good Morning Christmas’ with Clare Balding which followed at 8am had a strong ‘conventional religious’ dimension, and, unlike Royle’s and Jordan’s programmes, was live and interactive. The virtual community angle was flagged up at the start with Balding emphasizing that the show was specifically tailored towards those listeners “on your own” rather than those who have the radio on in the background while “you’re surrounded by kids and stockings are being opened”, and she was emphatic that the objective was to make everyone listening “feel connected to everybody here”. Her first interview was with the Head

Chef of a West Country homeless hostel called Caring For Bristol, which would be providing 200 meals in the shelter and a further 55 Christmas lunches for another homeless charity in the city for young people, and Balding stressed the importance of those people who are “really putting themselves out to make sure that somebody else can have a Christmas that’s slightly better than it might have been”. Revd. Lucy Winkett was then interviewed in which she drew parallels between the plight of Mary and Joseph in the Nativity story and the contemporary Syrian refugee crisis, such that “The Christmas story is one that is absolutely of today as much as it is of two thousand years ago”. Emphasis was laid on how her church next to Piccadilly Circus is a place where one can be “confidently Christian, but absolutely welcoming” – to be a refuge, indeed, “for anyone who wants to come in and talk”. Theologically, Winkett was keen to lay emphasis on how Christmas is about “celebrating the Incarnation” and of “God becoming human”, which, in keeping with the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, means that we celebrate that “people are holy” (cf. Bonhoeffer 1963: 128-9), to which Balding added that “With Christmas you’ve got that big shared conversation which immediately cuts down a barrier between strangers”. While ‘Good Morning Christmas’ was unapologetically ‘religious’ in its frame of reference, that religion was couched in the most inclusive of terms, with reference for example to how the Christian message may be about the way in which, as Winkett attested in her ‘moment of reflection’, we “reconnect with our better selves” or “even find God that sometimes we’re not sure is there or even feel a little foolish for believing in”. ‘Conventional religion’ may thus be the cornerstone of this programme, but, as Balding’s interview with playwright Julian Fellowes also demonstrated, agnosticism and the lack of certain belief are legitimate and valuable positions to hold.

A very different form of broadcasting followed when ‘Christmas Junior Choice’ with Ed Stewart took to the airwaves for two hours. This programme is a prime example of the manner in which the BBC’s ‘secular’ output may be shaping the format and content of contemporary religion, in which requests for novelty records which listeners remember making back in the 1960s and 1970s when they were young and which they now, as parents and grandparents of their own, have the opportunity to request again, impacts on our understanding of where matters of faith, identity, beliefs and values are situated. Religion may be intrinsic to the Christmas celebration, but it is the festival’s secular components which, paradoxically, amount to its most fecund manifestation (see Deacy 2016 (b): <https://blog.oup.com/2016/12/christmas-radio-bbc/>). The ‘virtual community’ angle which was so integral to ‘Good Morning Christmas’ was also a mainstay of ‘Junior Choice’, with the added element of nostalgia insofar as the programme was not only giving a voice to listeners who were physically estranged from their families and loved ones in the present but it afforded them the opportunity to reconnect in their memories and imaginations with their own childhood selves. Many of the listeners who contacted the programme referred to ‘Junior Choice’ as having taken on the status of “a Christmas tradition for our family” or that “Your show is an important part of our Christmas”, in which the records played “transport me back to a wonderful childhood”. Compared to the programmes that preceded it, with their mixture of carols, faith guests and moments of Christian reflection, ‘Junior Choice’ was unapologetically secular in character, and a prime manifestation of the ‘secular sacred’. But, while it is far removed from the ‘conventional religious’ model, it is not antithetical to or a deviation from the religious. It is, rather, a new way of conceptualizing religion “with its devotees who construe the two hours of nostalgia and reconnecting with the past on Christmas morning as a form of transcendent, even sacred, time” (Deacy 2016 (b): *ibid.*). No matter how sacred or sacrosanct the Nativity is to many people’s conceptualization of Christmas, and no matter how kitsch or trivial a programme is which plays ‘Champion the Wonder Horse’ and ‘The Monster Mash’ rather than ‘Silent Night’ and ‘In the Bleak

Midwinter', this does not militate against the fact that, in the words of one listener, "Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without your 'Junior Choice', Ed".

5 Live

Over on '5 Live Breakfast with Dotun Adebayo and Nomia Iqbal', the community element of Christmas heavily dominated what would otherwise be construed as 'ordinary secular' content, as the flooding crisis in Cumbria, in which dozens of people were forced out of their homes, turned into a celebration of acts of kindness on the part of members of the public. A chef from the Lake District who organized for those affected to receive a Christmas dinner was interviewed live by reporter Nick Gardiner, in which he spoke about how "various people have given up the day to provide entertainment" and that food hampers were available on request for elderly people: "The level of support is amazing and... I couldn't do this project without them". One of the presenters in the studio, Dotun Adebayo, later impressed on listeners the need to "Think of other people this Christmas", with the recognition that "It's not a merry Christmas for everybody across the UK". 'Conventional religion' played a part in the programme in the form of an interview with a royal historian who looked at the upcoming Queen's Christmas message and how, through its citation from the passage in the Prologue to John's Gospel about the light shining in the darkness and the darkness not overcoming it (John 1:5), the Queen would be "making her most Christian speech yet". Even here, though, the inclusive nature of programmes with an explicit 'conventional religious' orientation such as Radio 2's 'The Sunday Hour' and 'Good Morning Christmas' was reflected in how the conversation shifted from a brief foray into Johannine theology to how "we can all get through the darkness together" by means of "the importance of mutual support and hope and family". In keeping with 5 Live's news content discussed earlier, 'ordinary secular' stories predominated in the reports and interviews on the breakfast programme, but the stories were, nevertheless, given an overtly 'secular sacred' spin, as when in an interview with a BBC reporter on how Afghan government officials had recaptured part of Sangin in Helmand Province from the Taliban, Adebayo asked, "Do they know it's Christmas there?", and the discussion then turned to how little Christmas trees had been placed in different corners around the war torn city even though, amongst the fighting and the security challenges, the season's spirit had not yet made its way to that region.

The 'secular sacred' model featured prominently in the spin off programme '5 Live Breakfast: Your Call', a phone-in which ran from 9-10am, again with Nomia Iqbal and Dotun Adebayo, where listeners were asked to contact the show with their answers to the question "Why is this Christmas so special to you?" Invariably, the answers came down to the importance of family over the seasonal period. One listener called in to say that after waiting five years she has now received a kidney transplant and can spend time with her family instead of being on dialysis. She thanked the family of the donor and talked about how different family is for her now that she has received her Christmas wish. The next caller discussed her and her partner's problems with trying to conceive and how, after one unsuccessful IVF attempt, she gave birth to "my little miracle" and has recently learned that she has fallen pregnant naturally: "Every dream come true, it's amazing". This is equivalent to Knott's methodology where her category of 'common religion' encompasses magic, superstition, fate, luck and the supernatural, though outside the boundaries of the Church and other 'conventionally religious' agencies, and fits well with my definition of the 'secular sacred' where the transcendent is integral to the festival but outside of traditional institutional parameters. The bulk of the callers that followed all had similar life-changing and inspirational stories to tell, from a young lady in Shropshire who had spent the previous Christmas in an acute cardiac ward due to her anorexia but who has now developed the

confidence to believe in herself – and so sent the message to anyone else in her situation that “You can change your life around” – to the more banal case of a listener who was using his £1.8m win on the National Lottery to pay the bill of random people in restaurants.

Radio Leeds

All of the programmes to date have demarcated Christmas as a special, even an extraordinary, festival with ecumenical, nourishing and inclusive potential – with radio as the site for bringing together geographically displaced families and communities, along the lines of Connelly’s observation that in the early twentieth century “The wireless also quickly established its role as a companion to those who were alone, a feeling exacerbated by the communal festivities of Christmas” (Connelly 2012: 134; qtd in Deacy 2016 (a): 100). On Radio Leeds, however, there was much more of an irreverent and satirical temperament in evidence on the breakfast show with Martin Kelner who spent much of the programme making throwaway remarks about how he could not care less about Christmas, which he called “not the biggest day of the year”. Kelner invited listeners to email in spoof festive film titles, which included ‘Schlinder’s Christmas List’, ‘In the Name of the Father Christmas’ and ‘Sprout of Africa’, and there was a simulated hoax interview in which his ‘guest’ tastelessly discussed how Nat King Cole treated orphans appallingly and enjoyed witnessing the suffering of other people. Kelner referred to the amount of money that artists and studios make when their Christmas songs are played on the radio, estimating that Slade must earn £0.5 million per year from ‘Merry Xmas Everybody’ alone, and he reiterated how he does not receive any extra pay for working over Christmas whereas his producer has a day in lieu and his successor at 10am, Richard Stead, is on triple time. In terms of categorizing the speech content of this programme, the presenter clearly sounded like he would have been in his comfort zone presenting an ‘ordinary secular’ show, but lip service was paid to the ‘secular sacred’ dynamics of the festival by parodying Christmas music and film titles, while the ‘conventional religious’ nature of Christmas was alluded to by Kelner referring to his own Jewish heritage (and making reference to the “dream team” of a Jewish presenter, a Polish producer and a Muslim newsreader working on the programme) and offering the quip in response to a listener’s question “Are we going to hear ‘A Christmas Jew’ this morning?” that “You’ve heard me”.

Richard Stead’s programme on Radio Leeds, while not without its own irreverence and lack of decorum, as when he invited listeners to “Talk to us this morning... particularly if you’ve got any noisy toys to play down the telephone, or if you’ve already had your first glass of eggnog”, was a far less subversive transmission. Emphasis was upon some of the community projects taking place across West Yorkshire on Christmas Day, including the work of Riverside Riding for the Disabled in Bingley and the volunteers that comprise the Leeds Christmas Dinner Team who are helping young people who have just come out of the care system to have somewhere to go and to be able to celebrate with dinner, films, games and presents. In terms of ‘conventional religious’ content, the upcoming Radio Leeds carol service from Bradford Cathedral was advertised, followed by a ‘confessional’ feature in which Stead invited listeners to confess if they had not (yet) bought a present for their mothers-in-law. There was also a discussion of some of the traditions associated with Christmas puddings which, listeners were informed, were banned by the Puritans in 1664 before being re-established by George I in the early 1700s. It would be a stretch, however, to construe either of the programmes on Radio Leeds as having a discernibly religious content, in view of both the awkwardness surrounding ‘conventional religion’ and the need to parody much of it.

Radio Solent

In marked contrast, Radio Solent, while lacking the degree of ‘conventional religion’ that was in evidence on Radio 2, went to some lengths to accentuate the ‘secular sacred’ importance of the festival, especially as it pertained to the role of family and community. Whereas Kelner was keen to paint a picture of himself as a Scrooge-figure who would rather not be celebrating the festival at all, Louisa Hannan in her Radio Solent breakfast show conveyed to her listeners that Christmas morning “is the best time to be on the radio”. Her mission was clearly one of ensuring that “if you’re on your own for Christmas we’re here to keep you company throughout the day, and all over the festive period” and there were frequent references to how “money can’t buy that sort of thing”. The pastoral aspect of radio was reinforced by how for Hannan “I think most of us look back and there is somebody that we’re thinking of, at least one person today”, including those who have lost someone close to them (she referenced her own father to this end), and that “It’s not a nice time is it to be on your own, but we’re here to keep you company”. ‘Conventional religion’ played a relatively small role in the programme, in the form of a pre-recorded homily from the Bishop of Winchester, The Right Revd. Tim Dakin, who related the arrival of a new baby in a family to how “Jesus is the gift God wants us to have... in effect inviting us to hold him in our hands and to discover the hope that living with him brings”, though “Like many refugees today the holy family were left far from their own community, dependent on others and unable to return to their own home”. The Syrian refugee analogy was used across several of the programmes, and Radio Solent brought a local dimension to the story when Dakin said he had been overwhelmed by the generosity of people across Hampshire and East Dorset who had already given nearly £9000 to charities helping Syrian refugees and the victims of flooding in Myanmar. The following show, presented by Tristan Pascoe, lacked a ‘conventional religious’ dimension beyond using some of the superficial language associated with such discourse, as when the presenter told his listeners that he was “feeling very humble and blessed to be able to share Christmas Day with you”, or when he spoke about how his father was reading a lesson at a beautiful Norman church in the New Forest around the time that the programme was on air. But, the community angle was reinforced when Pascoe welcomed at the start of his programme those listeners who “may well be finding themselves without someone special for the first time this year”, adding that “You’re all part of the family, you’re very welcome along here and we’re glad to have you”. There was much reciprocity, with Pascoe thanking the listeners for letting him be a part of their special day – “you know I feel I’m among friends this morning, which is lovely” – which he described as “a very intimate feeling, I feel it’s just us out there”.

Radio Wales

Over on Radio Wales, the sacred essence of Christmas was accentuated from the outset with Mal Pope, on his early breakfast show, telling his audience that “We want to share the love this morning”. While other presenters, like Hannan on Radio Solent, remembered those loved ones who have passed away, Pope was keen to ensure that we did not thereby neglect those we care about in the present moment, also: “It is one of those times of year we think back and we enjoy the time that we have with the people who are still here”. ‘Conventional religion’ played a discernible, if unobtrusive, role in the programme, in which Pope used several of the links to refer to his own church-going background, where he started performing in a band in his youth together with his brother, including how he had spent Christmas Eve at a carol service in All Saints Church in the Mumbles district of Swansea, which in turn reminded him of how his grandmother used to take him and his brother to the nurse’s carol service at Mount Pleasant Hospital many years earlier. Various Christmas stories from the listeners were

shared, with a particular emphasis on the importance of looking out for others on Christmas morning, and the ‘conventional religious’ subtext permeated several of the exchanges with listeners, as when one message conveyed that “Even though Dad’s not with you he’s the brightest star in the sky watching over you”.

The ‘conventional religion’ element came into much sharper relief at 8am when Radio Wales broadcast a carol service from King’s Church, Newport, led by Dave and Faye Edwards, which began with the prayer “that we would all recapture the true meaning of Christmas in the gift of Jesus”, as well as to “thank you, heavenly Father, for the priceless gift you gave us on the first Christmas Day”. There was theological substance to the worship, which included a sermon that referred to how “On the very first Christmas we see the uncontainable excitement of heaven in God giving his gift, Jesus, to our world” and which, in contradistinction to the gifts that we give our family and friends – which are purchased “in brightly lit shopping malls, bustling with people, listening to festive music, all synched into brightly flashing lights” – will “never date or become tarnished” and “will always be relevant to every age and stage of life”. The “gift that God the Father has given” was identified as “the Prince of Peace over every fear”, the “wonderful Counsellor in our confusion and insecurity” and the “Mighty God over every lonely moment”. It is all the more incongruous, therefore, that Owen Money’s programme at 10am followed, musically, a predominantly ‘ordinary secular’ format, where there was not only an absence of ‘conventional religion’, following on from the preceding worship celebration, but the ‘secular sacred’ was also largely dismissed, both musically and in terms of the presenter’s throwaway comment, “Has Santa been in this studio? I can smell manure in here. I can, honest”. While the programme lacked the irreverence – indeed, the profanity – of Kelner’s Radio Leeds breakfast show, Owen Money was keen to play down the ‘specialness’ of the day, with extended references to his daughter’s failure to put money in her electricity meter, and the concomitant invitation to listeners to ring in with their disaster stories, such that when one listener contacted the programme to say “To Owen and the team, you put the ‘Merry’ in Christmas”, this sounded quite ironic in a programme which endeavoured to play down, even to diminish, the sacred nature of the festival, where one of the links consisted of the presenter discussing the importance of humour and whether it is acceptable to laugh at somebody’s funeral.

Radio Ulster

By contrast, Radio Ulster’s Carol Service, presented from the studio by Canon Noel Battye, was very much in the same sort of vein as its counterpart on Radio Wales, with a plea for “peace among the nations, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts as we remember the birth in Bethlehem of the Prince of Peace”. The following programme, presented by Father Brian D’Arcy, continued in the same manner with listeners wished “the holiest and happiest and most peaceful Christmas imaginable”. There was, as with Canon Roger Royle’s early morning Radio 2 programme, a juxtaposition of ‘conventional religious’ and ‘secular sacred’ components, as when D’Arcy spoke about how “You may even be opening your Santa presents” in the same breath as saying to his listeners that “you may be preparing to go to church”. D’Arcy acknowledged that “these things are going on around you and around me”, and the entire programme was geared towards accommodating and including audiences who might affiliate to either category. Responding to a poem sent by a listener, for example, D’Arcy ruminated on how “One of the lovely things about Christmas is that it’s full of stories about religion but it’s also full of customs and memories. I think ‘Jingle Bells’ is one of those songs which brings back memories of childhood and Santa Claus”. D’Arcy went to some lengths to ensure that any ‘conventional religious’ content was offset also by reference to the ‘ordinary secular’ in a manner that corresponds to what Bishop John Robinson wrote in

Honest to God in 1963 about how “Statements about God are acknowledgements of the transcendent, unconditional element in all our relationships, and supremely in our relationships with other persons” (Robinson 1963: 52). For, D’Arcy counselled his Radio Ulster listeners, “Relinquish superhuman efforts to produce Christmas card-perfect holiday celebration. Christmas is about God becoming human, not humans becoming gods”. This was then, appropriately, followed by a plea from D’Arcy to remember not just residents at nursing homes and those who have to work on Christmas Day but to “say hello to all the people who may be in prisons, too”. This admixture of transcendence and imminence, of divine and human – indeed, of the ‘conventional religious’ *with* the ‘secular sacred’ *and again with* the ‘ordinary secular’ – meant that D’Arcy not merely appealed to different, discrete constituencies of listeners at the same time but, crucially, managed to *humanize* the transcendent, to find the ordinary in the extraordinary and to *sacralize* the secular in a flawless, creative and dialogical process that is reminiscent of how for Harvey Cox grace in Christianity is not about the work of a supernatural, inviolable and almighty Deity but “the crucified one, recognized, not by his heroic powers but by the nail- and spear-marks” (Cox 1975: 545). For, as D’Arcy put it, “if you’re on your way to work what a wonderful sacrifice you are making, and I hope you’ll be blessed for it. Something lovely will happen [to] you today”.

Radio Scotland

In the third of the regional networks, Radio Scotland, ‘Christmas Morning with Cathy Macdonald and Ricky Ross’, was a pre-recorded, predominantly current affairs-based breakfast programme where the focus was on the concept of ‘home’ and what it might mean to provide a welcome for those who are living far from their place of origin due, for example, to the Syrian conflict. As with D’Arcy’s programme there was an attempt to marry the ‘ordinary secular’ with the ‘conventional religious’, though without the same confessional angle. Here, a Glasgow parish priest was asked about the specifically Christian values that lie at the heart of Christmas, and he replied that “the values of friendship and the welcome that’s extended to people at this time of year are things to be, I think, just celebrated as part of what those Christian values also would support”, with the need to ensure that there continues to be “a great deal of caring and compassion in local communities where people live”. There followed a report about the Milk Café which opened in Glasgow the previous summer in order to make asylum seekers in the city feel welcome, and this was again tied specifically to the Nativity narrative in terms of how, both for Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem “to be counted and finding that it’s all too difficult for so many of the people who would be offering them hospitality” and for those refugees who visit the Milk Café, “when you actually open the door into a humble little place... you suddenly find it’s amazing”. BBC Scotland’s first ever poet in residence, Rachel McCrum, was then interviewed in which she talked about her family being atheist and secular and how Christmas is a time of significance irrespective of one’s cultural or faith background, such that at a time when we are facing “the amazing commercialization of Christmas” then it is important that we ask what we really want and need at this time of year, and it is the emphasis on warmth, sharing and family that ultimately matters. Whether one is therefore religious or not, there are key values, simultaneously secular and sacred, that make Christmas transcendent. This notion of Christmas being able to transform and transfigure the ‘ordinary secular’ and the mundane is reminiscent of Niebuhr’s ‘Christ the Transformer of Culture’ model (Niebuhr 1952: 217) for how we understand the interplay between culture and faith vis-à-vis its emphasis on renewal and in finding a spiritual or sacred way of interpreting, even of redeeming, the everyday.

This was followed by ‘Get It On... With Bryan Burnett’ which, as with ‘Kim’s Twinkly Christmas’ over on Radio Ulster, was a more frivolous, music-based programme with an overarching emphasis on the ‘secular sacred’. With 90% of the music being Christmas pop songs (with an even higher ratio, of 96%, in the case of Kim Lenaghan’s show), there was a great deal of light-hearted banter between Burnett and his producer and a series of exchanges and conversations with listeners on the topic of food cooking and preparation, followed by a feature on the Christmas kitchen with Scottish cook and author Lady Claire Macdonald who sought to extrapolate the ‘real meaning’ of Christmas by counselling:

So what if your roast potatoes aren’t fluffy in the middle. Christmas Day isn’t a competition. It’s about eating together round a table with family and friends and enjoying it. So if the gravy’s got the odd lump, never mind. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is conviviality, friendship, and just a strong message that everyone must muck in and help.

Radio Ulster

A similar sentiment was conveyed on ‘Kim’s Twinkly Christmas’ where Lenaghan concluded her programme by reminding her listeners that “Whatever it is, especially if you’re sharing it with family and friends and people you love it will be the perfect Christmas and the perfect Christmas dinner”. Neither this programme nor Burnett’s on Radio Scotland engaged with the ‘conventional religious’ dimension to Christmas – particularly in the case of Lenaghan, that dimension was more than adequately embraced by the preceding programmes presented by Canon Battaye and Father D’Arcy – but neither for that matter did Burnett or Lenaghan seek to dismiss or filter out Christmas in the manner of Martin Kelner or Owen Money. There may have been no hint that Christmas was an important celebration due to its ‘conventional religious’ pedigree, but, no matter how flippant or casual it may have been to hear discussions about whether ‘Santa is a Scotsman’ or whether, as Lenaghan bantered at one point, Santa must have guided his sleigh very well the night before as everyone had gotten their presents that morning, Christmas was never presented as anything other than an extraordinary and sacred occasion in which, amidst all of the twinkles and glasses of bubbly that are in abundance, “lots of people [are] thinking about those who can’t be with us today and the folk that you shared Christmases in the past with”.

Asian Network

Finally, on the BBC Asian Network, we find one of the more explicit manifestations of ‘conventional religion’ vis-à-vis Christianity which, on a national digital network that caters for British people of primarily Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan descent, many of whom are of Muslim, Sikh or Hindu faith, whose remit is to “appeal across socio-economic and religious divides” (Iqbal 2012: www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2012/oct/26/bbc-asian-network-10-years-old), was one of the more surprising findings of this project. The network opened at 6am with Bhangra singer Danny Sarb asking his listeners if “amongst all the hustle and bustle of Christmas, the mistletoe and wine, family gatherings... many of us really know the true meaning of Christmas, that God loved us so much that he sent his Son into this world that we may not perish but have everlasting life”. Sarb then proceeded to outline how “when Jesus came into the world God did it without a man, because Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Hallelujah!” Sarb was categorical that “we’ve got to remember that Jesus is the reason for the celebration and he performs miracles every single day”, and there then followed a “real” and “life-changing testimony” from a Christian “whose life has been changed since he put his life into the hands

of God". This was a far cry from those programmes which were presented by ordained Christians who, like Royle and D'Arcy, were minded not to overplay their Christian faith and sought not to exclude listeners of other religious persuasions or none. Whereas, though, D'Arcy skilfully managed to accommodate the 'conventional religious', the 'secular sacred' and the 'ordinary secular' in an even-handed and measured tone, Sarb's programme was quite jarring and inconsistent in the way in which it tried to articulate the significance of Christmas. For, juxtaposed with such explicit Christian testimony as Sarb's concluding entreaty just ahead of 7am that "May the joy of the manger fill your hearts and your homes with everlasting love", Sarb also attested that "for me, Christmas is all about family" – which he illustrated by referring to the excitement of opening "all of my presents with all the family around me" – as well as how in "the lead up to Christmas, Christmas Eve, I waited for Santa to come down the chimney as well". Indeed, Sarb continued, when reflecting on his youth, "I still remember I used to write Santa a letter every single year – and I still do sometimes, even though I'm 22". In the next sentence, Sarb then affirmed that "Christmas is all about the spirit, and the children being excited" and that "Christmas for me specially is all about the children", particularly when "they're opening their presents and they're just talking about Santa". So, what we have is exactly the same range of sentiments, priorities, aspirations and belief that characterized D'Arcy's programme on Radio Ulster but in a less integrated and cohesive fashion. Rather than representative of the Asian Network's output on Christmas morning, however, the programme that followed Sarb's was a pre-recorded breakfast show presented by Tommy Sandhu, entitled 'It's Sandhu Claus', where the focus was much more on the 'secular sacred' aspect of opening the "ultimate present" that he and his co-hosts remember receiving as children – "because nothing is ever as magical as when you're a kid like that and you tear into a present". Aside from the pun in the programme's title, there were no specific references to Santa Claus or to other 'secular sacred' accoutrements associated with the festival until the end of the show where Sandhu concluded with "a good old Christmas panto", which took the form of an Asian variation of the Scrooge narrative, while Sandhu's final message was directed, perhaps strangely, not to his listeners but to his team assembled in the studio that they should "be good – because the elves are always watching. This time next year you may not get what you want".

Conclusion

Having surveyed a range of BBC radio stations and programmes over the course of the morning of 25 December 2015 Day, Vincett & Cotter's claim that "Certainly, there is often a disjunction between how 'religious experts' define particular religious traditions and how the everyday practitioner defines them" (Day et al. 2013: 2) could no less be applied to the way in which the celebration of Christmas is practised. What stands out in this survey is that a mishmash of 'conventional religion', the 'secular sacred' and the 'ordinary secular' permeated not only different programmes on a single network but, as Danny Sarb's early breakfast show on the Asian Network demonstrates, within a single programme a hodgepodge of eclectic models persist of how the 'religion' of Christmas can be experienced, celebrated and conceptualized. Overall, we see that across the eight stations 42.5% of the news content could be categorized as being 'conventionally religious' in persuasion, with just 19.5% being of a 'secular sacred' disposition and 38% lying in the 'ordinary secular' category. This, however, encompasses a number of variations per station, with over 50% of 'conventional religious' content on Radios Leeds and Ulster, even though the speech and musical content of these two stations could not have been more distinct, with a dearth of, even an antagonism towards, 'conventional religious' material on the Martin Kelner Breakfast Show, in contrast to the heavily faith-based components of the first two of three

programmes broadcast on Radio Ulster. The lowest level of ‘conventional religious’ news material could be found on 5 Live, whose output to this end recorded the second highest level of ‘ordinary secular’ content, while its ‘5 Live Breakfast: Your Call’ phone-in feature was replete with conversion narratives (“You can change your life around”) and intimations of the supernatural (“He’s my little miracle... Every dream come true, it’s amazing”). By contrast, the most ‘ordinary secular’ news content was ironically to be found on the Asian Network, a station which included the most explicit and confessional manifestation of ‘conventional religion’. None of the stations recorded high levels of ‘secular sacred’ news stories, all of which tended to appear at the bottom of the running order, where they took the form of largely ‘feelgood’ festive narratives, as in the cases of the pardon granted to the actor Robert Downey Jr. and whether the NHS Choir would reach number 1 in the Christmas singles chart. The lowest level of ‘secular sacred’ content appeared on the Asian Network while the highest was on Radio Solent, which also exhibited the closest balance in its news stories between the three categories (at 37%, 35% and 28% respectively), even though the speech content on Solent’s programmes was geared much more towards the ‘secular sacred’, with very little ‘conventional religious’ material besides a homily from the Bishop of Winchester.

The three categories used in this project, therefore, while useful as indicators of some of the various ways in which Christmas is celebrated or, in some instances, disregarded, cannot give us an exhaustive or definitive set of data as to how to measure or apprehend the place or extent of religious belief or religiosity in Britain today. When Collins thus speaks of how, in the context of hospitality chaplain space, “Secular and sacred discourse both co-mingle and compete” (Collins 2013: 57) and that “‘belief’ and ‘unbelief’, ‘religion’ and ‘non-religion’ and ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ are not mutually exclusive states of being” (ibid.: 42), this can be seen to apply no less cogently in the context of Christmas radio where the interplay between the traditionally religious, the (secular) sacred and the (ordinary) secular comprises more of, again to paraphrase Collins, a ‘both/and’ rather than an ‘either/or’. When Collins thus writes that “People can manage and even cultivate apparent contradictions with relative ease” (ibid.: 57) this applies to much of the output on BBC radio over Christmas Day 2015, though the broad and insipid way in which ‘conventional religion’ was delineated on Canon Roger Royle’s night-time Radio 2 show, where it was reduced to a number of platitudes pertaining to how he hoped his listeners were “feeling the warmth of love that is at the centre of the Christmas message”, or indeed on Alex Lester’s ‘After Midnight’ programme where ‘conventional religion’ appeared by way of the two ‘Pause for Thought’ slots but was set apart from the rest of the content which actively invited and encouraged listeners to offer a commentary on the music and speech topics, suggests that BBC radio is not always comfortable with the dissemination of ‘conventional religion’. This had the incongruous effect, indeed, whereby discourse about Santa Claus was legitimated – including supplying updates throughout Lester’s three hour programme on how many millions of presents Santa Claus had delivered up to that point and where he was next believed to be heading – but when poet and author Paul Canon Harris declared on ‘Pause for Thought’ that “The preacher in me spotted that Jesus of course was a superhero, disguised as an ordinary human being, that he had come to change the world and that he loves us whatever our colour and shape”, there was no scope afforded for discussion, dialogue or debate.

Despite such awkwardness surrounding the role and integration of ‘conventional religion’ in an environment where the ‘secular sacred’ or the ‘ordinary secular’ were much more comfortable domains, religion was by no means absent even from those programmes where these latter two categories predominated. If Day is correct, indeed, that “Christianity functions in [people’s] lives to reinforce familial, ethnic and social conditions”, and in terms of how they “stressed responsibility for personal destiny” (Day 2013: 68), then the way in

which listeners across the spectrum on local, regional and national radio prioritized family, charity, acts of kindness, and the need to reach out to relatives, friends and those dear to us who might be alone at Christmas (as with the email read out by Mal Pope: “Please ask your listeners just to check on elderly neighbours. It could save a life or two”, or how for Tristan Pascoe: “You’re all part of the family, you’re very welcome along here and we’re glad to have you, and I’m glad to be here as well, thanks for having me”), points to the pre-eminent role of the sacred in British society. Day, indeed, specifically categorizes ‘love’, ‘family’, ‘fairness’ and ‘kindness’ as manifestations of the sacred, and the fact that they are not explicitly grounded in ‘religious’ vocabulary does not thereby obviate the degree to which they need to be included in a study of religious trends and patterns in the British media in a manner that Gill’s narrower and more conventional demarcation of religion is inclined to overlook. If, in short, Day is right that most people ‘believe’ in their relationships with other people, such that their “orientation” is “to people, not to gods, and thus anthropocentric seems to convey best the idea that human beings are ‘centric’ to their lives and it is with them they locate power and authority” (Day 2013: 73), then we need to ensure that we are looking for such demonstrations and expressions of religious and/or sacred behaviour and values in the right places.

The difficulty with much of the current quantitative work in religion and media is that it is pre-supposed what ‘religion’ is and the exercise of searching for and locating it is only useful insofar as there is agreement over whether what is being identified is sufficiently recognizable or representative of what religion is, in all of its multiple manifestations and dimensions, or whether we need to modify, extend or revisit the boundaries and contours of religion, in line with my adaption of Knott’s tripartite classification model. Indeed, when Knott builds on the Durkheimian notion that “nothing is inherently sacred, but that everything has the potential to be designated as such” (Knott 2013[b]: 147-8), this accords with how, drawing on present data, we can conclude that religion plays a far-reaching and extensive role in shaping not just the celebration of Christmas but the way in which media agencies frame, demarcate and, as we see from the example of Sarb on the Asian Network, harness and (re-)appropriate the use and possibilities of religion in the context of transmitting core values around sacred emotions and encounters. To this end, Stringer is correct that there is more to be found in terms of what religion does and where it can be located in “the ‘off the cuff’ remark, the unthought comment” (Stringer 2013: 170) than in (when applied to this project) the safe, predictable, unimaginative locations of a ‘Pause for Thought’ or a ‘Thought for the Day’. It is in being “open to the unexpected” and by “listening to the spaces between the words” (ibid.: 168) that some of the most creative and prolific apprehensions of religion can be undertaken. At present, by contrast, there are too many media blind spots and too great a sense in which ‘religious’ phenomena and practices, not least the ‘virtual community’ that is so much in evidence across all of the stations surveyed, are simply not being picked up, evaluated or critiqued. The newspaper and TV surveys that Knott and Gill have undertaken are very much to be welcomed, but when Knott identifies her project as examining “the nature and extent of media portrayals of religion and secular beliefs and values” (Knott et al. 2013: 5-6), it is apparent, when viewed from the vantage point of this latest project on Christmas radio, that such previous research has not gone far enough in terms of uncovering some of the more nuanced and unconventional models of religion at the heart of contemporary media. This research thus offers a new direction for such benchmark work to date.

While Landau is undoubtedly correct that, in the context of news media, “The danger is that an editor for whom religion is an entirely irrelevant aspect of their own human existence fails to recognise its significance in the lives of its listeners” (Landau 2012: 84), the danger here is

that only conventional understandings and manifestations of religion are being accommodated. Landau's call for the BBC to thus appoint a Religion Editor "to ensure this defining aspect of human life receives the coverage it deserves" (ibid.) only goes so far as the sort of 'secular as religion' model that is intrinsic to our understanding of the role and location of religion in the British media needs also to be part of the equation. Under previous ways of looking, Romain cannot be faulted when he argues that if we peer at the schedules then we will "find religious broadcasting banished to the very early hours of the morning or the very late slot" or "on Sunday mornings when those most likely to appreciate them cannot do so as that is precisely the time when they are at church" (Romain 2012: 140). It has been the aim of this paper, however, to suggest that there are alternative and more challenging ways in which to seek, find and, moreover, interact with religion on the radio, such that when Kim Lenergan announced to her listeners on Radio Ulster just before 11am on 25 December 2015 that "My twinkly Christmas is my happiest morning of the year" she is also, perhaps inadvertently and without a doubt unintentionally, telling us that it is also her (and our) most *religious*.

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