

BEFORE THE BROADCASTING STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Decision No: 146/93

Dated the 15th day of November 1993

IN THE MATTER of the Broadcasting Act 1989

AND

IN THE MATTER of a complaint by

J.R. BRYANT
of Christchurch

Broadcaster
TV3 NETWORK SERVICES
LIMITED

I.W. Gallaway Chairperson
J.R. Morris
R.A. Barraclough
L.M. Dawson

DECISION

Summary

An interview with an authority on the Bible was included on 3 *National News* broadcast on TV3 on 12 April 1993 between 6.00 - 7.00pm. The interviewee expressed his opinion that some of what was written in the Bible was in error.

Mr Bryant complained to TV3 Network Services Ltd that the item was grossly offensive and that the interviewee's opinions clearly contradicted Articles VI and VII of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England. Pointing out that no balancing view was given, Mr Bryant maintained that presenting such heresy was itself heretical, particularly on Easter Monday.

Arguing that the right of an individual to express an opinion was protected by the Codes of Broadcasting Practice, TV3 denied that the item was in breach of any of the broadcasting standards. Dissatisfied with that decision, Mr Bryant referred his complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority under s.8(1)(a) of the Broadcasting Act 1989.

For the reasons given below, the Authority declined to uphold the complaint.



Decision

The members of the Authority have viewed the item complained about and have read the correspondence (summarised in the Appendix). As is its practice, the Authority has determined the complaint without a formal hearing.

An Easter Monday comment broadcast by TV3 Network Services Ltd on *3 National News* challenged the factual basis of some parts of the Bible. In an interview, Dr Jim Veitch, lecturer in Religious Studies at Victoria University and a Presbyterian Minister, expressed his view that the Bible was a piece of literature which could be interpreted to reveal historical information about the origins of Christianity. He commented that the Church had dominated the interpretation of the Bible and that there was room for a different, more literary interpretation.

Mr Bryant complained to TV3 that the suggestion that parts of the Bible were not true was grossly offensive and in contradiction to the Articles of Religion of the Church of England. He accused TV3 of presenting heresy and of failing to attempt to provide balance. Further, he argued, TV3 had failed in its duties as a broadcaster because it had encouraged denigration against those who believed that the Bible was the inerrant word of God.

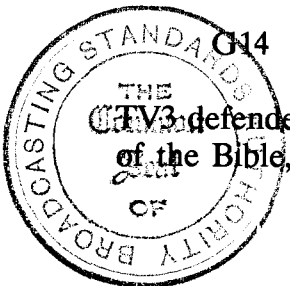
In its response, TV3 reported that it had assessed the complaint against standards 6, 12 and 26, now renumbered G6, G13 and G14, of the Television Code of Broadcasting Practice. Standards G6 and G13 require broadcasters:

- G6 To show balance, impartiality and fairness in dealing with political matters, current affairs and all questions of a controversial nature.
- G13 To avoid portraying people in a way which is likely to encourage denigration of or discrimination against any section of the community on account of sex, race, age, disability, occupation status, sexual orientation or the holding of any religious, cultural or political belief. This requirement is not intended to prevent the broadcast of material which is:
- i) factual, or
 - ii) the expression of genuinely-held opinion in a news or current affairs programme, or
 - iii) in the legitimate context of a humorous, satirical or dramatic work.

Standard G14 reads:

G14 News must be presented accurately, objectively and impartially.

TV3 defended the right of an individual to express an opinion about the interpretation of the Bible, noting that Dr Veitch did not claim that his interpretation was the only



correct one. It noted that Dr Veitch was presenting the viewpoint of an academic who was interested in the Bible as a piece of literature and denied that the presentation of an alternative view about the Bible was heresy. TV3 observed that although Christianity was dominant in New Zealand, that did not preclude other religions or prevent people from questioning traditional views. It also noted that standard G13 specifically protects the right of individuals to express their genuinely-held opinions.


The Authority considered that it was clear that the views expressed were the opinion of the guest and that the subject was topical because it was Easter. Dr Veitch's opinion that the Gospels were open to a literary interpretation was challenged by the interviewer who questioned whether the holding of such a view was in danger of destroying faith in the Bible. The Authority believed that the interviewer asked appropriate questions, challenging Dr Veitch to justify his opinion. It was of the view that there was sufficient balance in the item to avoid a breach of standard G6 and therefore declined to uphold that part of the complaint.

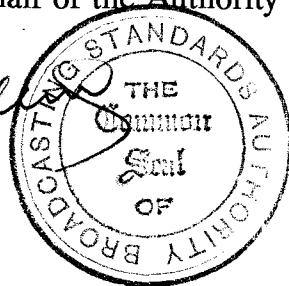
Turning to standard G13, the Authority concluded that it specifically provides for the expression of genuinely-held opinion and, accordingly, the broadcast of the views of Dr Veitch were not in breach of the standard. It declined to uphold the complaint that the item was in breach of standard G13.

Finally, the Authority considered the standard G14 aspect of the complaint. It decided that the standard was not applicable because it only applies to news and this was clearly a commentary segment within the news. It believed the matter had been addressed under standard G6 discussed above.

For the reasons set forth above the Authority declines to uphold the complaint.

Signed for and on behalf of the Authority


Iain Gallaway
Chairperson
15 November 1993



Appendix

Mr Bryant's Formal Complaint to TV3 Network Services Limited

In a letter dated 14 April 1993, Mr John Bryant of Christchurch complained to TV3 Network Services Ltd about an interview broadcast during 3 *National News* on 12 April 1993.

Mr Bryant described the interviewee as:

a man purporting to be some sort of expert on the Bible. The gist of the so-called 'expert' was that parts of what is written in the Bible are '*not to be believed*' because *he* found them to be in error.

In Mr Bryant's view, this was grossly offensive and clearly contradicted Articles VI and VII of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England. He added:

That TV3 should present such heresy in front of me, my wife and children is intolerable; particularly on Easter Monday. TV3 did not even attempt any form of balance in the viewpoints expressed.

TV3's Response to the Formal Complaint

TV3 advised Mr Bryant of its Complaints Committee's decision in a letter dated 15 June 1993. It reported that the complaint had been considered under standards 6, 12 and 26 (now renumbered G6, G14 and G13) of the Television Code of Broadcasting Practice.

TV3 explained that the interview by Mr Bill Ralston was with Dr Jim Veitch who was a lecturer in Religious Studies at Victoria University. Dr Veitch, it reported, raised the issue that Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ and sent him to his death, was possibly a very wronged man - if he existed at all.

The segment was not expounding that Mr Veitch's interpretation was **the** interpretation of the bible. Mr Veitch has interpreted various aspects of the bible from an academic viewpoint, from the perspective of the bible as a piece of literature - not from a philosophical religious viewpoint, nor from the viewpoint of any established Church doctrine. Mr Veitch is an individual expressing an opinion - he is an individual holding a position as lecturer in a University - he is not employed by TV3 as religious critic and nor does, nor should TV3 have any corporate opinion on the content of the Bible.

TV3 defended the right of an individual to express an opinion, explaining that this right was protected by the Codes of Broadcasting Practice. It declined to uphold the complaint.



Mr Bryant's Complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority

Dissatisfied with TV3's response, in a letter dated 12 July and Complaint Referral Form dated 3 September 1993, Mr Bryant referred his original letter of complaint to the Authority for investigation.

TV3's Response to the Authority

As is its practice, the Authority sought the broadcaster's response to the complaint. Its letter is dated 5 September 1993 and TV3's reply, 21 September.

TV3 identified three issues in the complaint:

- that the purported expert expounded an alternative version of events not in keeping with Articles VI and VII of the Articles of Religion of his Church
- that such an alternate point of view is heresy and because TV3 broadcast the point of view it broadcast heresy
- that such a broadcast of heresy was compounded by the fact that it was broadcast on an Easter Monday.

TV3 commented that although Christianity was dominant in New Zealand, that did not outlaw other religions nor prevent alternate or questioning attitudes and standard G13 of the Television Code of Broadcasting Practice appeared to support this view.

Referring to the accusation of heresy, TV3 responded that the charge was a matter of opinion, commenting that by the complainant's interpretation there must be a large number of heretics in New Zealand. It concluded by noting that it had not said that the studio guest was correct and that any other belief was false. It argued that the subject matter was topical because it was Easter.

Mr Bryant's Final Comment to the Authority

When asked to comment on TV3's response, in a letter dated 11 October 1993, Mr Bryant accused TV3 of failing in its duties as a broadcaster because it breached the requirement for balance and impartiality and encouraged denigration against those who believed that the Bible was the inerrant word of God.

He informed the Authority that the status of the three Articles of Religion of the Church of England were enshrined in the Church of England Empowering Act 1928.

Holding that it was up to every individual to hold and be accountable for their own beliefs, Mr Bryant refrained from making judgment on the number of heretics in New Zealand. He did not accept that TV3 had the right to present a programme which failed every objective test in regards to impartiality and balance.

