

PO Box 2278
Ilford
Essex
IG1 9XT

Ofcom
Riverside House
2a Southwark Bridge Road
London
SE1 9HA.

T: 020 7330 8796
E: info@iengage.org.uk
W: www.iengage.org.uk

Thursday 6th September 2012

Dear Sirs,

We are writing to raise a complaint and urge an investigation into the programme broadcast on Channel Four on Tuesday 28th August, 'Islam: the Untold Story,' presented by the historian Tom Holland, based on concerns we outline below.

We feel the programme breaches the regulatory code on grounds of 'Fairness' - notably the requirement that broadcasters take care that 'material facts have not been presented, disregarded or omitted in a way that is unfair to an individual or organisation;' on Religion – notably the requirement that content does 'not involve any improper exploitation of any susceptibilities of the audience for such a programme;' and on the aspect of the Code governing Harm and Offence, the requirement that 'appropriate information should also be broadcast where it would assist in avoiding or minimising offence.'

Fairness

In **Section 7, Clause 7.9** of the Ofcom broadcasting code, dealing with the 'proper consideration of the facts, the Code denotes: "Before broadcasting a factual programme, including programmes examining past events, broadcasters should take reasonable care to satisfy themselves that material facts have not been presented, disregarded or omitted in a way that is unfair to an individual or organisation."

1. Mr Holland introduces his documentary and interest in investigating the origins of empires referring to his current preoccupation in writing about the origins of Islam opening with the claim *"The problem of authorizing the history of the rise of Islam is that we have absence of evidence....I had expected Muslim testimony from the 7th century. But there's nothing there."*

There are a number of points to be addressed in relation to the claim of an 'absence of evidence' and 'Muslim testimony'. Firstly, Holland engages in no analysis on the historicity of the Qur'an. In a documentary about the history of Islam we found it bizarre that Holland did not address the historicity of the Qur'an. After all, Muhammad is mentioned four times, we believe, in the Qur'an.

Indeed, much further on in the documentary Holland visits the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which he acknowledges was built before the end of the 7th century, and remarks on its architecture saying:

"On the walls, there is an unequivocal mission statement "Religion, in the eyes of God, is Islam." There are mentions of Muhammad, quotations from the Koran. At last, something that we can recognise unmistakably as a new religion."

So, the claim at the outset of the documentary, *"I can't find anything. There's nothing there"* is clearly misleading. As is Holland's claim that *"you can barely find a new religion called Islam anywhere in the historical records."*

In part 3 of the programme, Holland refers to the availability of sources from Christian testimony of the 7th century. While acknowledging on twitter post-broadcast the presence of a Christian text from 634CE, the 'Doctrina Iacobi' which refers to the 'Prophet of the Saracens,' this historical evidence and its reference to such a prophet is omitted in the programme. Who was the Prophet in question, what did he preach, what faith did his adherents follow, what is known of him from the Doctrina Iacobi? The bypassing of the veracity, validity and relevance of this text and its significance to Holland's propositions are a glaring omission and one that deserves explanation given the problems it poses to the allegation that 'there is nothing there'. There clearly is something there, Holland, for reasons not provided, chooses to ignore it.

It further poses a problem to several other propositions Holland advances:

- '...you can barely find a new religion called Islam anywhere in the historical records.'
- '...we don't know what was the true religion of the first Arab conquerors.'
- 'Nobody had any notion that the Arabs were doing what they were doing in the name of a freshly minted and coherent new religion. Still less that what they were doing was in the name of something called Islam.'

If the Doctrina Iacobi speaks of a 'Prophet of the Saracens,' it is surely fitting and appropriate that a historian investigate the claims above in light of the Christian source before adding conjecture that nothing is available to determine the religion of the early Arab conquerors.

2. Holland questions whether Mecca was the birthplace of Islam and says of it:

"Surely here then, you would think, we could find solid evidence for Islam's beginnings. But there is a problem. Aside from a single, ambiguous mention in the Qur'an itself, there is no mention of Mecca, not one, in any datable text for over 100 years after Mohammed 's death."

This is factually incorrect because the Qur'an makes unambiguous mention of Mecca in chapter 48, verse 24:

"And it is He who has restrained their hands from you and your hands from them in the midst of Mecca..."

Holland's claims of "a single, ambiguous mention in the Qur'an itself" is therefore, factually incorrect. The assertion that "there is no mention of Mecca, not one, in any datable text for over 100 years after Mohammed 's death" without due reference to the unambiguous mention of Mecca in the Qur'an leaves the viewer with the misleading notion that 'a single, ambiguous mention in the Qur'an' is all that exists to buttress Muslims' claim of Mecca as the birthplace of Islam. Worse still, there is no elaboration on the 'single, ambiguous mention in the Qur'an' at all; where in the Qur'an does it appear, and why is it regarded as 'ambiguous' – these are details Holland bypasses.

The misapprehension caused by this glossing over is compounded by the fact that the programme displays on screen the verse mentioning Bakka (chapter 3: verse 96), twice but not once the verse mentioned above, (48:24) in which Mecca is referred to clearly and unambiguously in the Qur'an.

The effect of the inaccuracy and visual representation of the former but not the latter verses therefore, leaves the viewer with the false impression that Mecca is not explicitly referred to in the Qur'an.

3. A further problem with Holland's conjecture on the birthplace of Islam, given the ramifications for Muslims and their Muslim historical narrative, are the 'proofs' offered to validate the claims and the absence of a Muslim historian's response to his conjectures.

Holland advances a number of arguments to support his supposition:

- a. The absence of an environment hospitable to agriculture in the arid deserts of Mecca. Holland uses this as a basis to support his claim that Mecca could not be the location of early Muslim history because the Qur'an speaks of farmers producing olives and other foodstuffs which could not grow in non-fertile environments such as Mecca.
- b. Holland argues that the location of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, '1000 kilometres from Mecca' and the Qur'an reference to the sites as 'Truly, you pass by their sites by day and by night,' support his conjecture of Mecca not being the birthplace of Islam.

But Holland ignores the economic history of the early Arabs and their trade as caravans travelling across the region, from Syria to Yemen. In reading the Qur'an's reference to the vanquished cities of the people of Lot in a literal manner, Holland overlooks the reference to 'day and night' as figurative, meaning a regular and frequent encounter with physical proof and reminders of the wrath of God.

Perhaps most pertinent given the seriousness of the conjecture for the narrative of Islam, is the absence of any Muslim historian's response to any of these conjectures. We note that the documentary did feature some footage of the Muslim scholar Sayyid Husayn Nasr but he was not shown responding to any of these serious claims from Tom Holland. We would ask why this was not done in order to give the viewer a more balanced perspective about the claims advanced?

We feel the manner in which the material was portrayed, the questions posed and the proofs assembled breach the code on due accuracy and due impartiality and harm and offence through negation and exclusion of 'appropriate information [which] would assist in avoiding or minimising offence'.

There are further problems concerning the general content of the programme which pose additional cause for concern and we note them here on account of the distress caused to Muslims by Holland's conjecture.

'Religion'

4. The Ofcom code requires broadcasters to 'not involve any improper exploitation of any susceptibilities of the audience for such a programme' (**Section Four, Clause 4.6**).

A statement on the C4 website on Islam: the Untold Story states:

'[We] went to every effort to ensure that the moral and civilizational power of Islam was acknowledged in our film, and the perspective of Muslim faith represented, both in the persons of ordinary Bedouin in the desert, and one of the greatest modern scholars of Islam, Seyyed Hossein Nasr.'

The use of Bedouin Arabs, juxtaposed to Western scholars from Princeton and Oxford universities, is a sleight of hand. They are in no way commensurate and, it may be argued, a deliberate attempt to portray the Muslim perspective as irrational and dogmatic, contrasted to the evidence-based, rational methods of Western scholarship.

5. Related to the point referred to above, the programme approaches its subject matter in a Eurocentric manner markedly observed in the remarks by Professor Patricia Crone on the validity and utility of oral tradition as historical evidence.

It is well established in Islamic history that oral tradition played a significant part, whether in the form of the memorisation of the Qur'an or the compilation of traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the books of Hadith based on chains of narration that were transmitted orally. Again, the fact that this does not accord with a western methodology in recording history is no basis to undermine its legitimacy and it would have been useful had the programme-makers offered a Muslim expert the opportunity to expound the importance of the oral tradition in Islamic history.

Harm and Offence

6. A final point refers to the Ofcom code on harm and offence and the requirement that 'appropriate information should also be broadcast where it would assist in avoiding or minimising offence' (**Section Two, Clause 2.3**).

The thesis advanced by Tom Holland sits among the group of scholars known as the 'New Historians' and include amongst their ranks Patricia Crone who appeared in the programme.

Their work is not unknown to British Muslims having been published as a cover story in the New Statesman in December 2001 titled 'The Great Koran Con Trick'. In that publication the author, Martin Bright, refers to their approach thus:

"The explanation of the new historians is that later generations created a coherent scriptural basis for Islam to suit the needs of a sophisticated empire."

This is not dissimilar to the thesis advanced by Tom Holland and yet, despite the sustained criticism from fellow historians on the work of Crone, Cook, (and by extension Holland), there is no effort by Holland to situate the conjecture of the 'New Historians' within the wider discipline of ancient history.

The New Statesman article refers to Professor Ziauddin Sardar as "one of the few Muslim intellectuals genuinely to have engaged with the new historians" and who considers their work to be "Eurocentrism of the most extreme, purblind kind, which assumes that not a single word written by Muslims can be accepted as evidence."

It would seem to us apposite that this perspective be included in the programme in order to satisfy the requirement that "appropriate information should also be broadcast where it would assist in avoiding or minimising offence."

This programme has generated considerable unease and offence amongst British Muslims. We would welcome your response to the points raised above. We will furthermore, approach the production company, Maya Vision, for a meeting to discuss these concerns directly. We note them here for your attention in expectation of redress of grievance.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Shenaz Bunglawala