

## BOOK REVIEW

Edward Stourton, *Sunday: A History of Religious Affairs through 50 Years of Conversations and Controversies*, SPCK/BBC 2023.

doi:[10.1017/S1740355324000020](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000020)

Before I joined the BBC, I remember hearing about the BBC's Sunday programme, which started in 1970. It had quickly become a must for all training for ministry, who were excited at a radio broadcast devoted more or less exclusively to church news. When I was taken on by the corporation as a lowly research assistant, it was initially to the Sunday programme. I remember my first report was on whether university bookshops were stocking enough religious books. Later I did what was called a 'colour piece' on a Royal Albert Hall festival of new Christian music, and a report on a pilgrimage to Walsingham. It was on Sunday that I learnt some of the skills of interviewing, tape editing and live broadcasting.

No one should doubt the innovative nature of the Sunday programme. Before its advent religious broadcasting had been almost exclusively devotional. There was worship and there were talks with occasional debate. The producers were nearly all clergy, who came from pastoral ministries and went back to Deaneries or larger parishes after a few years.

*Sunday* began with what at the time was seen as the radical idea that religion was a part of life, like any other, and that it was therefore open to journalistic investigation and debate. The model it aspired to was that of the *Today* programme, though its reach and budget would never be anything like that of *Today*. The whole point, though, was that religion had no particular privilege. It could not stand apart from society in an unchallenged world of its own. The first producer was Colin Semper, a former incumbent of Holy Trinity, Guildford. Prior to the launch of *Sunday*, he spent time on attachment to Radio News and Current Affairs learning about how to put a news-based magazine programme together, and he then did just that, inviting the sceptical-sounding Paul Barnes to be its first presenter. David Winter was recruited from the evangelical magazine *Crusade* to follow in Colin Semper's footsteps. So, *Sunday* established itself and achieved a guaranteed space in the schedules. It has been well served by its reporters, producers and presenters, which include Christine Morgan, Gerald Priestland, Roger Bolton, Mike Ford and many others.

This book by Edward Stourton, who has presented the programme regularly since 2010 and Amanda Hancox, one of the lead producers, traces its evolution over

fifty years, with transcripts taken from the BBC Sound Archives. At first, nearly all the stories covered were from Christian, but occasionally Jewish, sources. But over time, just as society embraced the witness and testimony of other faiths, Sunday began to cover issues involving non-Christian faith communities and the rise of secularism. The place of women in religious life has been an ongoing theme, as have changing understandings of sexuality, the interplay of religion and politics and the scandals that have affected the churches over the treatment of unmarried mothers and the clerical sexual abuse of children. Apartheid, Sharia Law, bioethics, abortion, assisted dying and euthanasia, religious terrorism, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, the changing profile of religion in the United States, the succession of Popes, the plight of religious minorities in Asia and Africa – all these have provided a steady stream of stories, reflections and debate. BBC correspondents from around the world have been engaged to report and record interviews. Now and then there has been engagement with profound issues of theology and ethics. The Sunday programme made stars of some religious leaders: Jonathan Sacks could always be relied on for profound common sense rooted in conviction, and Desmond Tutu contributed at key moments in South African history. As it developed *Sunday* acquired a reputation for integrity and accessibility, not only explaining religion to an increasingly indifferent audience but also assisting the internal debate within faith communities by providing a mirror of our changing times.

In its way it has probably contributed quite a lot to the relatively benign and peaceful way in which different faith communities relate to one another in Britain, both tempering the privileges of the established church and giving space for minority voices to be heard. If today religious communities feel the need to be proactive in communication, it is at least in part because Sunday has imparted a sense of responsibility to engage with the whole community.

The hardback edition is a weighty, even unwieldy volume, not the easiest to read or manage. And it is a great mistake not to have a proper index. A list of contributors is a poor substitute.

Angela Tilby  
Portsmouth Cathedral, Portsmouth, UK  
Email: [angela.tilby@icloud.com](mailto:angela.tilby@icloud.com)