



## ABC TV

### Religious denigration

#### **The complaint**

On 8 February 2001, the ABA received a written complaint about a 20 March 2000 episode of 'Backberner', broadcast on ABC Television.

The complainant alleged that a sketch in the program about the performer Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens) was offensive and vilified Muslims.

The complainant had referred his complaint to the ABC's Independent Complaints Review Panel, but was not happy with their findings. He, therefore, exercised his right to refer the matter to the ABA for investigation.

#### **Relevant code of practice**

Clause 2.4 of the ABC Code of Practice states:

##### **2.4 Discrimination**

The presentation or portrayal of people in a way which is likely to encourage denigration of or discrimination against any person or section of the community on account of race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, disability or illness, social or occupational status, sexual preference or the holding of any religious, cultural or political belief will be avoided. The requirement is not intended to prevent the broadcast of material which is factual, or the expression of genuinely held opinion in a news or current affairs program, or in the legitimate context of a humorous, satirical or dramatic work.

#### **Decision**

The segment satirised Islamic singer Yusuf Islam's 'A is for Allah' CD. It included:

Cat Stevens, now known as Yusuf Islam, has taken time off from supporting the Salman Rushdie fatwah to release a children's CD - 'A is for Allah'.

We look forward to hearing his versions of such classics as 'Hickory Dickory Dock, the bomb was tied to the clock. The clock struck one - no more World Trade Centre'.

It also included a passage sung in a style imitating the singer:

'A is for Allah, B is for bomb, C is for clitoridectomy - she's holier when it's gone, D is for dismemberment [etc]'

The ABA determined that the segment was not focused on Islam or Muslims in general, but on Yusuf Islam himself.

The ABA considered that the segment suggested that Mr Islam supported extreme viewpoints such as the bombing of the World Trade Centre, clitoridectomy, the amputation of limbs as a form of punishment and the fatwah (death sentence) against the writer Salman Rushdie. The segment suggested that the extremist views that were satirised were primarily Mr Islam's alleged religious views.

In the ABA's view, there was a strong chance that the segment would have the effect of motivating viewers to consider that Mr Islam's alleged religious views might be at odds with,

and not appropriate to, his promotion of a CD of songs for children. The violent and misogynist views ascribed to Mr Islam were of such a degree that the ABA considered that there was a strong possibility that these alleged views would provoke a strongly negative reaction towards Mr Islam. The ABA also considered that, in motivating viewers to consider Mr Islam's alleged religious views, the segment assisted in disparaging and condemning Mr Islam for those alleged views.

Taking all these matters into consideration, the ABA found that the segment was likely to encourage the denigration of Mr Islam, by suggesting to the viewing audience that Mr Islam holds extremist religious beliefs that are worthy of scorn and condemnation.

The ABA considered that the segment broadcast was not in the 'legitimate context of a humorous or satirical work', as no factual circumstances existed to justify the satire. The ABA, therefore, found the broadcast to be in breach of clause 2.4 of the ABC Code.

#### **Action Taken**

The ABA noted that it would expect the ABC to exercise care in selecting material for future satirical programs, to ensure individuals or groups were not satirised or mocked on the basis of beliefs, attributed to them without justification.

