

PBS RELIGION BAN CARRIES A STENCH

The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) banned its member stations from carrying new religious TV programs; the few existing religious programs were allowed to continue.

The stated reason for censoring new religious programming went like this: (a) a ban on sectarian programming has been in place since 1985 but was never enforced, (b) PBS started to review its rules last year when the transition to digital TV was being contemplated, and (c) PBS expressed concerns that having religious programming may imply official endorsement. None of these reasons is persuasive.

A rule that is not enforced is a non-starter, much like jay walking statutes in New York City—everyone knows that non-enforcement means that it's legal. Citing church and state concerns is also pure bunk: there is no federal law banning religious programming by PBS. As for the review being sparked by the move to digital, the record shows that more was at work than this.

In December 2005, PBS aired a few shows with mildly religious overtones that angered its anti-religious viewers. Renee Fleming sang Christmas songs in between comments about the importance of Christmas; a three-part documentary retracing the routes taken in the first five books of the Bible, "Walking the Bible," aired; a month later, a documentary with a veneer of religious trappings was shown about two troubled teenagers in rural America who pulled themselves out of poverty; and a year-end Pledge Drive feature Dr. Wayne Dyer, a self-help guru opposed to organized religion who nonetheless carries "spiritual baggage." It was after these shows aired that PBS Ombudsman Michael Getler felt the heat and the in-house conversation began.

It never takes much to push secular buttons, but caving in to the voices of intolerance is shameful. That the religious gag rule is taking place in the age of Obama is not something that has escaped our notice. The stench is unmistakable.