



ADJUDICATION NO: 03/A/2026

NAME OF PROGRAMME:	OP EN WAKKER
DATE AND TIME OF BROADCAST:	7 JANUARY
BROADCASTER:	SABC RSG
COMPLAINANT:	DU PLESSIS

COMPLAINT

Complaint that the title and contents of a live interview constituted blasphemy and hate speech on the basis of religion.

APPLICABLE CLAUSE: BCCSA FREE-TO-AIR CODE OF CONDUCT

Clause 4

- (2) Broadcasting service licensees must not broadcast material which, judged within context, amounts to (a) propaganda for war; (b) incitement of imminent violence or (c) the advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, religion or gender and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.
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ADJUDICATION

- [1] A complaint was lodged with the BCCSA against a live interview that was broadcast on RSG's *Op en Wakker* programme on 7 January 2026.

[2] **The complaint reads as follows:**

"By means of this correspondence, I wish to formally express my profound dismay and shock at the blasphemous statement broadcast on RSG's programme Op en Wakker, during which a recorded insert was aired on Wednesday, 7 January 2026.

During this programme, the presenters, Gustav and Renske, engaged in a discussion with Prof Ryan Blumenthal concerning the dangers associated with lightning. In the course of this broadcast, the so-called expert permitted on air by RSG referred to lightning as "nature's most dangerous serial killer." I regard this statement as one of the most egregious forms of blasphemy.

As a born-again Christian, I find it deeply disturbing and wholly unacceptable that the programme editor of RSG allowed such a blasphemous utterance to be aired. I view this statement in an extremely serious light and am of the considered opinion that it undermines and offends the integrity of the broad God-fearing Christian population of South Africa.

This matter warrants a thorough investigation, and appropriate corrective steps should be taken to address and rectify this inappropriate on-air conduct.

I would greatly appreciate it if this matter were to receive the urgent and serious attention it deserves, so as to confront such blatant blasphemy and to prevent its recurrence in the future.

Revised Submission in Support of Complaint – Alleged Contravention of the BCCSA Code of Conduct.

Please find below the revised and consolidated information requested for purposes of investigating my complaint dated 7 January 2026.

Identification of the impugned content

The statement forming the subject of this complaint occurs at approximately 46 seconds into a broadcast segment with a total duration of 12 minutes and 2 seconds. During this segment, Renske Jacobs quoted dr. Ryan Blumenthal by describing lightning as "**die natuur se gevaarlikste reeksmoordenaar.**" Immediately thereafter, Renske Jacobs posed the question: "*Hoekom beskou jy weerlig in so lig?*"

This statement was broadcast without qualification, contextual limitation, or editorial distancing.

Applicable Code provision

The BCCSA has committed itself to ensuring that its members comply with the Free-to-Air Code of Conduct in respect of programme content and editorial material. This includes the prohibition of material which, within context, constitutes the advocacy of hatred based on, inter alia, religion, or which impairs the dignity of a protected group. The relevant provision states:

"Broadcasters are prohibited from airing material that, within context, amounts to the advocacy of hatred based on race, ethnicity, religion, or gender, constituting incitement to cause harm."

Grounds of complaint

As a member of the Christian Church, I submit that the impugned statement constitutes an objectively offensive and harmful portrayal of the Christian faith and its theological foundations. My grounds for this submission are set out as follows:

1. The description of lightning as **"die natuur se gevaarlikste reeksmoordenaar"**, employs language that is not only anthropomorphic, but which, when viewed through the lens of the Christian faith, fails to display the necessary reverence and restraint owed to matters touching upon God's created order. The use of such terminology is totally inconsistent with the reverence and respect due to God, His creation, and the Christian Church.
2. Within the Christian theological framework, nature forms part of God's created order. The unqualified use of such terminology therefore carries the unavoidable implication that God, as Creator and sustainer of nature, is indirectly portrayed as a deliberate agent of death.
3. This implication materially impairs the dignity of the Christian faith and its adherents by attributing moral blame, violence, and murderous intent to God, which is fundamentally incompatible with Christian doctrine.
4. Whether the statement was made intentionally or negligently is irrelevant; the effect of the language used amounts to religious humiliation of the Christian faith and it is highly offensive.
5. The broadcaster RSG, has failed miserably to take the interests of the Christian religion to heart and in the process promotes blasphemy. The editorial staff should been aware of this.

Contextual insufficiency

Although the programme addressed a topical matter involving tragic loss of life, this context does not justify the use of language that attributes human death—directly or indirectly—to God. Editorial discretion required heightened sensitivity, particularly in light of South Africa's constitutional commitment to religious dignity, and equality.

Editorial responsibility

As stated in my initial correspondence, I wish to place on record my serious concern regarding the approval and broadcast of the programme title **"Weerlig, die natuur se gevaarlikste reeksmoordenaar."** The decision to authorise this title reflects a failure to exercise appropriate editorial judgement and, in my opinion, is a gross breach of the broadcaster's obligations under the Code of Conduct.

Relief sought

I respectfully submit that this matter warrants urgent consideration and that appropriate remedial measures be implemented to ensure that similar content which denigrates or undermines Christian religious beliefs is not repeated.

I trust that the above information is sufficient for the purposes of further investigation."

[3] The Broadcaster responded as follows:

"BCCSA COMPLAINT: DU PLESSIS – RSG – OP EN WAKKER – 07.01.2026 – 07:00

With regard to the above-mentioned complaint, please find our comments as follows:

1. The impugned content formed part of a live radio interview broadcast on *Op en Wakker* on RSG. The discussion followed a recent tragic incident in Mathibestad, North-West Province, where two individuals lost their lives and approximately 150 people were injured because of a lightning strike at a traditional gathering.
2. The purpose of the item was public-interest education and safety awareness, specifically to inform listeners about the dangers of lightning and measures to reduce associated risks. The segment was neither pre-recorded, scripted, nor edited, and could therefore not be altered prior to broadcast. Prof. Ryan Blumenthal participated in the interview in his capacity as a

specialist forensic pathologist, holding a PhD in electrical and information engineering. He was invited to provide expert scientific insight into lightning-related fatalities and injuries, based on empirical research and forensic experience.

3. During the interview, the phrase “*die natuur se gevaarlikste reeksmoordenaar*” was used in reference to lightning. The phrase was employed metaphorically, within a scientific and public-safety context, to describe the statistical lethality and unpredictability of lightning. Immediately following the phrase, the presenters continued the discussion by requesting an explanation of why lightning is so dangerous, thereby reinforcing the educational and preventative intent of the broadcast.
4. Viewed objectively and within context, the metaphor served a descriptive and cautionary function, aimed at underscoring the seriousness of lightning-related risks. The statement does not incite harm, violence, or discrimination; does not impair the dignity of Christians or any religious groups when assessed objectively and in context; and does not attribute intent, morality, or agency to God.

RSG remains committed to editorial fairness, respect for religious dignity, and constitutional values, while continuing to fulfil its mandate to inform and educate the public on matters of safety and national importance.”

[4] The Complainant replied as follows:

“BCCSA COMPLAINT: NEIL DU PLESSIS – RSG – OP EN WAKKER – 07.01.2026 – 07:00

In response to the comments submitted by the SABC, I respond as follows:

1. I am fully aware that the discussion was broadcast in the aftermath of the tragic incident in the North West Province, and I greatly appreciate the SABC’S and RSG’s efforts to present programme material that informs the public about matters of current and national relevance.
2. I am personally a strong proponent of public awareness initiatives relating to any dangers that may result in loss of life, as well as of measures that can be implemented to prevent such loss of life, or at the very least to reduce it to an absolute minimum. I am, however, of the view that the broadcast in question could have been presented by the programme editor and the production team under a more appropriate title—one that is not blasphemous. I state this because the presenters of *Op en Wakker* had already informed listeners earlier in the programme about the forthcoming discussion with Dr Ryan Blumenthal, at which point reference was already made to *Weerlig, die natuur se dodelikste reeksmoordenaar*. I have sincere appreciation for Dr Blumenthal’s expertise and for the contributions he made during the discussion. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that the content could have been presented under a more suitable title, one that takes due cognisance of the Christian community. In my professional capacity, I am likewise frequently invited to present the findings of my empirical research to various audiences. Prior to addressing such audiences, I take care to acquaint myself with the nature of the audience before providing a proposed title to those who extend the invitation for public dissemination. Consultation takes place with governing bodies, school principals, and church leaders before a title is finalised. This process is followed not in order to diminish the audience’s interest in topical matters, but rather to stimulate and sustain such interest.

3. I regard the title *Weerlig, die natuur se dodelikste reeksmoordenaar* as outright blasphemy. Even if the phrase was employed metaphorically, as explained in the SABC's letter, it remains possible that metaphors can also be used to constitute blasphemy.
4. From an objective perspective within the context of the discussion, the blasphemous metaphor may indeed have served a cautionary function, highlighting the dangers associated with lightning-related risks. While the SABC contends that the use of a blasphemous metaphor such as *Weerlig, die natuur se dodelikste reeksmoordenaar* does not impair the dignity of Christians or any religious group, I respectfully and wholly disagree with that assessment.

Given that the SABC asserts its commitment to editorial fairness, respect for religious dignity, and constitutional values, it is my personal view that the title of the discussion could have been amended before drawing the listeners' attention to the subject matter of the conversation."

EVALUATION

- [5] The impugned broadcast comprised a live interview with Prof. Ryan Blumenthal, a senior specialist forensic pathologist at the University of Pretoria. Lightning research is one of his areas of specialisation, and he has dedicated a substantial part of his career to researching lightning-induced injuries and fatalities¹. Key aspects of his research indicate that lightning is the most consistent weather-related killer globally, causing approximately 24,000 deaths each year with rural communities in South Africa being particularly affected. Prof Blumenthal uses the "serial killer" metaphor in his academic publications and public engagements to raise awareness, attract attention and emphasize that deaths are preventable through disseminating of appropriate safety information.
- [6] The Complainant's primary objection relates to the alleged "title" of the interview and the purported lack of editorial control to prevent such an "offensive" title being broadcast before and during the interview. In an email to the BCCSA, the Complainant states that Ms Renske Jacobs, one of the presenters, "*may have been taken somewhat off guard when announcing the title of the discussion*".

¹ Prof R Blumenthal, Google and AI overview. Available on the Internet. Accessed on 29 Jan 2026.

- [7] The allegedly offensive reference was used only once, at the beginning of the interview, when Ms Jacobs asked Prof Blumenthal:

“Wat interessant is - ek het nog nooit so gehoor praat oor weerlig nie - jy beskou weerlig as "die natuur se gevaarlikste reeksmoordenaar. Dis 'n interessante term, hoekom beskou jy weerlig in so 'n lig?"

In an initial response to the complaint, Mr Kobus Burger, programme manager of RSG, indicated that the description of the interview was *Weerliggevaar: Waarom elke sekonde tel*. In my view, the introductory phrasing used by Ms Jacobs cannot reasonably be regarded as the formal “title” of the interview requiring special editorial oversight, as contended by the Complainant.

- [8] It is important to reiterate that the BCCSA's mandate is limited to determining whether broadcast content, as aired, contravenes the Code of Conduct. The Commission does not adjudicate editorial decisions or internal editorial processes. Its jurisdiction does not extend to directing broadcasters on how content should be presented, nor does it assess the appropriateness of editorial choices unless such choices result in a breach of the Code.
- [9] The Complainant argues that the use of a metaphor such as “*Weerlig, die natuur se dodelikste reeksmoordenaar*” is blasphemous and impairs the dignity of Christians. He submits that the phrase constitutes blasphemy and hate speech as it allegedly amounts to an objectively offensive and harmful portrayal of the Christian faith and its theological foundations.
- [10] Although blasphemy was historically recognised as an offence in South Africa, only one reported Supreme Court decision exists on the matter, namely *R v Webb (1934)*. In that case, the Appellate Division held that a conviction for blasphemy requires a “*deliberate intention to cast contempt upon Jesus*”².

²Milton J South Africa Criminal Law and Procedure Vol II *Common-law Crimes* (1996) 296.

- [11] Under Roman-Dutch law, blasphemy consisted of the cursing or slandering of the name of God. The Complainant contends that, according to Christian theology, nature forms part of God's created order and that the unqualified use of such terminology therefore carries the implication that God, as Creator and sustainer of nature, is indirectly portrayed as a deliberate murderer. The impugned phrase, however, did not literally refer to God, Jesus, or Christ. In any event, in present-day South Africa, blasphemy is treated within the broader framework of hate speech based on religion.
- [12] Clause 4(2) of the Code provides that, for a broadcast to constitute an infringement, the words complained of must, when assessed in context, amount to the advocacy of hatred based on religion and must further constitute incitement to cause harm. Both requirements are absent in the present matter, irrespective of whether the language may be perceived as offensive by some viewers. There is no indication that harm or malice was intended by either Prof Blumenthal or the presenter. Mere offensiveness does not, in itself, justify a finding that the Code has been breached. The impugned statement must meet the specific criteria set out in the relevant clauses of the Code, which it does not in this instance.
- [13] When judged within context, Prof Blumenthal's use of the impugned metaphor - clearly not intended to be understood literally - was aimed solely at underscoring the seriousness of lightning-related risks. This serves a public education purpose grounded in scientific fact and is entirely unrelated to religious belief.
- [14] The BCCSA enforces compliance with its Codes of Conduct, as subscribed to by members of the NAB, by striking an appropriate balance between the media's right to freedom of expression, the audience's right to receive information, and the individual's right to dignity and privacy, in accordance with constitutional values.

[15] It is apposite to refer to the following statement by O'Regan J in *South African National Defence Union v Minister of Defence and Another* 1999 (4) SA 469 (CC):

"The corollary of freedom of expression and its related rights is tolerance by society of different views. Tolerance, of course, does not require approbation of a particular view. In essence, it requires acceptance of the public airing of disagreements and a refusal to silence unpopular views" (para 8).

I accordingly conclude that there are no elements of hate speech based on religion present in the broadcast, and the complaint is dismissed.



**DR LINDA VENTER
COMMISSIONER: BROADCASTING COMPLAINTS COMMISSION**