

Is Christianity Fast Becoming a Crime?

Last week a parishioner gave me an article to read from one of our national newspapers entitled “How Britain is turning Christianity into a crime”. They were understandably concerned - not about the article (which was very clearly pro-Christian) but about the situation it highlighted. The article was prompted by an incident the previous weekend of an evangelical Christian campaigner being arrested and charged with “using threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour” for peacefully handing out anti-gay literature at a gay rally.

This, of course, came hard on the heels of a group of Catholic Strathclyde firemen being disciplined for a refusing to distribute leaflets at a gay rally on the basis of conscientious objection. No one seemed to ask the basic question as to why firemen - employed at public expense to provide emergency services - were being used to distribute leaflets in the first place, but then the fact that the Catholic Church teaches that we are morally required to follow our conscience didn't even come into it - their action was judged solely on secular grounds.

The basic issue in both cases goes much deeper than the superficial context of the rallies and strikes at the heart of inalienable freedoms enshrined in *Magna Carta* - the “Great Charter of Freedoms” - including freedom of speech and freedom of expression. Of course, all rights and freedoms also imply duties and responsibilities, and freedom of speech cannot be seen as a licence for abusive or racist words or actions and our modern laws rightly protect citizens against the negative “isms” of our age - racism, sexism, ageism, etc.

The article cited several other examples of what is basically “political correctness” gone berserk, incidents of people simply exercising their freedom of expression in the area of, in this case, Christian beliefs only to find themselves threatened with legal proceedings on the grounds that they were acting against religious or cultural “diversity”. The most absurd example of this is certain local authorities banning public activities connected with Christmas on the grounds that they are ‘too Christian’!

The journalist made a number of very telling points:

Christianity is still the official religion of this country. All its institutions, its history and its culture are suffused with it; Britain would lose its identity, its values and its cohesion without it. But minority rights are now being wielded against it like a wrecking ball.

Behaviour which was previously considered to transgress the moral norms of the Bible has now instead become the norm - and it is biblical values that are treated as beyond the pale of acceptable behaviour. Christianity has been dethroned as this country's governing creed on the

basis that equality demands equal status for minority faiths and secularism.

It is a process before which the Church of England has long been on its knees, going with the flow of moral and cultural collapse...and then wondering why its churches are so empty while those of uncompromising evangelicals are packed to the rafters.¹

Central to religious belief is personal conviction, otherwise what's the point? And with our incorporation into a faith community, comes a mandate to bear witness to our faith, sharing our conviction in the hope of bringing others to that same faith experience. There are, of course, social and legal safeguards in place to control the undesirable and even dangerous efforts of fanaticism, but that is an entirely different thing to people simply bearing witness, even conscientious witness, to their faith and the principles they live by. This should be a person's right just as it is everyone else's right to freedom in their response. If someone wants to lawfully distribute leaflets, or stand on a street corner and speak, they should be free to do so; no one is forcing anyone to take a leaflet or to stop and listen, it's up to them. It seems to me outrageous that the police should become involved in a purely democratic and peaceful right, in order to somehow "restore the balance" on behalf of someone else who doesn't agree or who hasn't the personal conviction to be similarly active. As the article said:

This bizarre state of affairs has arisen thanks to our human rights culture which automatically champions minorities against the majority. As a result, no one can say anything disobliging about a minority without being accused of prejudice or discrimination.

That word *disobliging* means "to refuse to act in line with the wishes of someone else". This doesn't mean you are guilty of discrimination or some sort of phobic reaction, it simply means you don't agree with what that person wants or has said and therefore you are exercising your right to disagree or even, perhaps, to argue against them or to put another point of view. Any effort to restrict or deny that basic right under freedom of speech - the right to dissent - is moving us into areas where we really shouldn't be going as a democratic country. If the article's interpretation of recent events is accurate, then it is *Magna Carta* and our democratic freedoms that are under threat and that should be a cause for concern to all of us.

Of additional concern to us as Christians is the fact that the situation is also spilling over into our religious freedoms too because, with all due respect to those of other religions or of no religion, *Magna Carta* states that "the English

¹ In this respect we might have similar concerns to those of the Church of England.

Church shall be free and enjoy her rights in their integrity and her liberties untouched”.² But, as the article said,

The sacred doctrine of human rights - which explicitly sets itself up as the religion for a godless age - is the means by which secularism is steadily attacking the Christian roots of our civilisation.

It went on to cite Norfolk County Council objecting to the inclusion of the word ‘Christian’ in the constitution of Barnabas House in King’s Lynn which houses homeless young men; two Lancashire pensioners being interrogated by police for nearly an hour and a half about their ‘homophobic’ views after they had merely asked their local council to display Christian literature alongside gay rights leaflets in civic buildings; Christian voluntary groups going out of existence when government funding is refused on the grounds that to be Christian means they are not committed to ‘diversity’; and Prince Charles’ statement that when he becomes king (and as such Head of the Church of England!) he no longer wishes to be called “Defender of the Faith” but the more inclusive “defender of faith”.

We certainly used to be a Christian country and many have paid the ultimate price in defence of that claim, and statistically it would still seem to be the case - or at least nominally so. The 2001 census showed that 70% of the population declared themselves to be Christian; 3.5% of other faiths; 15% of no faith, and the remainder presumably didn’t respond at all. If the newspaper article is accurate in the picture it presents and the questions it asks, it would seem that the 70% of us who claim to be Christian are simply not “fighting our corner”. In effect we are apologising for our faith (“silence is taken as consent”) (“decisions are taken by those who show up”) and allowing our belief in God, and our freedom to bear witness to that faith, to be increasingly sidelined by a tide of political correctness and secularism from which God is missing.

I lived and worked in Saudi Arabia for seven years, a country notorious for, as we would see it, the repressive nature of certain aspects of its social structures. One of those is the total and absolute ban on any religion other than Islam. That never stopped me from having some very positive and informative discussions with Saudi colleagues on our respective beliefs. We weren’t out to convert one another, merely to better understand the faith we each professed. They would never have dreamt of reporting me to the authorities - we weren’t in conflict, I wasn’t threatening their religious freedoms nor criticising their beliefs - it was simply healthy and educational dialogue even within an otherwise very controlling society. With all due respect to them, and whilst not for a moment defending certain aspects of that theocracy (government based on religious

² This was, of course, three hundred years before Henry VIII’s split with Rome and so the charter referred to the church *in* England, at that time the only Christian church in these islands.

beliefs), they do at least have the courage of their faith convictions, which is something we seem to be increasingly lacking.

Whether our country continues to be Christian will be defined by the faith commitment and practice of the majority of its citizens. This doesn't infer, nor should it result in, discrimination against any other religion (or those of no religion) whose rights and freedoms are implicit in the religious tolerance of our society³ and don't need to be (super)imposed on us in the name of "political correctness" or diversity. The article is quite right in saying that secularism is steadily attacking the Christian roots of our civilisation - the biggest threat coming not from other faiths but from that part of our society that has no faith. We need to fight our corner.

In his document on evangelisation⁴, Pope Paul VI said:

The faith in these days has often to contend with *secularism* or even atheism...

We are speaking here of secularism strictly so-called, that is the conception of the world according to which it is entirely self-explanatory without any reference to God, who thus becomes unnecessary and is, as it were, an embarrassment. Secularism of this kind in seeking to assert the power of man, leads to a situation in which God is ignored or even denied....

The faith is challenged and threatened. Indeed it is often assailed and actively opposed. There is a danger therefore that it may either be overwhelmed by these attacks or starved for want of spiritual nourishment unless it is constantly fed and supported. Evangelisation therefore requires that the faithful be constantly provided with this nourishment and support for their faith.

We need to fight our corner - but the last word is Our Lord's:

In the world you will have trouble, but be brave: I have conquered the world. (John 16 v33)

You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. (Matthew 16 v18)

Do not be afraid; only have faith. (Mark 5 v36)

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³ We have hopefully learned our lesson from the dark days of the Reformation and the crusades.

⁴ *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975).