

BHA BRIEFING 2009: Christianity in Public Life

Briefing for Westminster Hall debate: 'Christianity in Public Life', 14.30-16.00, Wednesday 11th March 2009. British Humanist Association.

Diverse and non-religious population

British society is becoming increasingly diverse and increasingly non-religious. While the Census 2001 recorded 72% Christian in England and Wales, that is a figure that has never been replicated by any other social survey. For example, the British Social Attitudes survey finds in 2006 those affiliated to Christianity at just 47.5% of the population with the percentage of non-religious people nearly equalling that at 45.8%. Among young people the proportion that are non-religious is even higher – a 2004 survey for the DfES (now DCSF) found that 65% of young people consider themselves non-religious.

The decreasing importance of Christianity for most people in England is further exemplified in the figures of Church attendance, which have been in steady decline since the 1960s and which is now less than 6% of the population.

Continuing Christian privilege

However, that society is becoming more secular is not reflected in the continuing and hugely disproportionate influence of Christianity in and on public life.

Despite some advances, Christianity still has a stranglehold over many of the fundamental aspects of public life, leading to discrimination, disadvantage, inequality and policies which are not reflective of public morality.

- A third of all state-funded schools are 'faith schools', the vast majority of which are Anglican. The Church of England and the Catholic Church have consistently opposed measures which would prevent or even reduce discrimination on religious grounds in admissions and employment in those schools, leading to huge problems for social cohesion now and in the future. Many qualified teachers are simply barred from applying to both senior and other teaching positions in many state schools as they are of the 'wrong' or no religion.
- Collective worship, of a mainly or wholly Christian nature, is still compulsory in all schools. This is a policy which is widely considered, including by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, as incompatible with the UK's human rights obligations. The best situation would be the replacement of the law requiring religious worship with a law requiring inclusive assemblies that would be suitable for all children. For as long as the current law remains, however, children must be allowed to decide for themselves whether they wish to participate. To compel them to pray, or worship in other ways, is a clear interference with their right to freedom of belief – one of the most important rights that we enjoy.
- We still have an established Church with 26 seats in the House of Lords reserved for Church of England Bishops – and many more have been awarded life peerages. The UK is the only democratic country to give seats in its legislature to religious representatives as of right. The presence of Church of England in the House of Lords entrenches a privileged position for one particular branch of one particular religion that cannot be justified in today's society.
- It is not just on matters of principle that this Christian privilege should be opposed – Bishops in the Lords have exerted their influence on a variety of matters, attempting to and sometimes successfully change public policy in a way which does not reflect public opinion. For example:
 - They opposed Lord Joel Joffe's Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill, when they organised and lobbied to deny the Bill a Second Reading (almost unprecedented in the Lords). This is despite the vast majority of the public, including the vast majority of Anglicans, supporting a reform of the law to allow assisted dying of the terminally ill.

- In the reform of public services, Bishops have used their privileged position, in the Chamber, to argue for contracting out of services to their organisation (i.e. the Church of England). At the same time the Church of England was lobbying not to be bound by the Human Rights Act, so that they can continue discriminating in their employment and service provision.
- For reasons based primarily on their widely unshared beliefs and doctrines, some religious groups and individuals – Christians in particular – attempt to restrict the use of human tissues for scientific research and progress. Some also attempt to restrict access to abortion, or lobby to outlaw abortion. In 2008, religious campaigners attempted to have the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill amended to legislate against treating same-sex couples equally to heterosexual couples in access to fertility treatment, to reduce the number of weeks into pregnancy that women are able to access abortion and to restrict stem cell research. The Roman Catholic Church in particular lobbied very hard on this Bill using emotive misinformation about its contents and aims and putting pressure on Catholic MPs to follow the Church's, rather than the Government's, position.
- In May 2008, a number of amendments to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill on 'ethical' issues were debated and voted against in the House of Commons, reflecting the rational, scientific and ethical approach to these matters by the majority of MPs. Despite this, religious opponents of the Bill have vowed to continue to lobby, in particular aiming to have the abortion time-limit lowered and eventually banning abortion in the UK.
- Religious groups have access to Government funds and assistance which are not available equally to non-religious groups. They are in the front of the queue to take on public services on behalf of the state, retaining their significant exemptions from law to allow them to discriminate in their employment practices on grounds of religion and on sexual orientation, even when working under contract. The TUC and others have been outspoken about the potential for hugely detrimental effects on public services and public service workers, should increasing numbers of public sector jobs be reserved only for evangelical practising Christians, as many are already in our schools.

There are many other areas where Christianity exerts an undue and unrepresentative influence in British public life today, including: broadcasting, public ethical matters, marriage law, free speech issues, charity law, education, communities strategies, constitutional reform, chaplaincy and human rights law and practice.

What's the alternative?

The British Humanist Association (BHA) campaigns for a secular state and an open society. By secular, we mean a state in which public institutions are separate from religious institutions and the state is neutral on matters of religion or belief, neither privileging nor disadvantaging none on the basis of his or her beliefs.

At present the continued establishment of the Church of England encourages demands for the equal privileging of other religions, as seen in the wider context of Lords reform and the school system.

'Secularism is not atheism and it is not anti-religious – in fact it benefits both the religious and the non-religious in their aspect as members of a single society. It provides a genuinely neutral framework within which we can express ourselves as a community, and in a diverse society it is a necessity. The achievement of a secular society should be the priority with which we approach all questions of religion and the state, questions of church and state included'¹.

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¹ Copson, A. and Pollock, D. (2006) 'Religion and the state in an open society'. London: British Humanist Association