

## FAITH EQUALITY, RACE EQUALITY AND COMMUNITY COHESION: NOTES ON KEY CONCEPTS – ROBIN RICHARDSON

### *Summary*

This review has two parts. The first provides a historical account of how legislation and legal discourse have developed over the years, particularly recently, with regard to (a) race and (b) religion. Its second part discusses eight key issues now requiring attention with regard to faith equality, as the term might be called, at national, local and institutional levels.

### **Part 1: Legal discourse and legislation over the years**

The first relevant pieces of anti-discrimination legislation in the UK were enacted in 1965 and 1968, and these were then developed and substantially strengthened through the Race Relations Act 1976. The dominant discourse was of *racial groups*, *race relations* and *racial discrimination* and the principal value was conceptualised as *racial equality* or (in due course) *race equality*. At the time the 1976 Act was being drafted and agreed, there was discussion in parliament at committee stage about whether a reference to religion should be included as one of the grounds on which discrimination should be made unlawful. It was resolved, however, that religion should be omitted, since at that time discrimination on grounds of religion was not considered to be a major harm that had to be addressed. Nevertheless, the central concept of *racial group* was widely defined, and involved not only so-called race but also nationality, and ethnic and national origins. In due course, as a result of case law, people affiliated to two religions (Sikhism and Judaism) were defined as racial groups.

But although the concept of *racial group* was widely defined in the legislation, campaigners for race equality in the 1980s spoke and wrote principally in terms of black people and white, and racism was conceived as essentially to do with discrimination on the grounds of physical appearance, particularly skin colour. In so far as differentiation within the overall category of black was acknowledged, the terminology was of Afro-Caribbean and Asian. The latter were seldom referred to by officialdom or by white campaigners with the terms which they themselves were increasingly using for self-definition — terms recalling national and regional origins, for example Bangladeshi, Gujarati, Indian, Kashmiri, Pakistani and Punjabi, or words recalling religious traditions, for example, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh.

Towards the end of the 1980s the dominant race relations paradigm, dividing everyone along black and white lines, was challenged by a number of organisations and individual commentators. Representations arguing for a revised paradigm were made in the early 1990s when the 1976 Act was formally reviewed, the basic demand being that the category of religion or faith should be added to the Act's remit. However, no change was made in legislation or in official discourse.

Towards the end of the 1990s the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry argued for substantial revisions in race relations legislation, but it barely touched on issues of faith and religion. 'Where's the Muslim in Macpherson's black and white world?' asked a headline in the Muslim magazine *Q News*. The article observed that race equality legislation had 'reduced the Muslims, the largest minority in Britain, to a deprived and disadvantaged community, almost to a state of siege... Much as Muslims want to confront racism, they have become disillusioned with an

antiracism movement that refuses to combat Islamophobia and which, in many instances, is as oppressive as the establishment itself.' A follow-up article in *Q News* declared that 'the Muslim community has little faith left in the race industry, at the helm of which is the CRE' and spoke of the CRE's 'mean-spirited hostility' towards Muslims.

In summary, there were two principal concerns. Race relations discourse did not sufficiently, it was said:

- address forms of prejudice and hostility where the principal markers of difference are to do with religion and culture as distinct from physical appearance, and in consequence people of Muslim heritage continue to suffer from substantial discrimination both in employment and in service delivery
- recognise how people of South Asian heritage increasingly understand and define themselves, and therefore did not recognise the narratives, perceptions, moral values and spiritual resources on which British people of South Asian heritage draw in order to resist discrimination and prejudice against them.

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, published in 1999, helped to shape key ideas and requirements in the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Again, representations were made arguing that issues of religion and faith should be included on the face of the Act or, at the very least, in the various codes of practice which were issued in its wake. The campaigns and lobbies had no effect, however, at the level of official discourse and policy. Local authorities had to produce *race equality schemes*, and schools had to produce *race equality policies*. There was no explicit requirement to refer in these to religion or faith, or to combat forms of racism such as Islamophobia.

However, substantial conceptual and legislative changes were on the way. Key events and influences included the following:

In 2000, the report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, chaired by Lord Parekh, argued that the central value of *equality* should be complemented and enriched by the values of *diversity* and *cohesion*. The three values were summarised by Lord Parekh as follows:

### ***Equality***

All individuals have equal worth irrespective of their colour, gender, ethnicity, religion, age or sexual orientation, and have equal claims to the opportunities they need to realise their potential and contribute to collective well-being.

### ***Diversity***

Since citizens have different biographies and needs, equal treatment of them requires full account to be taken of their differences. When equality ignores relevant differences and insists on uniformity of treatment, it leads to injustice and inequality; when differences ignore the demands of equality, they result in discrimination. Equality must be defined in a culturally sensitive way and applied in a discriminating but not discriminatory manner.

## ***Cohesion***

Every society needs to be cohesive as well as respectful of diversity, and must find ways of nurturing diversity while fostering a common sense of belonging and a shared identity. Although every society needs a broadly shared body of values, there is a risk of defining these so narrowly that their further development is ruled out or that legitimate ways of life are suppressed. While insisting on such essential procedural values as tolerance, mutual respect, dialogue and peaceful resolution of differences, and such basic ethical norms as respect for human dignity, equal worth of all, equal opportunity for self-development and equal life chances, there must be respect for deep moral differences and ways must be found of resolving inescapable conflicts.

(*The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: the Parekh Report*, Profile Books 2000, viii–ix)

In late 2001 the Parekh Report's emphasis on cohesion and belonging was taken up by the Cante Report (*Community Cohesion: a report of the independent review team*),<sup>1</sup> itself drawing on reports on disturbances in northern cities, and shortly afterwards the Government's community cohesion programme was launched and developed.

Also in autumn 2001 the United Nations World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) summarised its concerns with the phrase 'racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance'. The equivalent phrase used by the Council of Europe is 'racism, xenophobia, antisemitism and intolerance'. Both phrases are cumbersome, but valuably signal that there is a complex cluster of matters to be addressed and that the single word *racism*, as customarily used, does not encompass them all. In effect the WCAR argued that the term *racism* should be expanded to encompass patterns of prejudice and discrimination such as antisemitism, sectarianism and Islamophobia, where the markers of difference are to do with religious and cultural affiliation rather than physical appearance.

The events on 11 September 2001 were an extremely vivid reminder that religion has the power to play a significant part in public affairs. One of the immediate legislative effects in the UK was the introduction of the concept of *religiously aggravated* in the criminal justice system in England and Wales. The concept was already in use in the legal systems in Northern Ireland and Scotland. The principal purpose in England and Wales was to protect British Muslims from a range of criminal offences against them. Its significance lay not only and not so much in the number of cases that were prosecuted but in the official recognition it gave, at the heart of criminal law, to religious identity.

In December 2003, due to legislative requirements at European level, discrimination on grounds of religion or belief in employment became unlawful. Employers are required not only to avoid discrimination in recruitment practices but also to make reasonable adjustments in workplace practices to accommodate a religiously diverse workforce.

In January 2006, the Equality Bill received its final reading in the House of Commons.<sup>2</sup> The new legislation prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion or

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[http://www.faithandcohesion.org/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_details&gid=40](http://www.faithandcohesion.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_details&gid=40)

2 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc\\_parliament/4652313.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc_parliament/4652313.stm)

belief in the provision of goods and services, and in the regulatory functions of public bodies. Further, it authorises the establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR). The commission's duties will include attention to six separate strands of equality, and one of these involves central attention to matters of religion, faith and belief. It may well be that the term *faith equality*, coined on an analogy with *race equality*, *gender equality*, *age equality*, and so forth, will become current. Key issues for faith equality, whether or not this actual term enters general discourse, are outlined below.

## **Part 2: Issues relating to Faith Equality**

Work for faith equality requires attention to a range of separate though interrelated issues. Some of the issues are to do with the letter of the new and still developing legislation. Most, however, are to do with implementing its spirit. Either way this is a new and largely uncharted area for schools and local authorities, as also for other public bodies, and all reflections and discussions are necessarily tentative. Eight sets of issues are discussed below.

### **(1) Reasonable adjustments**

There is a legal duty to avoid discrimination on grounds of religion and belief both in employment and in the delivery of services. Further, on the other side of the same legislative coin, there is a duty to make reasonable adjustments, in order to accommodate the wishes, preferences and values of employees and service users related to their religious affiliation or faith. The law does not attempt to lay down what exactly is reasonable, nor with precision what is or is not to count as a religious value or preference. Preliminary guidance has been provided by the Department for Trade and Industry, however, and case law will in due course evolve. It will be complemented by negotiation and reflection in each separate public institution.

### **(2) Policy documentation and terminology**

Every public body needs to review its current documentation and policy discourse in relation to race equality issues, to ensure that there is central reference also, wherever appropriate, to faith equality. Changes at the level of formal policy are not sufficient, as is well known, to ensure changes in real outcomes. They are, however, as a general rule, necessary. What is required, it has been said, is a new language 'beyond anti-racism'. It must robustly encompass antiracism, but encompass other forms of attitudinal and institutional intolerance as well.

### **(3) *Ethno-religious identity***

It is crucial to recall that religious affiliation can take a range of forms, and that a person may identify with a religious tradition without necessarily holding any distinctive theological views and without necessarily engaging in any distinctive religious activities. For such people their religion provides markers of belonging rather than a set of beliefs. It's relevant to recall an old story from Northern Ireland. 'Are you a Protestant,' a visitor is asked, 'or a Catholic?' – 'Neither,' comes the reply, 'I'm an atheist.' – 'Yes, but are you a Protestant atheist or a Catholic atheist?' Belonging to a religious tradition or community, the point is, does not necessarily have anything to do with holding certain religious beliefs or engaging in certain religious practices. By the same token, hostility towards a

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<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldbills/002/2006002.htm>

certain ethno-religious community has nothing necessarily to do with hostility towards any specific religious beliefs. Consider, in this latter respect, anti-semitism – Jews who are secular, atheist and non-observant may nevertheless be targets of anti-Jewish prejudice. Similarly sectarianism is not primarily about hostility towards certain beliefs, and nor is Islamophobia.

When it was agreed in parliament that there should be a question in the 2001 Census asking ‘what is your religion?’, the then Home Secretary explained the rationale as follows: ‘I think it is becoming clear that more people are identifying themselves in terms of their religion or culture than ever before. That is why there is a need to expand on the kind of ethnic monitoring that is carried out in the Census. The basic classifications of black, white or Asian are simply out of date.’<sup>3</sup> In making this statement, the Home Secretary was in effect accepting and underlining fundamental distinctions between ‘beliefs’, ‘practice’ and ‘affiliation’. The census question was not about people’s personal religious beliefs, nor about whether they observed a religion by, for example, attending worship or following certain practices. Rather, it was about their broad affiliation, the community they identified with. It encompassed not only people who take their religious faith very seriously but also identities such as ‘nominal Christian’ or ‘secular Jew’. In different words, it was not only about personal faith but also about people’s sense of ethno-religious identity

Incidentally, it is relevant to note here that the word ‘faith’ has changed in its meanings in recent years. Traditionally, the word referred to beliefs, as in the famous phrase ‘faith, hope and charity’. Latterly, however, it has been adopted as a synonym for religious affiliation and no longer necessarily implies the existence of beliefs or the observance of practices. This shift in meaning does not seem to lead to greater clarity and is arguably most unfortunate.

#### (4) *Mixed identities*

The Home Secretary’s remarks cannot be interpreted as implying that categories of culture and religion are of overriding importance, to the exclusion of all other categories. On the contrary, it was axiomatic in the Census that people have mixed identities – Black British, Asian British, and so forth. By implication the Census recognised the concept of British Muslim, for example, or British Sikh, British Hindu.

It follows that a significant task for the education system is to assist and support children and young people as they test out and shape mixed identities, as distinct from single identities. It follows also that there are many ways of being a British Muslim or British Sikh, for example, just as there are many different ways of being a British Christian.

#### (5) *Religious literacy*

There is an increasing need for people in public bodies, particularly those with leadership and senior management responsibilities, to be ‘religiously literate’. The concept does not imply holding a set of distinctively religious beliefs, but to understanding the range of ways in which religion may affect a person’s values and perspectives. It implies also that a religious tradition should be understood in its own terms, so far as is humanly possible, not through templates and assumptions derived from another tradition. For example, it is religiously illiterate

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/paper/index.php?article=1129>  
<http://www.mcb.org.uk/downloads/census2001.pdf>

to suppose that imams in Islam have the same range of roles and responsibilities as clerics in Christianity.

Religious literacy also involves recognising that within every tradition there is a tension and conversation between pressures to maintain the heritage and pressures to re-interpret it. It is religiously illiterate to suppose that all people with a strong commitment to a certain tradition have much the same orientation towards it. Further, religious literacy involves understanding the pressures in every tradition that lead to the emergence of 'fundamentalism' and 'extremism', and that may cause certain adherents to use religious discourse to justify, or try to justify, immoral acts.

Another aspect of religious literacy involves being aware of power differences. It is illiterate to equate an attack on a bishop of the established church with an attack on a cleric in a marginalised community subject to racist violence. It was religiously illiterate for a group of French writers, apropos the controversy about the Danish cartoons in early 2006, to defend them on the grounds that 'picking on the parish priest has long been a national sport.'

(6) The handling of controversy and management of conflict

The Parekh Report, cited above, stressed that community cohesion necessarily involves 'respect for deep moral differences' and that 'ways must be found of resolving inescapable conflicts'. This was not a recipe for an anything-goes moral relativism and did not imply that a term such as *faith equality* means there are no ways of evaluating religious views in relation to each other. On the contrary, Lord Parekh stressed the importance of 'such essential procedural values as tolerance, mutual respect, dialogue and peaceful resolution of differences, and such basic ethical norms as respect for human dignity, equal worth of all, equal opportunity for self-development and equal life chances.'

Increasingly, the development and defence of such procedural values and ethical norms for handling controversy and conflict are crucial tasks for all managers and leaders in modern organisations.

(7) 'Belief'

It must be borne in mind that the key concept in anti-discrimination legislation is not 'faith' but 'religion or belief'. Conflicts, arguments and controversies exist not only between and within different religious traditions but also between religious traditions and secular ones. The latter include the worldviews implicit in the vast majority of social science, natural science, medicine, engineering, law and public administration, and in most contemporary work in the performing, literary and visual arts. Religious literacy, referred to above, includes understanding and taking seriously secular and humanist beliefs as well as religious ones.

The importance of recognising secular beliefs and outlooks was stressed a few years ago by the project known as 'Faith Together in Leeds 11',<sup>4</sup> funded by the Single Regeneration Budget. The phrase was a significant pun, for it referred not only to the involvement of overt religious bodies in the project but also to the secular, humanist belief in the regenerative power of the local community held by staff based in local, regional and national government. By the same token, a phrase such as 'faith in schools' has, or should have, two meanings.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.faithtogether.org.uk/>

(8) *Good and bad religion: and the need for discernment*

'If the concept of God has any validity or any use,' said James Baldwin once, 'it can only be to make us larger, freer and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of him.'<sup>5</sup> This was a vivid way of recalling that religion can do harm as well as good. In all religious traditions a distinction is made between 'true religion' and 'false religion'. Sometimes it seems easy to make the distinction, or minimally to recognise false religion when one sees it – planes flying into the Twin Towers, for example, or when true religion is equated cavalierly with 'us' and false religion with 'them'. But traditional teachings through the centuries have also stressed that telling the difference between true and false religion is not really easy at all, for human capacities for self-deception and for false security seem limitless.

A Christian word for telling the difference between true and false religion is discernment. One of the most influential exponents of the concept was Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), whose key terminology distinguished between true and false consolation. The opposite of both kinds of consolation was desolation. The signs of the latter, Loyola said, include 'lack of confidence, in which the soul is without hope and without love; one finds oneself thoroughly lazy, lukewarm, and as though cut off from our Creator and Lord.'<sup>6</sup> If such language were demythologised and secularised there would perhaps be valuable insights for understanding the growth of false religion in our own times.

See in this respect 'The Radical Loser' by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, published in *Der Spiegel* on 7 November 2005 and available in English from the Goethe Institute at [www.signandsight.com/features/493.html](http://www.signandsight.com/features/493.html). It discusses in depth the psychology of suicide bombers who seek to justify their actions by claiming that they have a divine seal of approval. There are also links to articles about the psychology and social psychology of suicide bombers at [www.insted.co.uk/multi.html](http://www.insted.co.uk/multi.html).

It is relevant to note, further, the 'christianising', as the term might be, of anti-immigrant racism in recent publications of the BNP, and the 'christianising' of opposition to 'the political correctness brigade' in, for example, the *Daily Express*. Such 'christianising' is also evident in the creation, by some members of the BNP, of a body entitled the Christian Council of Britain.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James Baldwin, 'From a Region of My Mind', *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Quoted at: <http://www.nathanielturner.com/feminismblackeroticarevstruggle.htm>

<sup>6</sup> From *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, at: <http://www.jesuit.org/images/docs/915dWg.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> The far-right British National Party (BNP) is seeking to gain ground in the forthcoming local elections by playing on false fears about race and immigration, and by seeking to exploit the mythology of a white 'Christian Britain'. 'BNP exploit racist fears and "Christian country" claims' (19 Apr. 2006): [http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/news\\_syndication/article\\_060419bnp.shtml](http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/news_syndication/article_060419bnp.shtml)

'The Christian Council of Britain (CCB) has reportedly been set up by members of the BNP to rival the Muslim Council of Britain.' 'BNP Members involved in "Christian Front" (14 Mar. 2006): [http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/news\\_syndication/article\\_060314bnp.shtml](http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/news_syndication/article_060314bnp.shtml)