

A Discussion Paper from Barnardo's CANDL Project

This is one of a series of discussion papers dealing with current and controversial questions for the church in modern society, and primarily distributed with our quarterly newsletter. Our aim in these papers is to provoke debate and action. As such, the views and questions expressed herein are sometimes quite deliberately blunt and to the point, but do not necessarily represent the policy of Barnardo's.

Discrimination against the churches -- fact or fiction?

The government has been increasingly interested in including faith communities in their regeneration agenda but within Christian circles there is some scepticism due to the discrimination which they feel they have suffered. This paper looks at some of the issues involved in this difficult question and without seeking to answer it, one way or the other, seeks to identify what are the critical questions which we must face.

A secular society?

I'm confused. I'm told that we live in a secular society but I'm also told that we are a Christian country. Maybe there is some truth in this seeming paradox. Society is increasingly secular, our day-to-day lives, the media, our culture take less and less notice of Christianity but this very secularity is built on Christian roots. The Bishops still sit in the House of Lords and are asked their opinions on moral issues. A majority of people in the census identified themselves as Christian. The Bible is woven into the very fabric of our language.

Secularisation is a contentious subject in academic debate. The straightforward connection between modernity and secularism has often been challenged both by academics like David Martin and the revival of religion in the USA, the flagship of modernity. Callum Brown's interesting book "The Death of Christian Britain" says that Britain remained basically Christian until as late as the 1960s when women rebelled against Christian morality. He is one of a score of revisionist church historians questioning the line I was taught during my theology degree in the early Eighties that the Victorian working class were never Christian.

So what does this mean for us as churches? Certainly there is less understanding of Christianity in our society and we have to explain more in order to be understood. Certainly most churches are seeing numbers decline (but not in east London where we are experiencing an African inspired revival). But is this the beginning of the end for the churches -- or a new opportunity to remake Christianity cleansed of Christendom and all its baggage? This growing secularism has caused people to ask whether Christianity is now being marginalised and discriminated against.

An anti-Christian ideology?

A recent article by David R. Hodge asks the question Does Social Work Oppress Evangelical Christians? Its precis runs thus:

This article argues that social work, informed by "new class" and ideology, oppresses Evangelical Christians. The article discusses the rise of the "new class," along with its attendant ideology, which sanctions and legitimises discrimination against evangelicals and other people of faith.... consequently, the article suggests that social work is losing touch with numerous ethnic and religious minority groups, and unless the profession deconstructs the ideology that informs it, it will be unable to provide services to will facilitate dialogue among the increasingly diverse populations of North America.

The article produces some telling evidence which certainly seems to ring true. A recent short article by Bernard Moss in community care looks at whether social work qualifications are preparing social workers to understand the role and impact of religion in society. He comments

"there was very little acknowledgement of religion and spirituality being empowering or resilient influences in people's lives. By contrast, several programmes highlighted some of the flashpoints in the ways in which minority groups and women were often badly treated by religious organisations". This all chimes with my own experience in academia where I have been told to my face that an essay didn't receive top marks because it was about churches. Comments from friends also seem to suggest that you are unlikely to get a first if you tackle a religious subject in a social science degree. There seems to be a deep-rooted suspicion of religion in academia which produces prejudice and discrimination.

This prejudice can percolate out in society. When I was a teenager I have the memory of two television clips. One was of David Penhaligon, a Liberal MP saying the what he was most afraid of was American Christian fundamentalism 'taking over' Britain. It struck me as faintly ludicrous at the time but when a little later I saw a clip from South Africa of a white woman expressing her fears about black majority rule and saying "we will become chocolate coloured". I wondered if there was really any difference between the anxieties and prejudices underlying the two quotes

Minority ethnic Christianity

My experience would also suggest that black Christians are particularly likely to be discriminated against. I remember talking to a council official in Lewisham about partnership between churches and the council. It was quite clear that he was happy to work with established churches but was suspicious of black majority churches because of experiences he had had with them in the past. I suspect there are many deeply ingrained stereotypes and prejudices about black religion within academia and bureaucracies which need exploring and challenging. There is also a danger for white Christians to find common cause with secular prejudices against black religion as a way proving their respectability to people and institutions that find religion of questionable value.

Christianity and "faith communities"

A new language of faith communities seems to have appeared in recent years. I find it perplexing. Personally I am interested in exploring working with Muslim and other religious communities but I rattle at us all being labelled as faith communities -- I think I'm beginning to feel the same irritation that pentecostal and holiness churches feel at being labelled as black led. I wouldn't deny that faith is important to me but it's not what I call myself -- I think of myself as a Christian rather than a 'person of faith'. The language makes me feel as if I'm being manipulated. The secular attitude seems to me to be that there isn't really any difference between religions - that they are all just different manifestations of superstition. A sign of a religious person being safe and not 'fanatical' is that he is prepared to be involved in an interfaith body and that is only through such a body that 'faith initiatives' can be safely worked with. Again I think dialogue between religions is of great importance but that's a long way from being expected to be involved in an interfaith body in order to be given a place at the table. I worry that this is the way we are going. Some years ago I was at a Jewish-Christian meeting where an Anglican clergyman said that no Christians are really interested in converting Jews any more. When I questioned this assertion I was treated like some kind of fanatical pariah. Toleration is a funny thing.

Funding and faith

The question of funding faith based initiatives is a contentious one at the moment and we in the CANDL project have certainly heard stories which illustrate how difficult it can be for Christian organisations to be upfront about their religious basis and fundraise successfully. I worry, however, that this is an issue we can over focus on. The problem of anti religious prejudice is much more profound than simply the funding of Christian, Muslim and other religious organisations. There is a desperate need to enter into a meaningful dialogue about what religion means in contemporary society and how we can move into a shared understanding of the role of religion and faith within communities. One of the most disturbing things about the issue is the way people just don't want to talk about it -- only focusing on the funding issue seems likely simply to entrench positions more and more.

Conclusions

So what conclusion can we come to? There seems to me little doubt that there is discrimination against Christian organisations and churches. Prejudice and ignorance is widespread and this can make life difficult for Christians -- especially black Christians as they seek to be fully involved in their communities. This can cause us to withdraw into our own safe world and not be involved with the wider community -- except, perhaps, when we need funding, planning permission or something else which we can't do for ourselves.

Nonetheless there are also issues which we need to look at ourselves. Are our attitudes sometimes defensive? Are we sometimes not completely honest in our funding applications? Do we have a blind spot for the the privileges and powers of churches in a country with a strong Christian heritage? Certainly some caution is necessary in challenging specks of discrimination before our own planks are removed.

Perhaps we need to take a more subtle approach than protesting against discrimination whenever we experience it. Our society is really neither Christian nor secular but a mixture of both and both traditions have contributed to what we are now -- good and bad. The ability to live together, religious and nonreligious, is crucial for our future flourishing as a modern nation. Ignorance of Christianity diminishes the whole of society for if people do not know about Christianity they do not know their roots and prejudice of any sort demeans everyone. Secular society desperately needs to learn to live with religion -- especially the kind of powerful, confident religion that it is so uncomfortable with. It needs to stop believing that religion is a primitive state that will wither away in the face of the manifest goodness of liberal values. We need to together embrace the Britain where many different religions are practised in many different ways. Religions need to be enabled to contribute in their own way to society -- a way which includes the nurturing of their distinctive spirituality as part of their holistic mission. I think that this is what we should be arguing for rather than seeking to retain our privileges and scramble for our piece of the government funding pie. Sometimes challenges need to be made and things questioned -- as for instance the new legislation on religious discrimination which may make it difficult for faith based bodies to recruit people who share their faith. But above all we need to show people in words and actions how Christian faith actually works in practice: What a good Christian project looks like. How faith can change a person's life. Why spirituality is the opposite of fanaticism. It can be done. I remember my professor, a totally nonreligious person but an expert on drug abuse reflecting on how much more effective religious drug rehabilitation programmes were and then going on to seek funding for a research project on the role of churches in urban communities. We didn't get the funding but I think we made some progress.

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If you want to respond to any of the above points, or follow-up any of the ideas, please do get in touch with us at CANDL.

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