



# **Human Rights & Equalities Charnwood**

**Public Lecture 2010**

29th April 2010  
Sir Robert Martin Theatre Martin Hall  
Loughborough University

**“Some more equal than others?”  
Equality, faith and the  
established Church in England  
today**

**Guest Speaker**  
The Right Reverend Tim Stevens  
Bishop of Leicester

*We would like to thank the Vice Chancellor and  
Loughborough University for their kind support and  
invitation to the campus*

## **Introduction: Christianity and Equality incompatible?**

One of the more intriguing moments in the recent TV election debates was when a questioner asked about the forthcoming visit of the Pope to the UK. The question implied that the Pope stood for principles which were incompatible with contemporary ideas of equality and human rights – anti abortion, homophobic, anti scientific approach to embryology research etc. As if that was not enough, he was the world leader of a Church whose moral authority had been deeply eroded by the child abuse scandals. For once, the three speakers were slightly hesitant and cautious. Yes, they welcomed the visit of the Pope, recognising how important this would be for the Catholic communities in this country, but taking the trouble to point out that each of them was opposed to Catholic teaching on these subjects.

I speak, of course, not as a Catholic, but as an Anglican Bishop recognising that, especially in the last week of an Election campaign, Christian approaches to questions of equality and human rights can seem controversial. There are real questions around now as to how far a secular society can accommodate the freedoms traditionally accorded to religious groups. That leads in turn to further questions about the appropriateness of a formal religious voice

speaking on behalf of the established Church in Parliament. And for some, it leads to the view that religious faith and conviction is essentially incompatible with secular notions of equality.

I want to explore some of these questions tonight. First, by looking at what the Christian tradition has to say about equality and then to recognise that inequalities in our country have particularly dangerous and damaging consequences for collective wellbeing. And then I want to go on to see how this relates to the recent Equalities legislation brought before Parliament, and the controversial way in which the media reported the response of the Bishops. And that will lead us to think about how we balance religious freedoms and statutory obligations in a secular society. And perhaps at the end I will ask whether there is any longer a place for Bishops in Parliament in a society which is increasingly religiously and ethnically plural.

## **Christian Teaching on Equality**

So first, what is the basis of any Christian argument for equality and what do Christians mean by equality? This week the Sunday Times published its annual rich list. It's a reminder of how a narrow cross section of our society lives a dramatically different life from the rest of us. Some soccer fans will remember the moment in the 2008 Champions League final when the Chelsea captain

John Terry missed the penalty that would have won his team the trophy. In the moments after this disaster, John Terry's face showed his desolation at letting down his team, his manager, the fans and himself. And the media reaction at the time was sympathetic to the tearful footballer who would now have to live with this very public moment of failure for the rest of his life. But it was only when the dust settled on the match that commentators pointed out that Terry earns in a week what six average British workers take home in a year, and suggested that we might expect him, for that sort of money, to do the basics of his job and shoot the ball on target from twelve yards!

Issues about salaries and bonuses paid at the top of the earnings scale have become acute and intense in the last eighteen months. Suddenly the question of highest earnings has become a matter of political concern.

From a Christian perspective there are two clear moral principles. The first is that human beings are given an equality of worth and status by virtue of their being created by God. This idea that all human beings have inherent worth as bearers of the image of God runs through the whole of the Hebrew scriptures. While disparities of wealth and status are clearly evident and acknowledged – the riches of certain patriarchs and kings are described uncritically or taken as a sign of divine blessing, and the existence of slaves is accepted –

a concern that none should be denied their basic needs pervades every book. In the Prophets, Isaiah and Amos come unspoken condemnation of those who exploit the poor:

*'What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor, says the Lord of Hosts.'* (Isaiah 3:15)

*'Hear this, you that trample upon the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land... the Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: surely I will never forget any of their deeds.'* (Amos 8:4-7)

And then of course there is the Old Testament concept of the Sabbath – the day once a week when all worked stopped so that rich and poor alike are to abstain temporarily from the creation of wealth. In the New Testament comes the idea that community can only truly be said to exist when all members of it are held to be equal. The Christian community was intended to be one in which any social status, wealth or standing is of no importance. In the book of Acts it is clear that the practise of the early Christians was to have shared all private possessions, sold lands and houses and distributed the proceeds to those in need. This was a fairly extreme version of social living but it reflects the teaching of Jesus in his rejection of riches and adoption of poverty and his teaching that entry into the Kingdom depends on setting ourselves free from the lure of wealth.

The examples of this teaching are too numerous to mention, but amongst the most well known is the saying of Jesus to his disciples:

*'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all'* (St Mark 10:43)

*'The last will be first, and the first will be last'* (Matthew 20:16)

It was based on this teaching that R H Tawney and William Beveridge argued that the state as well as local authorities, individual citizens and voluntary bodies and community groups all had a crucial role in reducing inequality. Tawney once wrote:

*'The existence of such opportunities in fact, and not merely in form, depends, not only upon an open road, but upon an equal start... equality of opportunity is fictitious without equality in the circumstances under which people have to develop and exercise their capacities.'* (R H Tawney, Equality, 1952)

Yet the debate about equality is still a divisive issue. Although we have made considerable progress since the 19<sup>th</sup> century on matters like One Person, One Vote or Equality before the Law, equality of opportunity and of access to wealth

remains a far off dream. Yet there are signs that it maybe returning to the political agenda. In a succession of opinion polls including the British Social Attitudes Survey, three quarters of voters in the UK said that the income gap is too wide.

## **Social Consequences of Inequality**

So let us stop to think briefly about the consequences of the inequalities we live with in this country. Last year The Children's Society (of which I Chair the Trustees) published a report entitled 'A Good Childhood'. It was an exploration of the condition of childhood in the UK drawing on the work of leading experts as well as the words of children themselves. The report explored the main influences to which every child is exposed – family, friends, youth culture, values and schooling as well as looking at questions about how a competitive individualised society can have a negative effect on children's wellbeing.

One of the most telling chapters of the report explored the whole question of inequalities. It showed that in Britain 22% of our children are living in relative poverty compared with only 13% thirty years ago. The report explored what relative poverty means. The bottom fifth of children lead radically different lives from the top fifth: fewer or no holidays away, much more cramped living space, fewer places to play or opportunities to swim, a lack of means to entertain friends. But

more worryingly children from poor families fair less well than others in terms of mental health, school achievement, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy. And in terms of later life, poverty in childhood is one of the five most powerful and consistent predictors of subsequent disadvantage.

And if we compare countries, those with high levels of child poverty also have much worse outcomes for children. This comes out clearly from UNICEF study which compared Britain with other countries. It demonstrates how closely correlated the levels of child wellbeing in a country are to the levels of child poverty. The US has the most child poverty and it has one of the lowest levels of child wellbeing.

So inequality is related to poor outcomes for children. The Good Childhood Report concluded that inequality is bad for the people at the top as well as the people at the bottom. And they went on to conclude that it may not be mainly income inequality that is having these bad effects, but an inadequate respect between people which is causing both income inequality and poor child outcomes. A society which practises less mutual respect will produce many types of bad outcome. To produce better child outcomes we have to change the fundamental ethos of society. We must reduce income inequality but that is not enough on its own.



We must also make society less success orientated and more generous with respect. The report goes on to say that although most people now pay lip service to the idea of eliminating child poverty, many have private reservations about whether we should or really could do much to reduce income inequality in this way.

Further, the report demonstrated that combinations of inequalities can have a drastic effect on children's life chances. It quoted research which shows that a young person aged 13 or 14 experience five or more problems in the family environment – such as mental health problems, physical disability, substance misuse, domestic violence, financial stress, neither parent being in work, teenage parenthood, poor basic skills and living in poor housing conditions – is 36 times as likely to be excluded from school and 6 times as likely to enter the care system or have contact with the police as a young person living in a family with none of these problems.

### **Academic Research: 'The Spirit Level'**

The book which most clearly demonstrates the negative effects on societies of inequalities is of course Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's book 'The Spirit Level'. What is so telling about this book is that it relates inequality to the undermining of trust and the social fabric of society. It discusses the cost of inequality in terms of

community life and social relations, mental health and drug use, physical health and life expectancy, obesity, educational performance, teenage births, violence, imprisonment and social mobility.

The book tells the story of hurricane Katrina hitting New Orleans in 2005. What captured the attention of the world's media in the aftermath of the tragedy was what seemed like the complete breakdown of civilised relations in the city. There were numerous arrests and shootouts throughout the week following the hurricane. Television news screens showed desperate residents begging for help, for baby food, for medicine and then switched to images of troops, cruising the flooded streets in boats – not evacuating people, not bringing them supplies, but, fully armed with automatic weapons looking for looters.

The response of the commentators was to observe the complete lack of trust between law enforcement in the one hand and the mostly poor, black citizens of New Orleans on the other. At one of the widely televised benefit concerts for victims of the hurricane, the musician Kanye West burst out:

*'I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a white family, it says "they're looking for food." You see a black family, it says "they're looting"'*.

It seemed as if the events in New Orleans in 2005 held up to the world a disturbing mirror of what happens when inequalities are stretched to the point where trust had eroded so totally and where law enforcement was used (even in a time of extreme emergency) to control the poor.

### **The Equalities Bill and the Churches**

In view of what I've said about the place of the Christian tradition in relation to inequalities, and of the increasing weight of academic opinion that income inequality makes for unstable societies, you might have expected that the recent Equalities Bill coming before Parliament would be relatively uncontroversial for the churches and faith communities. However in some small but highly publicised respects it's created a substantial conflict. Part of the difficulty was highlighted by rather rash and dramatic overstatements from zealots on both sides of the arguments. The basic conflict was not between a systematic assault on Christian values by a secular Government on the one side and a demand by the Church for licensed bigotry on the other. It was over the question of how society identifies the point at which one set of freedoms and claims so undermines another that injustice results.

The particular point at issue related to the employment exemptions within the Equalities Bill which have hitherto been granted to faith

communities. On matters relating to human sexuality the status quo has been that religious groups, faith communities and churches are allowed to determine which occupations explicitly require both a commitment to and a readiness to publically argue for the moral teaching of that particular religion. In other words, which are the jobs which have a purely administrative function and therefore do not require any public adherence to the moral teachings of the church or faith community.

Generally speaking Government was clear that in the case of churches Clergy should be exempt, just as Imams would be in the Muslim community, from having to be selected and appointed without any reference to their lifestyle and sexual proclivities. But the grey area lies in Diocesan Administrators, Directors of Finance, Youth Workers etc who are not ordained and who the Government felt should no longer receive exemptions. Part of the background to the debate lies in an increasing recognition that faith communities, churches etc provide public services through the state maintained sector in education, through care for the elderly, voluntary groups supporting children's work, the homeless, the unemployed etc. As the range of voluntary involvements in charitable provision extends, surely the pressure to require equality of opportunity for those employed by these organisations increases.

## **Bishops in the House of Lords**

The Bishops in the House of Lords found themselves faced with something of a dilemma. The boundary between those occupations which do not require the public defence of the moral teaching of a church and those which clearly do (ie the Clergy) is a not clearly defined boundary. In some dioceses or in some parts of the church Youth Workers would certainly expect to be included amongst those who were responsible for expounding the moral teaching of the church. So the argument of the Bishops in the Lords was that the definition of who should and should not be included in the exemptions on employment law were best left to the churches to determine. It was not that Christians were contesting the civil liberties of gay and lesbian people in general, nor indeed should they have been. What they were contesting was a small but very significant point of detail, which was whether Government had the right to tell religious bodies which of the tasks for which they might employ people required and which did not require some level of compliance with the public teaching of the church about behaviour.

As the story developed it was clear that the Government had difficulty seeing that this was not just about Clergy and official teachers of the faith. The Church too had difficulty explaining that there might be positions, not covered by the neat

definitions offered by the Government, which had some kind of official standing such that it would be very strange for someone to hold such a position when they were manifestly in dispute with some aspects of the Church's teaching.

So this whole debate cast a light on a number of important features of the public discussion about equality. One is that we all in fact recognise that communities and organisations have a certain liberty to define what belonging to them might entail. Those who belong have to some extent chosen to live with the limits that a community has settled upon, even if they want to argue with those limits or seek to shift them. So the limits maybe a bit fluid; but whether and when they change is best decided by the community itself and not by Government.

The second point, is that if we concede the right to Government to settle matters for religious bodies in some areas, how do we resist it in others? The rights and dignities of gay and lesbian people are a matter of proper concern for everyone and we should assume that the securing of these rights is a mark of a civilised and humane society. When those rights are threatened (as they recently have been in the infamous legislation that was being discussed in Uganda) it's absolutely right for us to express repugnance. But from a Christian perspective not all Governments are benign and rational.

A Government that creates powers for itself is doing something which could be used by a later Government for exactly the opposite purposes. So therefore the Bishops argued that the freedom of Government to settle debated moral questions for the diverse communities of civil society is not something we should endorse too rapidly. Governments and political cultures change and it's a mistake to grant to Governments authority over religious communities which could impact on us in even more serious areas later on. So the Bishops argued that what matters is that Government acknowledges that there is a boundary that is risky to cross without creating ideological powers for the state that could be deeply dangerous for liberty in general.

### **Amendment to the Civil Partnership Act**

The debate reached a particularly critical point in an amendment to the Equalities Bill which was brought by Lord Waheed Alli in relation to the Civil Partnership Act which forbids the registering of civil partnerships in places of public worship. Lord Alli's argument was that what was at stake was a question of religious freedom. He was not making an attack on the Catholic Church or the Church of England, nor was he proposing a Bill which would require Churches, against their conscience to accommodate the celebration of civil partnerships. Rather he argued that if Churches were claiming for themselves exemptions from some aspects of

Employment Law on the grounds of religious freedom, surely the Churches should allow to some faith groups, in particular the Quakers, and liberal Jews the right to host civil partnerships. Lord Alli argued that the Church of England and the Catholic Church should not be required to host these if they do not wish to do so but that religious freedom cannot begin and end with what one religion wants. It has to be applied equally to the Quakers and the Church of England, to liberal Jews as well as to the Catholic Church.

In the end the Waheed Alli amendment was carried, and even though it has had some fairly confused consequences, it is clear that the House of Lords was persuaded that on the balance of religious freedoms it would be absolutely right to allow those faith communities which wished to adopt an open stance towards the celebration of civil partnerships no longer to be inhibited from doing so by the law.

### **A Growing Secularism?**

So let me finally come to the point what this kind of debate about equalities has done to our understanding of religious freedoms in this country.

A recent debate in March was sponsored by Lord Harrison, a member of the British Humanist Association.



He argued as follows:

*'In recent years the Church of England has continued unwarrantedly to enjoy and increase its privileges within the state – in education, in employment practises, law and public broadcasting – as statutory public services continue to be contracted out to religious organisations.*

*The consequences have been to imperil the take up of public services and to encourage discrimination against users of such services and against employees who owe allegiance to another religion or to none at all. Most egregious has been the discrimination offered to the gay community. Career prospects have stalled for some attached to the wrong religion or to no religion at all. Religious harassment has had an open goal to shoot at while the status of religious organisations has been undeservedly advanced under the cover of the public purse.*

*Uneconomic duplication in the provision of services is a constant danger, as is the division fostered within local communities by the separatist approach of the religious organisations using public money. In the current Equality Bill, for instance, the Government still ponder giving religious organisations the power to discriminate against gays, non believers and believers of other faiths who apply for lay positions. The hesitancy over the sensible amendment from my noble friend*

*Lord Alli, which would allow religious groups to conduct civil partnerships in their own places of worship if they so wish is a further example of bowing to church pressure.*

*In the Children, Schools and Families Bill, religious groups have seemingly rested back the control to teach children their versions of sex education. The Government's feeble sticking plaster of a balanced approach will hardly dilute the engrained homophobia and antipathy to sex redolent in the teaching practises of too many of our religious schools....'*

I quote this at length, because it gives a flavour of the arguments readily now used in Parliament and elsewhere. There is without doubt, a growing secularism which regards religious faith as inimical to equality and inappropriate for the public square.

At a recent debate in the Oxford Union in the motion 'this house believes that politicians should not do God', the journalist Matthew Paris spoke on the side of God. Although he is a committed atheist, his argument was that if any politician is irrational enough to espouse a belief in God he should do so in public so that we can know what he thinks and decide not to vote for him or her!

### **Is a secular society more equal?**

I leave it to you to decide whether an entirely secular public square is likely to be a more equal one or not. In my view the opposite is the case. The values which a

liberal democracy espouses of equality before the law, human rights and employment opportunities have their roots in Christian social teaching. It was William Temple, the great Archbishop of Canterbury, who wrote his seminal work *Towards a Christian Social Order* in 1942 which later was to become the basis of the Welfare State. Excluding religious values in general and Christian values in particular from public debate is unlikely to make for a more equal society.

From a Christian perspective, if God's purpose for human beings is a common purpose, we have a duty to ask how the organising of society makes this purpose harder or easier, more or less attainable. It is not that the Church approaches the wider society with a detailed programme which it expects Government to enact. But it does offer a series of searching questions about what Government can make possible for people and communities – about what barriers to creative communal life it needs to take away.

So a healthy relationship between God and Government is not one in which believers demand that the will of God should be enacted by legal systems but rather one in which Government accepts that it needs to be challenged constantly as to what it is doing to enable a morally serious project for life together to be taken forward, what it is doing to keep alive a sense of mutual responsibility and equality; and one in which the Church examines itself relentlessly as to whether it is being faithful to the fullness of the new humanity in Christ.

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