

WHICH WAY TO GO?

Faith or Secularism

Last December, in a speech celebrating the King James Bible, David Cameron declared “Britain is a Christian country and we should not be afraid to say so”. Last week, High Court Judge Mr Justice Ousley ruled that local authorities have no power to say prayers at their Council meetings. It is significant the Judge did not rule that prayers breach human rights or equality legislation. His judgement hung on a technical point that the 1972 Local Government Act does not include prayer as one of the duties of Local Authorities.

The case was brought by a former Councillor, an atheist who objected to having Christian prayers imposed on him. The National Secular Society, which backed him, stressed that they had no objection to anyone praying but religious faith is a private matter that has no place in the public sphere. That is the nub of the matter. If Britain really is a Christian country, the NSS is wrong, prayer does have a place in how we conduct our public affairs but if we are now a secular society it does not.

Today Baroness Warsi writes in the Telegraph of “the deep and intrinsic role of faith here in Britain and overseas” but worries that it is threatened by a militant and deeply intolerant secularist campaign. Last week’s High Court case is but one example of many. Christians have been disciplined or dismissed from their jobs for wearing religious symbols, offering to pray for patients and refusing to act in ways contrary to their faith and consciences. Voluntary sector projects have been denied public funding because of their faith basis. Secularists campaign for faith-based schools to be closed and the Bishops removed from the House of Lords.

The danger is that the Christian and other faith communities will retreat into a victim culture and do too little to resist and reverse the secular drift. As Lady Warsi reminds us our culture has been shaped over centuries by Christian values. “These values shine through our politics, our public life, our culture, our economics, our language and our architecture.” The Prime Minister made the same point in his December speech. Destroying this heritage is already doing real harm to British culture and society. The moral consensus that existed for generations, and was rooted in the Judeo-Christian heritage, is being displaced by a moral relativism whereby everyone does what is right in their own eyes. One example of this can be seen in the statistics for family breakdown. One child in two will experience this before their 16th birthday, with potentially damaging consequences for their own future capacity to sustain relationships. The terrible truth is that secularism is leading Britain towards a moral, spiritual and social precipice and most of us are following like lemmings because we are too blind or too timid to cry ‘stop’ and lead in a different direction.

Perhaps the Christian community would have greater confidence and society would have more respect for us if there was greater awareness of the contribution that faith-based organisations are still making. Consider the most disadvantaged people in Britain – the homeless, rough sleepers, people with disabilities, those with drug and alcohol problems – and you will find Christian groups trying to care for them. The work of the Salvation Army is

well known but increasingly so are the Street Pastors helping young people stay out of trouble in our city centres. These and a host of similar activities unconditionally care for the most needy, express Christian love whilst saving the public purse the costs that might otherwise fall on the state. Pretending that faith and prayer have no place in the public square is foolish because the values we claim to have are meaningless unless they are practically expressed in such ways.

Secular thinking has gained ground and will go on gaining ground until people of faith confidently but graciously challenge those who are leading Britain towards the precipice ahead. Humanist and atheists are not our real problem; our own failure to stand up to them is. To that end the faith communities should be engaging intellectually with secularists as well as practically with the damage they are causing. We need think tanks like Theos, the Centre for Social Justice and the Relationships Foundation to give us the analytical skills to address the causes as well as the symptoms of moral confusion and social breakdown. We need our sharpest thinkers to engage in vigorous debate with the likes of Richard Dawkins and the national Secular Society. We need gifted journalists to report the positive contributions of faith-based projects. We need Churches to see social transformation as part of their mission in their local communities and be the answer to their prayers.

Jesus called his disciples to be salt of the earth and light to the world but too many of us keep the salt in the salt cellar and our lights hidden. It is time to change and that change needs to begin in the faith communities.