

## A CASE FOR CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

The Government has decided that “Christians have no right to wear a cross at work”. Why so? People of other faiths are allowed to manifest their faith by wearing religious symbols. Muslim women wear head scarves and some even wear a burka. Sikhs wear their turbans. So why are Christians being told they have no right to wear a cross at work?

Back in 2006, Nadia Eweida, a British Airways employee, was suspended for wearing a cross to her work on a check-in desk at Heathrow. Eventually British Airways relented in the face of a public outcry echoed in the House of Commons. Then a nurse, Shirley Chaplin, was banned from wearing a cross on the ward because it was deemed a health and safety hazard. The two women have now taken their case to the European Court of Human Rights, alleging that their employers were in breach of Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This article affirms the right to freedom, of thought, conscience and religion and the rights to manifest one’s religion or beliefs subject to limitations prescribed by law.

The British Government is opposing them because wearing a cross is not a “requirement of the faith” and therefore not a human right. It is true that there is no doctrinal obligation to wear a cross but it is surely the height of religious illiteracy to be unaware of the centrality of the cross in Christian belief and doctrine. Wearing a cross is a harmless way of reflecting this and denying Christians the freedom to do so is disproportionate. Did not the Prime Minister say in a major speech last December that “we are a Christian country and we should not be afraid to say so”? Of course he recognised that there are Britons who have other faiths or none but respect for their beliefs is not grounds for denying Nadia and Shirley the freedom to manifest theirs.

Surely the right response is the one of reasonable accommodation, recognised by the All-Party Parliamentary Committee of MPs and Peers who investigated the marginalisation of Christians in this country. They noted that “the concept of reasonable accommodation is already used in UK law to decide whether companies and organisations have made reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities.” This approach acknowledges difference and accepts the need for discrimination in specific circumstances but reasonable accommodation could help to keep at least some cases out of the court where no harm or offence is done to anyone else.

Is the real issue that wearing a cross offends atheists and secularists who want to drive anything religious out of the public square but make Christians their target because they dare not attack Muslims or people of other faiths yet? If this is so Nadia Eweida and Shirley Chaplin should have the full support of all Christians. We could all wear a cross as a gesture of civil disobedience but prayer and financial support would probably be welcome too. Nor should this be a private matter for Christians alone. If Christians are the easiest target now, no-one who believes their religion is the one true faith can afford to be complacent. They could be the next target of intolerant secularism.

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