

Making your own mind up on role of religion and belief in UK public life--



The Commission on Religion and Belief's two-year study into the role of religion and belief in UK public life reported just a fortnight ago. Although broadly welcomed by the BBC and national press, the report has mixed reviews in some religious titles, not least *The Tablet*. Below, Commissioner Gwen Griffith-Dickson explains the Commission's thinking and invites readers to take a look at the whole report, rather than rely on selective commentary....

The Commission's vision which underpins the report we have just published is of a society where all feel part of an ongoing national story: a nation with a deeply-rooted Christian history, but which has accommodated others at an ever-accelerating pace. It argues that all should be treated with equal respect and concern, knowing that their culture, religion and beliefs are embraced and valued as contributing to the nation's common life. And it says that those of faith should feel confident in bringing their faith to bear in shaping public policy, and challenging the ills in society, and thus to contribute to the common good.

And yet, pieces in the *Tablet* have, startlingly, described the report as 'secularist' and 'hollowing out' the presence of religion in Britain's history and present.

Far from 'secularist', the vision described above calls for the interaction of faiths in the public space. It argues that our beliefs are so inseparable from the wellsprings of our values and motivations that the call for a neutral public space is impossible, and works to the disadvantage of the religious. It departs from one view, which asserts Christianity or specifically the Church of England as having an unquestioned pre-eminence in British public life. But recognising the impact and influence of Christianity on British history is not a justification for unequal treatment of other faiths and beliefs in the present time. We do not call for a re-reading of British history; we call for equal opportunity for other faiths to share in our public life; not merely tolerated but welcomed. Naturally this call for a

mutually respectful inclusion - a 'right to be here and be heard' - applies as much to Catholicism as to Sikhism.

This is the very opposite of 'secularism' if one considers it to be the demand to remove religion from the public square (a view the commissioners rejected). Instead, we call for more of it, as it reflects the reality of British religiosity, and done better. We therefore use the term 'pluralist' for our collective implicit stance: 'Such equality of respect and concern is one of the marks of a society which recognises that the public square is rightly a crowded place where a wide range of voices, religious and non-religious, need to be heard.' (Para. 3.15, p. 25.)

Two major threads run through the analysis of the report and its recommendations. First is the concept of the common good, which we explicitly acknowledged as coming from Catholic social teaching. This goes beyond the concept more common in academic discussion, 'public goods'; and includes the moral environment, that bedrock of co-operation, trust, and reciprocity necessary for a healthy community. We also set aside the views of individualism and self-interest, and social and market liberalism, in favour of the vision of human beings as interdependent 'persons in community'. This rests on a valuation of fundamental human dignity, articulated in differing ways by our diverse traditions. In particular the report cites Pope Francis' encyclical

Laudato Si

' for inspiration as our vision and wider concept of the common good as going beyond humanity to creation itself.

'Literacy' in religion and belief was the second theme. I liken it to the religious equivalent of emotional intelligence; a matter of knowledge, but also an ability to be informed, aware, at home with diverse religions; the ability to conduct oneself well when questions of faith and belief come to the fore.

In education, Britain presents a very diverse landscape, which perhaps not all commentators or readers might initially recollect: different nations, different faiths. We could not fail to recognise the different impacts of religiously-separate schooling in Belfast vs. London, or the differences in ethnic diversity between Catholic schools and Jewish schools, or the stances on diversity between some Church of England schools and some Islamic schools. The unintended consequences are not always positive. The call for less 'segregation' in Christian schools is not necessarily (or uniquely) made by 'humanists' but also by Christians in Northern Ireland with deep concerns about how to heal a painfully divided society.

Nevertheless the commission states that the perceived benefits of faith schools are clear: including the rights of parents to have their children educated in their religious ethos at the state's expense; and the positive contribution that religious communities make to the common good. The recommendation seeks to ensure that religious selection for schools does not result in bias, either for staff or students. Meanwhile, faith schools can mitigate the effects of religious selection in a way that is exemplary for non-faith schools, and the report highlights examples where schools can foster interfaith encounter that in itself is an important part of education for life in a religiously diverse world.

The report emphasises the importance of high-quality RE teaching and call for it to be put on an equal footing with other humanities subjects (mindful of the EBAC).

Not to be overlooked is the importance we gave to lifelong learning in religion. We call throughout the report for continuing professional development in religion; not only for educators but in law, medicine, nursing and social work, media, government and public administration. In fact we call for CPD for religious leaders themselves, in ongoing learning about other faiths.

The chapter on social action is one that should engage many Tablet readers. Here we stress the importance of what we called in our discussions the ‘prophetic’ dimension. While meeting social needs can be an urgent imperative, we should not neglect the role of challenge, of ‘speaking truth to power’; the critique of systemic injustices (7.22, 7.31). Charities should avoid being co-opted when partners of the state and ‘go beyond the mere treatment of social ills and offer both a critique of injustice and a vision of social change.’ (7.22) (For those keeping score, the role of Christian denominations in this radicalism has been acknowledged.) We give support for the challenges of funding and of engaging with governments and political pressures; funders (whether government or corporate) should not avoid funding religious groups for fear of covert proselytising (7.19-7.21, 7.31)

There is much more of value in this 100 page report, and I hope readers will explore it for themselves and participate in the upcoming debates.

Gwen Griffith-Dickson is a member of the Commission on Religion and Belief and a former vice-principal of Heythrop College

Gwen Griffith-Dickson - The Tablet