

Faith and Equality

Thought for the Day

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In a lecture this weekend, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor reflected on his forthcoming retirement as head of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales. He quoted research published by the BBC last week, that two-thirds of people saw a place for religious values in public life. He argued that "religious faith is not a problem to be contained, [but] a social good to be cherished and respected", and warned against being deceived by the aggressive secularism that sees no place for religion in society.

There was a similar message the previous week from John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York, who attacked those who interpret equality and diversity policies as protecting all except the majority, whether in terms of colour or creed. I agree: equality is equality, and you can't be equal with me if I'm not equal with you. Only in Orwell's *Animal Farm* can some people be more equal than others. That's why men can win gender discrimination cases and white Britons can win race discrimination cases, even while the balance of inequality generally tilts the other way.

The same must surely be true of faith. Thankfully, gone are the days, for the most part, when each faith or denomination would bitterly denounce all others as heretical. We live in an era when the heir to the throne can talk of being the "defender of faith" or "of all faiths" rather than of "the Faith". So I find it ironic that while we as a society have put so much effort into overcoming barriers between faiths, and building respect for what the Chief Rabbi calls the "dignity of difference", we at the same time seem to encourage hostility, disrespect, and intolerance of faith as a whole.

I was really struck by Archbishop Sentamu's remark that "asking someone to leave their belief in God at the door of their workplace is [like] asking someone to remove their skin colour before coming into the office". In a truly tolerant society, it's not for others to tell you what's at the core of who you are.

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