

Editorial: 'A Christian Country'

David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, caused a minor stir over Easter when he declared that Britain is a Christian country. Predictably enough this provoked a reaction from the ever vociferous secularist lobby, to which some religiously minded people were moved to reply. Figures were banded about, low church attendance on the secular side, on the other high numbers of what might charitably be called non-professing Christians, who nevertheless declare themselves 'religious' or even 'Christian' in opinion surveys. Those supporting Mr Cameron pointed to the Christian roots of British life and institutions, while the secularists claimed that this sort of talk, while not untrue, tended to marginalise people of other faiths, or of none, as the phrase goes.

What was perhaps remarkable about all of this was that there was in fact very little disagreement in matters of fact on the part of the various sides. Neither figures nor history were seriously contested, at most nuances of interpretation, so is there more at stake than a degree of posturing and noise?

Clearly if one looks at contemporary British society with a dispassionate eye, it would be hard to say that it is in any deep sense Christian. It is not only that church attendance is low; generally speaking, attitudes in private and even more in the public sphere are not in any serious sense Christian. Indeed, if attitudes in the worlds of the intellect, the media and entertainment were taken as representative, one might conclude that Britain is more anti-Christian than Christian, and certainly non-Christian.

But beneath the somewhat ambiguous and inconclusive discussion of contemporary Britain's religiousness, there is something which may be worrying, at least for those concerned with the treatment of minorities. It is perhaps symbolised in the phrase we have already alluded to, 'people of no faith'. People of no faith (that is, secularists) are increasingly arguing that anything with a hint of 'faith' should not be tolerated in the public sphere. So religious beliefs, however deeply and sincerely held, and whether Christian or not, should not be allowed to intrude in medical practice, voluntary adoption agencies should be closed rather than restrict their placements to heterosexual couples, and there is increasing pressure against the very existence of 'faith' (i.e. religious) schools.

Editorial

What is overlooked in much of this is that Christians and people of 'other faiths' pay their taxes and are as much citizens as people of 'no faith'. So long as their practices are not clearly oppressive or objectionable, for example by forcing underage girls to marry, by promoting terrorism, or by actually preventing those who disagree from pursuing their own legitimate ends, they should not be outlawed or rendered impossible by governmental diktat. But Christian schools are not preventing secularists from having non-religious schools, nor are Christian adoption agencies preventing homosexual adoptions among those who favour them, nor, whatever might have been the case in the sixteenth century, do Catholic schools nowadays foster allegiance to Spain (nor, if this is a genuine concern, would most Christians favour schools in which the theory of evolution is seriously questioned).

From a secularist perspective the public sphere should be governed and regulated by principles which can, in theory, be adduced without any antecedent commitments, and as determined by what will be called democratic procedures. But the principles which can be determined without 'antecedent commitments' may not be quite what they seem. They turn out to be just those which secularists agree to, overlooking the fact that their views on rights, obligations, freedoms and the rest rely on assumptions which are by no means self-evident, as two hundred or more years of philosophical effort to show them as such might suggest.

Moreover appeal to democratic mandate here is somewhat disingenuous, as anyone who has had anything to do with the formulation of policies on education or with the reform of the law in morally contested areas will, if they are honest, admit. As Baroness Mary Warnock, an astute philosopher as well as a legislator, once revealed, in practice legislation about matters in which there are strong moral disagreements is determined not so much by concepts of right and wrong, as by what civil servants judge public opinion might find 'acceptable'. We could add to that that 'acceptability to public opinion' is not necessarily what the majority would actually vote for, were they given the chance, which they rarely are in these matters. In any case in an ideal democracy the protection of the rights and freedoms of law-abiding minorities ought to lead legislators to seek as far as possible to respect their sensibilities rather than trample on them.

What is ironical in all this is that despite David Cameron's talk of Britain being a Christian country, in practice the government he leads has done little to preserve a space within the public sphere for those with Christian sensibilities.