

**Ensuring equality of religion and belief in Northern Ireland:  
new challenges**

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What is a person from Aberdeen doing talking about equality in Northern Ireland? Well, living in Northern Ireland *doesn't* qualify you to understand the place, although I did live here for twenty-three years until last July. It is a genuine pleasure to be back so soon.

I think it first necessary to distinguish some terms. In particular we need to contrast religion as a sociological category and religion as a form of personal practice and belief. As a sociological category religion functions in Northern Ireland as the social marker to draw boundaries around the groups between whom there is or has been conflict. Religion is not the *substance* of this conflict; no one seriously argues that the conflict has been about religion. But religion is its *form*, the way in which it is experienced. The contestation has been about the legitimacy of the state and access to its scarce resources, but this took on a religious form because 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' were the terms used to understand and describe the nature of the groups. Religion as a sociological category therefore stood in for and represented the major patterns of inequality and differentiation in Northern Ireland; at least it did so until the relatively recent discovery of gender and 'race'. The awareness that sectarianism isn't the only fault line in Northern Irish society

doesn't however, penetrate far enough.

The way that religious equality has been understood in the past is in terms of equality of opportunity between Catholics and Protestants as sociological categories, between groups marked and defined by religious labels, especially around employment. Religious equality in this meaning is already a key dimension of the post-Agreement equality agenda. I'm not going to be talking about religious equality in this sense. I want to question what we mean by religious equality and address some of the issues that would arise in Northern Ireland were the law to make concessions to religious belief and practice. This is partly what the offence of religious hatred is attempting to do in England and Wales, although the issues before me today are much broader than the matter of religious hatred.

What are the challenges of religious equality in this sense and who are they challenges for? Three challenges come to mind: the post-Agreement equality agenda; devolution; and the emerging post-Christian society in Northern Ireland. And they are challenges for everyone, but in particular policy makers, locally elected politicians, and Northern Ireland's Christians. These challenges are all inter-related and compound each other, but for argument's sake I'll disaggregate them here; and as we shall see, these challenges are less commonplace than they seem when applied to religious practice and belief.

It is prosaic but worth saying nonetheless that we are all here today as evidence that the Belfast Agreement has broadened Northern Ireland's understanding of equality; and the

equality agenda has proceeded apace despite the political difficulties around the Agreement. I mean three things by this. The political and public profile of equality has been boosted by the Agreement; the monitoring regime has intensified; and equality's reach has spread to now cover a wider range of issues and groups. 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' as sociological categories no longer define the only groups and relations that an equality agenda needs to address.

If equality of religious practices and beliefs were to be made part of this agenda, it would mean upholding the right to all religious practices and expressions of belief and none *within* the constraints of the law. It would *not* mean the right to have one's religious beliefs upheld in law or for alternative systems of religious law, such as Sharia Law, to over ride civil law. However, even the weaker formulation is not as unproblematic as it sounds. Four difficulties arise. First, when the law imposes direct prohibitions on particular religious practices (say polygamy or Levirate marriage); when lawfully implemented legislation indirectly imposes constraints on religious practices and beliefs (such as Sunday trading on Sabbath observance or health regulations on religious food rituals); when religious beliefs and practices morally sanction and oppose behaviour that is lawful (say, homosexuality); and when specific forms of religious practice or belief develop cultural hegemony that restricts the religious practices or expressions of belief of others and of those with none (say, on a women's right to abortion).

It would also mean that Northern Ireland, so dominated by Catholic-Protestant relations, would not only have to admit to equal status believers from the other Christian

denominations but also people of other world religions and none. Again this is not as unproblematic as it sounds given that all world faiths have a self-righteous conviction in their own superiority. The challenge for believers would thus be to recognise that self-righteousness is not just displayed in doing selfishly what we want but forcing others to share it. The challenge for policy makers would be to recognise and protect everyone's right to practice and believe whatever they want, including not believing.

This is not as simple as it sounds, for in a society where equality of treatment across contentious religious divides is legally enshrined and enforced, there will be conflict over what counts as religious. In Northern Ireland, where religion and culture elide, this is no easy thing. Problematic cultural practices – say marching – get defended by representing them as religious practices; and particular religious beliefs which it is otherwise legal to hold – say opposition to Catholic or Islamic doctrine – are used as forms of cultural attack. In this instance, racism, in the form of Islamophobia or anti-Catholicism, would continue to be culturally defended despite the rhetoric of religious tolerance. And one can imagine the wackiest of beliefs and practices being redefined by adherents as constituting a religious belief system in order to benefit from protection under the law and to realise the advantages that accrue from equal treatment and expression. Northern Ireland's Christians would not only have to confront New Age beliefs being accorded the same legal status of Christian doctrine, but also Paganism, say, or devil worship.

An important question thus arises for locally elected politicians and policy makers: what should be the reach of religious views into the public square when there's a diversity of

religious beliefs and practices and where religion elides with culture? This brings me neatly to the challenges arising from devolution.

In the US, where ironically church and state are separated, there is an implicit requirement for public figures to articulate their private religious views, resulting in an easy penetration of the public sphere with politicians' private religious beliefs: religious enlightenment is taken to be the right *to* believe and for those beliefs to count in public affairs. In Europe, church and state are closer, with many state religions, and religious enlightenment is taken to be the right *not* to believe or to believe something entirely unorthodox. Religion tends to be restricted to the private sphere: witness the Italian European Commissioner who had to resign because his Catholic views on matters related to his job were thought incompatible with his public duty. Witness also the general embarrassment of ordinary people to declare religious beliefs in public.

In France the reach of religious views in public is restricted - recall the banning of Islamic headdress in public schools - while Britain is more tolerant of public displays of religion. Sociologists of religion have noted however that the British prefer their religion in moderation, disliking expressions of extreme religious commitment. As Steve Bruce once wrote, only religion of the vaguest and most inoffensive kind is supported in the public square in Britain; excessive fervour is frowned upon or regulated. The British state regulates private behaviour when it has public effects, such as smoking and drinking, although not when its reach into the public sphere is minimal, such as gambling. People in Northern Ireland are used to a more extensive reach of religion into public affairs of

the more extreme religious kind and in a relatively unregulated way.

Devolution provides local accountability for an increased range of services and responsibilities and were equality in religious practice and belief to become part of the equality agenda of local policy makers and politicians, they would have to take responsibility for either removing religion from the public sphere or permitting similar access to the public square to all religions and none. When so many politicians and public officials are themselves prelates this would require a remarkable degree of pluralism that, one has to say, their theological preferences have not been noted for in the past. The enormity of this task is reflected by the British government's exemption of Northern Ireland from the proposed religious hatred legislation. This is highly paradoxical. In Great Britain, religion is a private matter and normally enters the public domain only in formulaic ways; to extend it to Northern Ireland would criminalise some of the public figures responsible for devolved government, such is the reach of specific religious views into the public sphere here compared to Britain.

The difficulty for Northern Ireland is that religion has not been privatised. It is for this reason that I describe the last challenge as the emergence of post-Christian society rather than secularisation. As many sociologists of religion point out, levels of religious observance and belief are high in Northern Ireland and even though they are declining, especially amongst the young and in the mainstream denominations, there is very little evidence of a rise in unbelief or drop in the numbers identifying with a church. Secularisation is not what is occurring in Northern Ireland; the changes are better

described as the development of a post-Christian society. By this I mean the declining ability of Christian religion to affect and shape ordinary believers' lives, a growing liberalisation in what ordinary Christians believe and in the certainty with which they believe it, and the appearance of other world faiths, still admittedly very much as minority religions, but a presence that nonetheless challenges the Christian hegemony. Religious diversity and pluralism now has to cater for differences in practice and belief between the world religions not just Catholic and Protestant. The problems over planning permission for the mosque in Craigavon reflect that some have not adjusted to this change in Northern Ireland's religious terrain. Christian believers in Northern Ireland are a long way from their co-religionists in Britain in having to adjust to Christianity becoming a minority religion, in the sense of either being the choice of a minority of the population or no longer the most populace faith, but diversity in religious practice and belief has become a reality in Northern Ireland.

If this religious diversity affects the equality agenda, and equal treatment and status between them is enacted, there will be challenges for those voters and elected representatives who expect their Christian beliefs not only to shape their own lives, but also to imprint generally on culture and public affairs in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is too small to allow religious and faith communities to sustain separation and withdrawal from society, as so often happens in the US, so in a post-Christian society contestation over the public reach of religion would intensify in competition between the world faiths and those with none who object to the penetration of any religion into public affairs.

In a post-Christian society, religious diversity is best managed by the separation of religion from public life; in effect its privatisation. Northern Ireland's problem is that the elision between religion and culture and the continuing high levels of religious observance and identification are unlikely to promote privatisation. Paradoxically, equality of religious practice and belief is easier to enact in settings where religion doesn't matter, or not matter enough to want believers to have their beliefs count in public affairs.

Let me close by posing the obvious question for Northern Ireland. What concessions can the law make to religious belief and practice in a setting of religious diversity and where public officials have in the past elided culture, politics and religion? The answer to that is a test not only of the commitment here to the equality agenda but also a measure of people's religious tolerance and the ability of its devolved politicians.

Thank you.