

Religion and Enlightenment

Allies, enemies or critical friends?

Introduction and disclaimer

This brief paper recalls the CORAB report's use of the distinction between two key terms in the commission's own title, 'religion' and 'belief'. It in effect wonders whether the report could and should have been clearer and fuller on this topic and whether, therefore, further explication is needed when and if the report's recommendations are implemented.

The paper is a personal view by the report's editor, and is not to be understood as representing the views of any of the commission's members.

The report's name: 'Living with Difference'

The title of the CORAB report was derived from a submission received from an academic lawyer. 'There is much to be grateful for and proud of,' he wrote, 'in the legal traditions of the United Kingdom. But it is important to ask whether the law is doing all it can to help us live with our differences.' Earlier in his submission, he had written:

The challenge we face is not merely to live with our differences – we do that easily all the time – but to live with differences we think are deeply significant, and concerning which some of our fellow-citizens are fundamentally mistaken. Toleration only becomes a virtue when we tolerate what we do not like. And this toleration is not mere indifference – it is a 'profoundly, excruciatingly difficult virtue'.¹ In short, we need to foster a culture of civility and mutual respect in which dissent is valued and error has rights. That is no mean task.

What kinds of difference, in particular, was the commission concerned with? When it began in 2013, its name was 'the commission on multi-faith Britain', and this is what potential members were invited to join. The expectation was that essentially the commission would be about differences between major world faiths and worldviews, particularly differences between Islam, Christianity and Judaism. When the membership was constructed an essential concern was to ensure that each of these three traditions was represented by at least four people. Then a Hindu, a Sikh and a Humanist were added, and a specialist in

inter-faith relationships who happened to be a Christian. Also someone from Scotland was invited, as was someone from Northern Ireland, to ensure a degree of geographical breadth across the UK as a whole. Both these latter members of the commission, incidentally, were Christian ministers.

The composition of the commission was criticised by one observer with severity, scepticism and scorn:

Nearly half of the members are religious professionals and nearly all of them have strong religious identities, if not beliefs. The chief executive of the British Humanist Association plays his customary part as the token free thinker, but it's hard to shake the dispiriting sense that we are dealing with an assembly of, by and for the religiously committed. It is completely appropriate for people whose business is faith to prepare a report on the role of religion and belief in British public life, just as it is appropriate for people who work in the pub trade to write about the role of alcohol in British life. What they cannot expect, though, is for their findings to be treated as anything other than the product of a special interest group. The commission is condemned from its conception to producing a minority report. ²

The difference between 'religion' and 'belief'

As soon as its members began meeting and talking, a different title for the commission was chosen, a phrase in equalities legislation: 'the commission on religion and belief'. In due course but slowly, and in retrospect rather obliquely as distinct from forthrightly, the commission was concerned not only or even primarily with differences between various religions but with the difference and relationship between 'religion' on the one hand and 'belief' on the other, or between 'faith' and 'reason', or between 'religious values' and 'Enlightenment values'.

By 'belief' or 'reason' or 'Enlightenment values' the commission's report was referring to the cluster of values, ideas and practices that gathered strength in the intellectual, cultural, moral and political climate that developed in Europe and North America through the eighteenth century and whose legacy is seen in, amongst other places, equalities legislation and international human rights standards in the modern age.

Enlightenment ideas included, the CORAB report noted, the use of reason and the advance of science; freethinking and toleration of dissent; the rights and responsibilities of individuals; independence and emancipation in the affairs of nations; deliberative and representative democracy; anticlericalism, *laïcité* and the separation of church and state; humanism as a distinct worldview, explored and presented in the arts as well as in philosophy; social sciences – particularly anthropology, sociology and psychology; the rule of law as distinct from

despotism and the arbitrary whim of officials; procedural secularism in public administration; cosmopolitanism and internationalism; and the famed trinity of equality, liberty and solidarity.

Frequently Enlightenment values have been and are in opposition to religion, and religion in its turn has been and is suspicious of, or downright hostile towards, the values associated with the Enlightenment. This was reflected in some of the media coverage of the commission's report,³ and in responses from the Church of England.⁴ It is reflected also in a recent (November 2016) report from a Christian think tank.⁵ The two sets of values have also, however, intertwined and converged, and have deeply influenced each other.⁶ At best, they can and do critique each other, and benefit from each other, and there can be synergy and mutual reinforcement. They can therefore be, in short, critical friends. At best, they together challenge and oppose, and propose alternatives to, the values known loosely as neoliberalism and neoconservatism, and the populist and nativist discourse that was so evident during 2016 around the EU referendum in Britain and the presidential election process in the United States. They could also jointly challenge the thinking in reports such as the recent review of opportunity and integration on a diverse society commissioned by the UK government,⁷ and common ground between them could have featured far more prominently than it in fact did in the recent House of Lords debate on shared values underpinning national life.⁸

'The present interplay between religious faith on the one hand and the humanism of the Enlightenment on the other,' remarked the commission, 'is a specific achievement that has been worked out over a long time, and with great difficulty.'⁹ It has required what was referred to above as a 'profoundly, excruciatingly difficult virtue'.

The relationship between religion and belief, or between religious values and Enlightenment values, was implicit and fundamental in CORAB's discussions of law, vision, media, education, dialogue and social action. The two sets of values, it stressed, 'sometimes overlap; they are sometimes in mutual opposition; they sometimes combine, and mutually enrich and reinforce each other'.¹⁰

Religion and belief literacy: a brief note

The distinction between religion and belief, as the commission used it, had implications for its discussion of what it called religion and belief literacy. (It explicitly decided not use the more usual term 'religious literacy'.) In summary, it made the following observations.

1. The religious and philosophical traditions, paths and worldviews of humankind have many deep similarities, overlaps and commonalities. At the same time there are significant differences between them. To cite a single example, Dharmic faith systems (notably Buddhist, Hindu, Jain and

Sikh traditions) are very little understood in the UK, and are too often marginalised or even ignored in interfaith discussions.

2. There are significant differences *within* each religious tradition, for no tradition is monolithic, none is unchanging and none exists independently of specific cultural, historical and political contexts and circumstances. There are tensions between tradition and reform, between the perspectives and experiences of women and men, different approaches to the interpretation of sacred texts. Specifically, and bluntly, there is a need in every tradition to discern the difference between toxic religion and healthy religion. Skills of such discernment are, to quote some words cited earlier, a profoundly, excruciatingly difficult virtue.

3. It often happens that belonging or not belonging to a religion is to do with heritage and sense of identity more, or much more, than to do with holding certain beliefs or engaging in certain practices. Religious identity can therefore be bound up with ethnic or national identity, and is something given rather than chosen. The concept of ethno-religious identity is as relevant for understanding Christianity in the UK as it is for understanding other religions in other parts of the world.

4. It is often vital to recall that a religion has three main dimensions that do not always overlap: a) affiliation and identity, b) practice and c) doctrine and ideas.

5. The relationship between what someone believes and what they do is often difficult to unpick. Two people may have similar beliefs but perform different actions. Or they may perform similar actions but have different beliefs. Also it happens that human beings do not always know accurately why they did something and may be prone to self-deception in the reasons they give for their actions and the explanations they offer regarding their motives and purposes. An implication, incidentally, is that 'religious ideology' is a dubious and unreliable concept for adequately understanding the factors associated with terrorism.

6. It is possible to appreciate religious art, architecture, stories, poetry, music and theatre without necessarily sharing the beliefs which they express or assume. Similarly, all or most religious and philosophical traditions contain concepts, wisdom and teachings that can valuably challenge the strategies, policies and priorities of secular governments, both national and local, and which therefore merit a presence and a hearing in the public square.

Of course, this list of key points was offered in the report, and is offered now in this brief paper compiled twelve months after the report's publication, as a tentative starting point for discussion, not a final position.

Source: Talk by Robin Richardson at the Zutshi-Smith Symposium on the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB), University of Bristol, 15-16 December 2016

¹ The phrase was used by Baroness O’Neill of Bengarve in a debate on the work of CORAB in the House of Lords, 27 November 2014, column 1027.

² David Voas, *The Conversation*, 11 September 2016, <https://theconversation.com/rowan-williams-and-his-ilk-are-not-the-people-to-decide-where-religion-sits-in-public-life-31125>

³ For example, John Bingham and Steven Swinford, ‘Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop acting as if it is, says judge’, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 December 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/12036287/Britain-is-no-longer-a-Christian-country-and-should-stop-acting-as-if-it-is-says-judge.html>

⁴ For detailed references see Jonathan Chaplin, ‘Living with Difference: time for a constructive Christian engagement’, *Law and Religion UK*, <http://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2016/01/20/living-with-difference-time-for-a-constructive-christian-engagement/>

⁵ *Beyond Belief: defending religious liberty through the British Bill of Rights* by James Orr, <http://www.respublica.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Religious-Liberty-Digital.pdf>

⁶ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: the origins of Western liberalism*, Allen Lane, 2014.

⁷ Louise Casey, *The Casey Review: a review into opportunity and integration*, Department for Communities and Local Government, 5 December 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-casey-review-a-review-into-opportunity-and-integration>

⁸ House of Lords Hansard, 2 December 2016, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2016-12-02/debates/37E807CF-3A7E-4060-B139-8A30257E770F/NationalLifeSharedValuesAndPublicPolicyPriorities>

⁹ Paragraph 3.6 of the CORAB report.

¹⁰ Paragraph 2.12 of the CORAB report.