

6

The Social Equality of Religion or Belief: A Critique

Edward Reiss

The dominant tendency nowadays in multifaith Britain is to proclaim, or presuppose, equality between different religions and beliefs. This presents, on the surface, both an attractive fix to the problem of religious difference and a way of managing religious conflict. The solution – all religions and beliefs to be deemed equal and to be treated equally – has simplicity, generosity, even-handedness, even beauty. In appealing to neutrality and fairness it seems to deliver both a level playing field and the moral high ground. It has the boldness of the grand gesture, as if one were finally cutting the Gordian Knot of religious tribalism and primaevael prejudice. But it is a problematic position and, I contend, a foolish one.

There are several reasons to doubt whether the principle of social equality of religion or belief is an effective way of regulating religious conflict. This essay focuses on just two, the first of which may seem far-fetched; and the second obvious to the point of simplistic. First, equality, impartiality and toleration are principles with cultural limits. They may be admired as social virtues in our culture whilst beyond it they are ignored, misunderstood or opposed. If these ideals lack resonance and authority in another culture then they will not affect its members in the way we might wish and expect. Second, the dogma that religions and beliefs are ‘socially equal’ takes religion and the dangers of religion too lightly; it scuppers important discussion about the merits and demerits of different belief-systems.

The cultural limits of ‘equality’

Equality is a potent ideal but not a universal one. If we live among people who cherish the ideal of equality, it is pleasing to assume that

others do likewise. This ensures that we don't have to reflect too hard on our own core values. They are seen, if they are noticed at all, to be self-evident and natural.

If in this way we universalise and absolutise our own particular paradigm, we ignore its limits and settle into an ethnocentrism which blinds us to the reality and validity of another culture. What is needed is an accurate 'cultural anthropology' of the moral world. In my circle, the ideal of equality may command respect and admiration, to the point of reverence. In another it is hotly disputed. In the Nietzschean domain and under authoritarian regimes, the very idea of equality provokes contempt and revulsion. But in yet other worlds, equality barely figures as a concept in moral and social concerns. It meets incomprehension. It is unthinkable because that moral world rotates around a different configuration of values: honour, duty, dignity, propriety, modesty, chastity, blessing, favour.

Perhaps traditional morality, based on values of custom and hierarchy, indifferent to equality, is the historical norm, in which case it is 'Western', Christian or post-Christian society which is peculiar, even aberrant, in its admiration for equality. Although the importance of equality is contested in the West, it is widely understood as a virtue, a virtue to be generously reciprocated: one good turn deserves another. The principle has deep resonance and authority. But if another culture does not recognise or respect 'equality' and 'impartiality', then these values will not be received or reciprocated in the way that Westerners assume. Seen as alien, intrusive, preposterous, they could surprisingly evoke aggression.

How might one gauge the extent of another culture's unresponsiveness to the ideal of 'equality'? It would be hard to measure, because by its very nature it is likely to entail an absence of evidence. If that culture did not think much of equality, what would one expect? Lack of engagement, indifference, intermittent hostility.

Some cultural self-reflection may be in order. Perhaps our respect for equality and impartiality arises from deep historical experience of which we are barely aware. Larry Siedentop argues that liberal secularism, with its ideals of equality and individual freedom, is born out of Christian moral thinking and there is a deep moral logic joining the two: "Christian moral intuitions played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse that gave rise to modern liberalism and secularism"; or again: "[s]ecularism is Christianity's gift to the world, ideas and practices which have often been turned against 'excesses' of the Christian church itself" (Siedentop 2015: 359, 360).

Following Fustel de Coulanges, Siedentop argues that the norms of the ancient world reflected the claims, memories and rituals of the sacerdotal family. The absolute authority of the paterfamilias – and an underlying assumption of natural *inequality* – were challenged and overturned by revolutionary Christian emphasis on the moral equality of souls and a day of judgement which equally awaits all – and on which all will be judged equally: that is, uniquely. This generates inner convictions which disregard class and status in favour of individual moral agency and freedom of conscience.

The apostle Paul had a vision in which conventional social identity is made to vanish. “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (*Colossians* 3: 11). Elsewhere he had written that there is neither male or female in Christ (*Galatians* 3: 28). Taken to heart, this universalism of Paul’s inspires a joyous sense of liberation from the constriction and oppression of social identity, along with a sobering realisation of personal responsibility. He opens up a moral space (infused with grace) where the socially-bounded person matters less than the moral being they truly are. This allows for a sharpened distinction between a person and the role which he or she happens to occupy, between inner conviction and external conformity, fostering in turn a clearer division between what ought to be and what is.

Separating the realm of Caesar from the divine – separation of the powers of Church and state – allows for an interaction between the two which, however acrimonious, vitalises both and prevents the ruling order from sliding into theocratic tyranny. In the centuries after Jesus, moral intuitions generated by Christianity began to build the assumptions, laws and institutions out of which a liberal paradigm and secular equality agenda would eventually emerge. Monasticism provided a model of voluntary association, simplicity and self-discipline, in which work was no longer despised as the occupation of slaves. Drudgery could be divine. Self-government provided a basis for self-respect and even resistance. The growth of papal leadership and administration led to an elaboration of canon law, which became “the first modern Western legal system” and “the original vehicle of modernity” (Siedentop 2015: 226). Meanwhile, ‘natural law’ led on to ‘natural rights’ and thence to ‘equal rights’. Other cultural developments driven by Christian moral intuitions included courtly love and chivalry.

The European Enlightenment was the child of (reformed) Christianity, the rebellious truth-telling teenager who attacks the hypocrisy of the parent. ‘Equality’ was now a principle of secular progressivism, used

to claim moral ascendancy and censure the wealth and double standards of an established Church condemned in terms of the ideals it had itself cultivated. Almost every hierarchy fails the equality test and limps away delegitimised. In this way the principle of equality can be 'weaponized'. Where once it was deployed against other religions and inspired missionary endeavours to liberate them, in Britain now it is targeted more often on the established Church (women bishops?) than on religions such as Hinduism which can claim the privilege of cultural difference.

So the word 'equality' enjoys a powerful bivalence, with roots in both Christianity and humanism, two movements with a history in common. It can be part of a cultural war, usually a cultural cold war between the secular and the religious. It is an ideal which resonates deep within the collective 'Western' moral and historical consciousness.

As a principle or an ideal, equality co-exists with a nexus of complementary and competing values in relation to which it takes meaning. In the French Revolution, for instance, there was a tension or contradiction between each of the terms in the triad: liberty, equality, fraternity. These days there is a seldom-noticed strain between equality and another progressive desideratum: 'diversity'. Equality is also in conflict with merit. (Why do I deserve equal pay when you are more skilled and work harder?). Some among the "Great Goods", as Isaiah Berlin observed, cannot live together (Berlin 1991: 13), or cannot do so amicably.

'Equality' is a tricky concept. If we think of it primarily as a mathematical term, applying to quantity and measurement, then its transference to qualitative human affairs is problematic. Friedrich Engels was surprisingly wary of the word, saying that it produces "nothing but mental confusion". He makes the down-to-earth observation: "As between one country, one province and even one place and another, living conditions will always evince a *certain* inequality which may be reduced to a minimum but never wholly eliminated. The living conditions of Alpine dwellers will always be different from those of the plainsmen." Engels continued: "the concept of a socialist society as a realm of *equality* is a one-sided French concept deriving from the old 'liberty, equality, fraternity', a concept which was justified in that, in its own time and place, it signified a *phase of development*, but which, like all the one-sided ideas of earlier socialist schools, ought now to be superseded, since they produce nothing but mental confusion, and more accurate ways of presenting the matter have been discovered" (Engels to August Bebel, 18–28 March 1875, in Engels 1991: 64).

Seventy years ago 'equality' was a call for redistribution and economic justice, a rallying cry for socialism and class struggle. Something of that

meaning persists, but over the last few decades 'equality' has mutated, having been adopted as a feel-good buzzword in management circles. My own organisation (the University of Bradford) claims in its strapline to be 'confronting inequality' and 'celebrating diversity'. But the inequality being confronted is not inequality of wages. Indeed over recent years while senior management have been 'confronting inequality' their salaries have soared and the financial gulf between them and others in the University has widened. When used by management (increasingly the dominant use) the word 'equality' is not about levelling wages or campaigning for a fair deal for the low-paid. It refers to the civil rights of minority groups, rights which cost management almost nothing and which clothe it in the robes of secular piety. The slogan of 'equality' is deployed, as in *Animal Farm*, to build consent and cloak the interests of the powerful. For this reason, 'equality' is increasingly seen as a cant word (Ely 2015: 49). The assumption that 'equality' means improving conditions for the worse-off falters before a realisation that people can always be treated *equally* badly.

All these meanings and connotations of the word 'equality' matter because it is too easy to assume that others will respond to the word in the same way, or with the same fervour of assent. To decree social equality of religion or belief sends out a strong message which may be interpreted quite differently from how it was intended. It suggests that a society has given up on its historic religion and is offering itself and its patrimony to all comers, known or unknown, on equal terms. If a society assumes that such munificence will elicit appreciation and cultural reciprocity, a generous spirit of give-and-take, it may find that it is as tragically mistaken as Lear when he supposed that dividing his kingdom and gifting it away would induce filial gratitude in his elder daughters. The beneficiaries may instead interpret the give-away as an act of stupidity, or feebleness: or as a propitious sign, a blessing and reward from their own deity. In a culture dominated by honour/shame, a culture in which weakness is despised, 'equality' can be interpreted as a mark of submission – and concessions, read as signs of placation, invite aggression.

The political limits of impartiality and toleration

If our ideal of equality may be construed quite differently in another culture, then so too may similar ideals of impartiality and toleration. In the 'West' (for want of a better term) impartiality is normally evaluated positively. That said, an enlightened liberal will be more partial to impartiality than an old-fashioned believer. To the liberal, impartiality

is a virtue with connotations of openness, neutrality, reason, objectivity, self-restraint, fairness, broad-mindedness, empathy, emotional and social intelligence, the ability to see life many-sidedly, magnanimity. To an unreconstructed religious traditionalist, living with absolute right and wrong, 'impartiality' smacks of evasion, fence-sitting, fudging, pussyfooting, fickleness, wrong-headedness, cowardice, dishonesty or self-deception. Perhaps both are right.

On the positive side, 'impartiality' means acting fairly, with disinterested probity, without favouring self, family or allies. The claim to impartiality is, implicitly, a claim to moral authority and power. In this way the State promotes itself as an honest broker, a fair arbiter sufficiently detached from the issues at stake to give balanced, objective judgment. Impartiality, or its appearance, is easily maintained in an area such as sport, based on shared rules and agreed codes of conduct; also, politically, over a narrow spectrum of views which are weakly held. But throw something more extreme – the Moonies, Anjem Choudary, or a mouthy neo-Nazi, say – into the arena and 'impartiality' starts to look like complicity. Faced with radical disagreement, much that is 'neutral' melts into air. Against cruelty or falsity there may be no value-free position. Remaining a by-stander, professing to be non-aligned or 'value-neutral', means, in effect, siding with the prevailing force, countenancing abuse.

Perhaps impartiality is one of the illusions of an epoch, an illusion which can only be sustained in a condition of deep underlying consensus (such as a consensus of 'British values') and unanimity about the civilised rules governing disagreement. Once the stability of 'impartiality' itself is threatened, once the Kalashnikovs are fired, the appearance of neutrality is shelved. This may be what is currently happening in Britain. When terrorists threaten the streets of London, the rhetoric of impartiality gives way to the Government's 'Prevent' counter-extremism programme, which seeks to mobilise community and civil society organisations across "a wide range of sectors (including education, criminal justice, faith, charities, online and health) where there are risks of radicalisation", to "rebut terrorist and extremist propaganda and offer alternative views to our most vulnerable target audiences" (Prevent 2015).

Commendable as they are, the liberal virtues of openness attract abuse. On its own, toleration cultivates the intolerant and intolerable. And impartiality dissolves in the presence of extremism and the absence of value-neutrality. So the first reason to beware of the 'social equality' of religion or belief is that ideals of equality, impartiality and toleration

are limited, culturally, politically and pragmatically. They may be read (or misread) as signs of weakness and submission. There is a need for other values: discernment, courage, authority and that active sense of justice which protects the weak.

On (ignoring) the dangers of religion

A second reason to be wary of the 'social equality' of religion or belief is that it underestimates the danger of religion and obstructs honest debate about the characteristics of different religions.

Religion, like fire, is dangerous. Religious groups conceive, understand and assert themselves in opposition to one another. Often they do so violently. Indeed, violence and the sacred are intimately, inextricably, interwoven (Girard 1979). For this reason, beliefs and belief-based groups should be scrutinised vigilantly. Beliefs inclining towards violence should be named, examined, exposed, criticised and tackled. Such beliefs should not be considered socially equivalent to more peaceful beliefs, nor afforded respect, unless in the sense that it is wise to 'respect' an enemy: not underestimate it, remain alert to its vigour, craft and camouflage. One might like the human being who holds a fanatical belief, but the belief itself should be rigorously searched, not waved through out of 'respect'.

Britain, it might be said, has three main defences against fanaticism. The first, a soft defence, is the Church itself, especially the Established Church. The Church is well placed to draw the various religions into dialogue and draw them out. (Yes, faith groups often get along fine.) The model here is hospitality: warmth, welcome and acceptance of difference. Here diverse religions can communicate in the way they know best, in the language of theology, mysticism, metaphysics, ceremony or the sacred, not a language in which the secular State is fluent.

But that secular State provides a second defence against bigotry, a harder defence. The State works best when it is both detached and benign, respecting the relative autonomy of religion. In its policing and protective role, it should be fair, firm and, if need be, fierce.

The third and surest defence against extremism is a well-educated, confident public. A knowledgeable public, free to speak truth not just on settled matters for which the evidence is in, but also on matters of uncertainty, where people are still fumbling towards an opinion – such a public requires lively debate, informed disputation and disciplined argument, throughout civil society. In Britain intelligent debate has been strikingly absent, for reasons which might include native tact and

politeness; squeamishness; politically correct hypersensitivity and fear of causing offence; fear of being judged 'judgemental'; a trend to contract out discussion to 'experts'; and a wider culture in which for the last fifty years it has been 'cool' to be ignorant about religion. Public debate has been policed by a partnership of progressive politics and psychotherapy which enforces the line that criticism of any minority group amounts to demonising, stigmatising and oppressing the 'Other'.

It might be thought that proclaiming the social equality of religions and beliefs would encourage civic and civil discussion by establishing mutual respect and trust. But what initially seems to be an invitation – all can now converse on equal terms – turns out to be a deadening, deadly prohibition against free appraisal of different beliefs. This effectively infantilises discussion. It acts to forestall, short-circuit and repress debates about the relative merits of religions and beliefs. It permits a *simulacrum* of debate, polite exchanges, flattery and fustian, but the substance of disagreement is off-limits and that eliminates the opportunity to work through conflict and achieve real, hard-earned understanding.

To declare or legislate as a first move and on principle that religions and beliefs are socially equal is to announce a verdict before hearing the evidence. It assumes the very point which is at issue: it takes for granted that which is supposed to be proved. Debate is thereby rendered redundant and unwelcome because the conclusion has been predetermined. This begging the question (*petitio principii*) compromises intellectual integrity and confuses the issue. It is an act of pre-judgment and, in the literal sense, prejudice. The matter is already decided, not only for this case, here and now, but for all cases, always. It is a universal judgment and a universal misjudgment. Its presumption tips into hubris.

Conferring 'social equality' all round, as a primary, pre-emptive strategy, seems to stem from fear of debate, as if the State mistrusts free discussion of religion or needs to buy off the participants. Milton would tell us that such mistrust is a disparagement both to the public and to truth: "Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter" (Milton 1968 [1644]: 35). Mistrusting the public is a derogation in a double sense: a curtailment of authority and detraction of honour. Thwarting debate acts to the discouragement of judgement and the stop of truth. It strikes at the breath of reason itself.

To decree social equality for one religion and all, indiscriminately, irrespective of the nature and outcome of beliefs, is an act of great secular faith, possibly a crazy act: *quos deus vult perdere, prius dementat*. It is a rash act of unscrupulous optimism which disregards and trivialises

important questions of right and wrong. It disempowers and disarms moral analysis. And it allows injurious sects to hide behind a *façade* of legitimacy, to play the politics of indignation and grievance and to fore-close debate.

The social equality of religion or belief: why?

It is valid to ask: what is your evidence for believing in social equality of religion? On what grounds do you base your opinion?

Beliefs should be rated on their merits. If a belief is ludicrous, then it is equally ludicrous to proclaim equality, intellectual or social, for that belief. I am free to believe that the earth is flat, the moon a blood-ball and the sun a banana, but my belief should not be held equal to that of a competent astronomer. If a belief is dangerous and anti-social then it is dangerous and anti-social to grant it 'social equality'. There are those, for example, who hold that adulterous women should be stoned, thieves have their hands cut off and apostates be put to death. To declare *on principle* that the convictions of a *Salafist* are socially equal to those of a Turkish *Alevi* or an *Ahmadi* Muslim is a grievous error. To change the example, few would endorse the 'social equality' of homophobia, paedophilia or racism. Few would be happy to concede 'social equality' to satanists such that the local satanist group had a right to take the school assembly. (And if you profoundly disagree with what your opponent says, yet defend their right to say it, you are standing up for freedom, not for equality.)

In any religion, some individuals will hold beliefs which run counter to 'civilised norms' and/or are considered heterodox by their co-religionists. To declare at the outset that these beliefs, however daft, are socially equal is an act of deference, bordering on abdication of independent thought and judgement. It authorises refusal to reason freely about religion and the critical differences between one belief and another. This refusal is dismaying when it comes from free-thinkers, whom one might expect to bring scepticism and critique to matters ideological. Of course there may be a critical edge to the 'social equality of belief' position, a conviction that all religions boil down to superstition: "they're all as bad as each other". But this too shows clumsiness and naiveté in lumping together *Al-Qaeda* with the Quakers.

There is then an obvious common-sensical difficulty in advocating social equality of religion and belief. Is there any solution? One possibility is to start defining one's way out of the problem, redefining belief such that the more egregious and ungenial ones are excluded. An

attempt to do this is seen in the Explanatory Notes to the UK *Equality Act* of 2010 (s. 10: 52):

The criteria for determining what is a “philosophical belief” are that it must be genuinely held; be a belief and not an opinion or viewpoint based on the present state of information available; be a belief as to a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour; attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance; and be worthy of respect in a democratic society, compatible with human dignity and not conflict with the fundamental rights of others. So, for example, any cult involved in illegal activities would not satisfy these criteria.

What qualifies as ‘a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance’ is uncertain. Equally uncertain is what is ‘worthy of respect in a democratic society’. Are all aspects of *sharia* law ‘worthy of respect in a democratic society’? Are the views of white supremacists or Scientologists? The word ‘cult’ cannot be defined in a value-neutral way. A ‘cult involved in illegal activities’ would not satisfy the criteria, but what about a cult canny enough to stay within the law?

The Explanatory Notes seem to be seeking a definition which is value-free, staking out a position of neutrality and objectivity. But no such position exists. The Explanatory Note smuggles values back in through phrases like ‘worthy of respect in a democratic society’ and ‘compatible with human dignity’. Rather than spuriously claiming neutrality, it is better to state one’s core values, whatever they are, clearly.

There is a problem too with the word ‘religion’, a word which covers so many beliefs, practices and outcomes. Islamic Jihad is clearly unlike the Jehovah’s Witnesses who in turn differ from the Jains. The word ‘religion’ invites us to focus on what they have in common, but what matters is precisely how they differ.

One might pause here to speculate what it tells us about British society that we aspire towards or believe in equality of religion and belief. What does it say about our relationship to our own traditions? It might show how deeply Christian or humanist values – fairness, friendliness, justice – are embedded in an apparently secular society. It might show confidence, or overconfidence, a trust that our society can embrace and incorporate other (alien or antagonistic) value systems. It might, on the other hand, betray a lack of confidence in our traditions, or ignorance, indifference or complacency, a failure to appreciate that ‘cultural heritage’ must be nurtured and renewed. It could show an acceptance of

moral relativism, even its *apothēsis*. Or it might demonstrate collective guilt and self-hatred, to disown what led to the iniquities of Empire. It may be the symptom of a house divided: a cultural war.

A media agency DCM (Digital Cinema Media) bans a Church of England cinema advertisement in 2015 featuring the *Lord's Prayer*, on the grounds that some advertisements "could cause offence to those of differing political persuasions, as well as to those of differing faiths and indeed of no faith" (Wyatt 2015). The agency, which controls 80 per cent of screens around the country, including the Odeon, Cineworld and Vue chains, has a policy of refusing 'Political or Religious Advertising'. Religious advertising is defined as "advertising which wholly or partly advertises any religion, faith or equivalent systems [sic] of belief (including any absence of belief) or any part of any religion, faith or such equivalent systems of belief" (Digital Cinema Media 2015: section 2.2.2). DCM defends its ban by invoking neutrality and equality. It says "a clear neutral stance remains the fairest policy for all, and allows DCM to treat all political and religious beliefs equally" (Aresti 2015). This reference to equality means in practice an equality of prohibition; not the right to expression but equality of being censored. Discourse is regulated and policed by suppressing anything that might cause hypothetical offence and an unelected company decrees what might cause offence. Note the illiberal effects of an apparently liberal standpoint and the coercive power of words such as 'neutral' and 'equality'. The result is an enforcement of ignorance. The case as a whole shows not just the absence but the impossibility of value neutrality.

Here's a hypothetical reality check. Imagine a group of Islamists (such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir*), united by a proud sense of tradition, community spirit and zeal. Suppose that this group nurses a deep and understandable grievance about British foreign policy in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq. Its followers identify with the global *Umma*, support the *Khalifah* and sympathise with the goals of movements such as *Boko Haram* and *al-Shabaab*. This Islamist movement has little to say about equality as such, but it advocates a literalist version of *sharia* law which undermines women's equality, condemns lesbian and gay rights and upholds a sharp distinction between the rights of believers and the non-rights of infidels. Such a scenario is not implausible. That it is 'scary' does not make it 'scare-mongering'. Against such an antagonist – strong, determined, founded on principles alien to equality – the notion of social equality of religion and belief appears ineffectual, or worse than useless, in that it clears the ground for subjugation and discredits resistance.

But perhaps the principle of social equality hides inner strength under surface flimsiness. If one could engage an anti-egalitarian movement in prolonged negotiation organised around the principle of equality, then that movement might come to accept the principle, which could then begin to unravel it from within. In this way ‘social equality’ might function as a Trojan horse, or benign virus. Non-egalitarian minorities might take it on, unaware of the ramifications of what they are buying into. The process would establish that the State will be setting the rules, that those rules are fair and that they are structured around a notion of social equality which gives rights but also, quietly, exacts responsibility.

Such a hope, however, is probably naive in that it underestimates the coherence and vitality of belief in target groups. It also misjudges the distance between the equality agenda and true believers, and under-rates their capacity for dissimulation (*casuistry* or *taqiyya*). It is easy to play the equality game, paying lip service to equality whilst despising it, dipping into the language of liberalism and democracy while aiming in the longer run to subvert both.

Conclusion

I have outlined two main reasons for objecting to the social equality of religion and belief. First, it erroneously presumes that the virtues of equality, impartiality and toleration are equally valued in other cultures. An initiative for equality may be read as a sign of deference and capitulation. Second, we need a healthy discussion about the particulars of religions, particularly dangerous religions. That discussion cannot be honest if it has been predetermined that all religions are socially equal.

There are other reasons for mistrusting equality. It can be disputed on liberal grounds, in that it degrades liberal values and leads to illiberal consequences. It increases State interference because enforcement necessitates surveillance and investigation into what are properly private matters; and, in the case of guilt, punishment. Apparently trivial incidents become confrontational test cases, such as the ‘gay marriage cake’ (Irish Times 2015). Something is awry when liberal beliefs are imposed (under threat of penalties) on those who dissent.

Equality is an important word, to be used accurately. In the phrase ‘equality of religion or belief’ the concept of equality is probably being over-extended and misapplied. When beliefs are fundamentally dissimilar, there is no compelling reason to suppose that they are equal, intellectually or socially. So the phrase ‘social equality of religion or belief’ should be approached with caution. In conflating different

religions and ascribing to them social equality, the phrase overlooks the variety of religions and the social danger which extreme ones pose. The pressure to accept or promulgate equality of religion and belief, social or otherwise, should therefore be resisted.

A destructive belief-system should be named as such and countered with rational deliberation, thorough examination and vigorous criticism. One should isolate and analyse its particular features, formal or informal, its scriptures and doctrines and practices, looking for what makes it dangerous, not for what makes it 'equal'. Each religion and belief should be *equally* open to critique.

Religions should be judged by their consequences, not pre-decided by an abstract principle such as equality. Each group should be publicly accountable for the conduct of its adherents. If one religion generates more suicide-murder bombings and terrorism than others, then it should not be exculpated merely because it is a religion. Social equality is not an entitlement. Respect should be earned, not guaranteed.

Religious groups acquire a reputation over time, depending on their fruits and whether their actions accord with their words. If a sect is brutal and its beliefs noxious, then society needs defences, formal and informal. It would be irresponsible to vow perpetual impartiality. A pedestal is no place from which to do battle. When an ideology appears which is backward or anti-social, then the State must exercise its right to counter that ideology, unhampered by pre-commitment to 'social equality' of belief. Instead of presenting Britain as a neutral abstract space, vacant to all equally, it would be better to acknowledge the country's historical culture as an active part of its future.

If then 'social equality of religion and belief' fails to regulate religious conflict, what would do better? Here I will sketch only the outline of an answer, an answer which sounds somewhat traditional and inimical to liberal sensibilities. To counter the spread of religious extremism would require:

- a much greater degree of religious knowledge and religious literacy among people at large;
- willingness to engage in frank debate;
- much more honesty and truth-telling;
- readiness to hear some painful home truths; and
- robust cultural assertiveness.

With respect to the law, there is a ready and easy way to avoid the difficulties which attend on talk of 'equality of religion or belief'.

The employment legislation passed under that heading – legislation which prevents an employer from disavouring or victimising a worker on grounds of religion or belief – could be re-categorised in terms of freedom of thought, conscience and religion: a long-established classification and also one in line with Article 9 of the *European Convention on Human Rights*. If this were done, then employees would retain protection from harassment or disadvantage; and the law would not have to ‘square the circle’ in terms of arguing for the social equality of the benign and the malign, or the intellectual equality of phenomena intrinsically unequal.