Easter sermons: self-serving and dishonest

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It's a Bank Holiday, half the staff in the newsroom are on leave, but news editors still have to somehow fill their papers and their broadcast bulletins. What easier way to do it than to draw on the ready-made Easter sermons of various bishops and Cardinals around the country?

This year there was a positive welter of politically motivated messages to pick from.

Perhaps the most ludicrous was that of the Catholic Bishop of Shrewsbury, Mark Davies, who said that countries that had become secularised opened the door to evil ideologies such as Nazism and Communism and that Britain was heading in that direction. The bishop said that unless we had Christianity to protect us –as it had since it arrived here – we were likely to become a nation of evil-doers.

He blithely glosses over the evil that Christianity has drawn in its wake and the fact that much of the warfare in Europe over the centuries has been in the name of Christianity. He also forgets that Catholicism was at its height in Germany in the 1930s when Hitler rose to power. It was hardly the secularised nation he would have us believe.

There is an account of his sermon here.

In his speech, the Archbishop of Canterbury was complaining that because our schools are not absolutely saturated with his religious opinions it means that religious education has been "sidelined".

He forgets to mention that the CofE recently issued a report about its educational intentions saying that church schools "must include a wholehearted commitment to putting faith and spiritual development at the heart of the curriculum and ensuring that the Christian ethos permeates the whole educational experience."

The report also says that "religious education and collective worship should continue to make major contributions to the Church school's Christian ethos to allow pupils to engage seriously with and develop an understanding of the person and teachings of Jesus Christ."

Given that this kind of blatant religious propaganda is now ubiquitous in Britain's schools, what more does Rowan Williams want? Some kind of Christian madrassa system where kids are lined up for most of the day reciting religious texts and having highly contentious claims about supposed supernatural happenings rammed down their throats?

Why should children who go to state schools be hauled into churches every five minutes and subjected to the propaganda of school chaplains who don't even pretend to give objective religious education but are, as they will admit, trying to create the next generation of Christians?

Who decided that our school system should be a recruiting tool for the CofE (or the Catholic Church or Islam, come to that?).

Then, in Scotland, the ridiculous cleric Cardinal Keith O'Brien decided to use his sermon to perpetuate one of Christianity's most successful lies of modern times – that there is some kind of

restriction on the wearing of the cross in Britain.

The leader of the Catholic Church in Scotland said he was concerned about the growing "marginalisation" of religion. It is so marginalised, in fact, that his words were generously reported in every newspaper in the country and on every TV news bulletin that day. Isn't it a shame for the poor, neglected, ignored "sidelined" Cardinal that his every word makes headlines – however crack-brained?

The cases of Nadia Eweida and Shirley Chaplin were, of course, wheeled out again for further airing. Apparently they are proof positive that you can't wear a cross at work.

But despite the mythology that has arisen around these cases, they were not about wearing crosses at all, they were about wearing inappropriate jewellery of any kind at work.

The argument in the European Court is about whether employers have the right to enforce their uniform policies (as in *Nadia Eweida vs BA*) or whether dangling jewellery poses a health and safety risk in a hospital setting (*Shirley Chaplin vs Health Authority*).

The fact that these women were wearing crosses is irrelevant – it would have been the same if they had been wearing charm bracelets or lucky pixies.

And, as the appeal court judges said in their ruling on the Eweida case:

"Among the tribunal's explicit findings are Ms Eweida's 'readiness to make a serious accusation without thought of the implications' (§20.7), 'her insensitivity towards colleagues, her lack of empathy for those without a religious focus in their lives, and her incomprehension of the conflicting demands which professional management seeks to address and resolve on a near-daily basis' (§19.4.5). *It is regrettable that print and broadcast media have continued to publicise allegations made against BA by Ms Eweida (and not by her alone) which have been rejected by a responsible judicial tribunal."*

(My italics - read the whole Appeal Court judgment here)

Cardinal O'Brien, in full persecution mode, advised Christians to buy a small cross or crucifix and pin it to their clothing – they only cost £1, he said.

That is their choice. But let us not forget that this is precisely the compromise that Shirley Chaplin's employer suggested. But Shirley – an evangelical Christian - was adamant that she wanted to wear her cross on her necklace chain, and it was that obduracy that led to the confrontation in court, not the fact that it was a cross.

But now, because the distorted version has been endlessly repeated, the truth of these cases has been lost to the popular mind. The Christian activists have done an excellent job of cementing a lie in the nation's consciousness. And boy, are they playing it for all it is worth, secure in the knowledge that few members of the public or, indeed, journalists are going take time to read the actual judgements in these cases.

In his sermon, Cardinal O'Brien invoked the equally legendary "aggressive secularists".

But I fear that for sheer militancy, ruthlessness and dishonesty, secularists have little to learn from the present-day crop of aggressive clergypeople.

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