

Religious differences are reinforced by misguided enthusiasts like Tony Blair

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Tony Blair has been on the public platform again talking about how important religion is for everybody – even if they don't think it is.

At a debate in London this week on Religion in Public Life, he appeared to be presenting himself as some sort of religious secularist. On a platform with the Archbishop of Canterbury he made the case for political decisions being ultimately made by elected politicians within a secular framework. They should listen to religious views, but in the end they should take their decisions on the basis of what they think is right for the country.

During the course of the debate he revealed that, contrary to rumour, he didn't pray with George Bush in the lead up to the Iraq war – although he thought there wouldn't have been anything wrong if he had. He invoked "militant secularism" — which he didn't define — and portrayed it as some kind of threat to religious liberty. It is difficult to know what he was referring to, but it would be wonderful to ask him.

During questions, the Archbishop of Canterbury was asked whether he thought religious believers were being "pushed into the margins" by legal rulings that seemed to disparage their expressions of faith. The Archbishop said that Christians should be wary of too readily assuming the victim mantle – he admitted that many of the cases that had given rise to this feeling of persecution among Christians had been misrepresented and exaggerated.

On "faith schools", both thought that they were a good idea – not surprising given that the Archbishop has a strong vested interest in them and Tony Blair set the whole expansion of these schools in action in the first place. Their arguments were familiar and still totally unconvincing.

On interfaith dialogue, the Archbishop of Canterbury admitted that it "allows you to talk to people who want to talk to you". The challenge, he said, comes with talking to people who don't want to talk to you. He claimed that even talking to people of goodwill from other "faith traditions" eventually filtered down into those unreachable parts of their communities where suspicion and even violence were most likely to reside.

This is very unpersuasive. In reality, "interfaith dialogue" is an utter waste of time and resources. The very people who need to understand and accept the differing beliefs of others are the very ones who don't want to hear about them. The Islamists who want to wreak havoc on their perceived enemies (defined by their religion) will not sit down at a table with Christians and Jews and try to understand where they are coming from.

If you are utterly convinced that you are in possession of the ultimate divine truth, then why would you want to hear other people trying to tell you that there is another ultimate divine truth?

Neither Rowan Williams nor Tony Blair could satisfactorily answer the question of how you reconcile absolute truth claims made by different religions. If a number of religions say that they,

and only they, have the truth and will brook no contradiction, you have all it takes for conflict. Tolerance of other people's claims is all very well, but when people take their religion very, very seriously, tolerance will not do for them.

Sometimes what seem to outsiders like tiny doctrinal differences can lead to bloodshed on an epic scale. The small differences between Catholic and Protestant Christianity, for instance, have, at times, laid waste to Europe.

In Iraq at the moment, the small difference that separates Sunni and Shia Islam is causing untold [murder and mayhem](#).

Both Blair and Williams think that trying to educate children in schools about the differences in religious belief that potentially divide them is a good idea. But children have shown that they have no interest in religion – if left alone they will abandon it completely. It does not divide them unless someone keeps telling them that it does.

That someone might be their parents, but it also might be the school that harps on endlessly about the differences between communities.

Children want to know about the world but they also want friendships that are not constantly defined by religious and cultural differences. They want to share what they have in common, not what the teachers or parents keep telling them is their differences.

A convincing argument can be made (at least as far as I am concerned) that the less they know about the religion, the safer they will be.

But no, the religious busy-bodies, who are the source of the trouble in the first place, keep emphasising that "you are a Muslim", "you are a Christian", "you are a Jew".

That's not what makes people respect each other. In fact, quite the reverse.

Recently I was shopping in the very multicultural London Borough where I live and the local secondary school had just turned out. There were girls of all colours wearing all kinds of dress. Two girls, one wearing a hijab, the other a rather short skirt, were walking along arm in arm giggling and gossiping without any self-consciousness. They were pointing out a boy who was walking in front of them.

I don't think they were discussing the finer points of Islamic or Christian doctrines.

And the Olympics, too, will show how people from all around the world from all kinds of cultures and religions can unite around a shared interest – in this instance, sport. Of course, religious interests will be crawling all over the Olympic Village, doing their best to religionise the whole thing. Hopefully they can be discouraged or ignored.

All this I find more encouraging than listening to Tony Blair and Rowan Williams telling us that we have to talk about religion all the time to avoid hating each other.

Watch Archbishop Rowan Williams, Tony Blair, and writer and former Daily Telegraph editor Charles Moore discuss 'Religion in Public Life' in the final conversation of the Westminster Faith Debates series.

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Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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