

Time for Christians of goodwill to say “Not In My Name”

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Most Christians don't feel the need to be exempt from equality legislation in order to live their lives in accordance with their religious beliefs. Terry Sanderson says it's time they spoke out against those that do.

The efforts by some evangelical groups to secure special privileges for Christians in the workplace – mostly at the expense of the rights of other people – were in evidence again recently with another trumped up story of supposed discrimination on grounds of religion.

The Christian Legal Centre said that a hospital-worker had suffered "religious discrimination" after she was disciplined for trying to bully a Muslim colleague into embracing her own evangelical version of Christianity. It was widely reported in the right wing press as another case of Christians being "persecuted" for their beliefs.

When the matter came to court, a [very different story emerged](#).

Even though just about all their legal challenges have failed, the zealots of the Christian Legal Centre and the Christian Institute have been wildly successful in creating the idea that "something must be done" to protect Christians from the supposedly hostile society in which they live. That something is a "conscience cause" in the Equality Act that would relieve them of the duty to obey the law in the same way that everyone else must.

In Northern Ireland just such an opt-out clause is high on the political agenda, and has been given new impetus by the "gay cake" row.

Many people have said that it was wrong for Ashers Bakery to have been found guilty of discrimination because it refused to make a cake with a message in support of same-sex marriage iced on to it. The court did not agree and found the bakers guilty.

It may seem like a trivial case, but it actually represents a very big principle. Can a commercial firm claim to have a religious identity? Can a bakery be "Christian"? By its own admission, many of its employees are not. The point is that this case was about whether gay people are truly equal members of society or whether Christians should have the "right" to render them second class.

The law says that firms operating for commercial gain must serve all-comers equally. The evangelicals who are leading this campaign think they should not have to observe such a law as their "conscience" is more important than anything else.

But not all Christians think this way. In fact, very few of them want to go down this route of intolerance, but the Christian Institute and the Christian Legal Centre purport to speak for them all when they talk about a "Christian conscience".

We often ask moderate Muslims to denounce the extremists in their midst. Now it is time for Christians of goodwill to disown the Christian Legal Centre and its ilk and say loud and clear: "Not in my name".

Terry Sanderson

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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