

On homophobia and racism

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Two weeks ago the Archbishop of Canterbury was in Monterrey, Mexico where he delivered a sermon to the effect that Anglicanism is standing on a precipice and risks falling into a "ravine of intolerance".

Mr Welby said the Church had to steer a course between, on the one hand, compromising so much that it abandoned its "core beliefs" and, on the other, becoming so intolerant that it fractured completely.

He said the atmosphere in the Anglican Communion was rather like the English civil war: what the church was fighting about was "incomprehensible" to people outside it.

He revisited the same territory this week in a speech to a group of evangelical Christians when he told them that young people considered the Church's attitude to gay marriage as "cruel" and "wicked". Even young evangelicals thought so.

Yet he still maintains that he did the right thing in voting against gay marriage in the House of Lords. It's worth quoting him in detail:

"What I voted against was what seemed to me to be the rewriting the nature of marriage in a way that I have to say within the Christian tradition and within scripture and within our understanding is not the right way to deal with the very important issues that were attempted to be dealt with in that Bill.

"The Bill was clearly, quite rightly, trying to deal with issues of homophobia in our society.

"As I said at the time in the House of Lords, the Church has not been good at dealing with homophobia — it has at times, as gods' people, either implicitly or explicitly supported it and we have to be really, really repentant about that because it is utterly and totally wrong. But that doesn't mean that redefining marriage is the right way forward.

"That discussion is continuing and the Church is deeply and profoundly divided over the way forward on it.

"I am absolutely committed not to exclude people who have a different view from me, I am also absolutely committed to listening very carefully to them.

"If the same thing happened again I would vote the same way as I did then but I am continuing to think and listen very carefully as to how in our society today we respond to what is the most rapid cultural change in this area than there has been for a very long time.

"We have seen changes in the idea about sexuality, sexual behaviour. We have to face the fact that the vast majority of people under 35 not only think that what we're saying is incomprehensible but also think that we're plain wrong and wicked and equate it to racism and other forms of gross and atrocious injustice. We have to be real about that.

"I haven't got the answer one way or the other until my mind is clear on this. I'm not going to get into the trenches."

So, the Archbishop is facing up to the intractable problem that defeated his predecessor. A church that is, on the one hand, deeply and hatefully homophobic (in its African divisions at least) and increasingly liberal in its European and American branches. It's the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. Rowan Williams didn't have an answer, and neither does Justin Welby.

The reason? There is no answer that will satisfy all parties. The only solution is to split, something the bishops are desperate not to happen. The Church is weak enough as it is, but would be even weaker broken into ever smaller warring factions.

Justin Welby's dilemma is insoluble, but he does not make it better by saying on the one hand that he deplores homophobia and five minutes later practising it in the most disgraceful manner.

If you put yourself up as a moral arbiter, you had better be consistently moral yourself. Mr Welby hasn't got there yet.

And in a similar fashion, we must take to task the Runnymede Trust which has [recently published a pamphlet](#) saying that Muslims in Britain must not be stereotyped — in fact, to do so is "racist".

The pamphlet then goes on to indulge in the worst kind of stereotyping. Even its title "The New Muslims" immediately herds everyone who has come from a Muslim heritage into being "a Muslim". If you happen to live in an immigrant community that originates from a Muslim majority source then, according to the Runnymede Trust, you are a Muslim.

Imagine if they did the same with "Christians". Imagine if, because you are white and Anglo Saxon (and perhaps live in the Home Counties), you were immediately identified as a "Christian" and lumped into a category that they had chosen for you rather than one you had chosen for yourself.

The Runnymede Trust says that it is "racist" to imagine all Muslims are the same. That is true, and we have long recognised that Muslims originate from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. The Somalis have little in common with the Pakistanis and the Sri Lankans share little common ground with the Bosnian Muslims.

But what if you come from one of these countries and you don't regard yourself as a Muslim? What if you have grown indifferent to the "faith" that your parents (or the Runnymede Trust) assigned to you? What if you feel actively hostile towards it, as some do?

Just like in the general population, there are people from Pakistan and Iran and other majority Muslim countries who simply aren't interested in religion.

I have seen only one small survey of "Muslims" which measured their mosque-going. It showed that about a third of those questioned never went to a mosque. This is not to say that they didn't regard themselves as "Muslims" — in the same way that people who never cross the threshold of a church can still regard themselves as Christians.

But there are many "indifferents" in both Christian and Muslim heritage cultures.

This is something the Runnymede Trust doesn't seem to recognise. But it is a message that Maryam Namazie and the Council of ex-Muslims in Britain has been trying to get out for years.

So, who are the real "racists" here? Those who genuinely judge a person on his or her individual qualities and merits or someone who can think only in terms of "Muslims" and "Christians"?

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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