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Broadening Conceptions of Religion & Belief for Equalities

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Thanks for the invitation to speak.

Hope the second morning slot isn't too taxing for you! I'll try to be as entertaining as I can be but it is early!

Lots of legislation around equalities and its been proliferating over the last decade particularly, as you'll know.

And the introduction of a 'religion and belief' strand has added to the complexity.

I'm not a lawyer and this isn't a legal briefing. But what I want to explore is how universities might take an approach to equalities which takes a broad view of the role of religion in universities.

This is part of my work as programme director for the RLLP, funded by HEFCE LGM to support universities in their engagement with religious faith.

It's complicated at a number of levels. So first things first – what's a religion?

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Then, what's a belief? This well known environment case sets a new precedent. It's been hotly debated by religious studies scholars across the country, and beyond.

Likewise, New Religious Movements and 'alternative spiritualities' are likely to claim protection at law and definitional and status debates will likely proliferate.

For example, in the last census there was a movement to get 'Jedi Knights' recognized as a religious group. (There is a minimum number required for this). This succeeded, technically. And in the forthcoming census there is a similar move for the recognition of heavy metal!

In Canada, Satanism counts as a religion, but not in any European census.

And it raises the interesting question of who the final arbiter will be in contested cases as time goes by. Will courts be calling theologians as expert witnesses to resolve equalities disputes on matters of religions and belief?

One can envisage all sorts of problems with that approach and the debate risks getting hotter, rather than cooler, as a result of the new law. I don't envy judges dealing with this issues in coming years.

As well as these definitional debates and contests, there are also some important and obvious tensions.

The most prevalent is around establishing Genuine Occupational Requirements for religion and belief.

This is frequently an issue in university chaplaincies, for example. And equalities issues arise there, too, when some traditions – notable the Anglican – fund or part-fund posts while others can only contribute volunteers, because of the way they're resourced. This may well lead to challenges on the basis of terms and conditions and so on.

Another area is in terms of competing freedoms and protections under the legislation. A key tension here is between religion and belief on the one hand and sexual orientation on the other, for example.

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There is also the well known B&B case and the case of the registrar, Lilian Ladele, who was dismissed from her post in January 2008 after she refused to officiate for civil partnerships because of her religious beliefs.

So how might these issues bite for universities? RLLP has conducted case study research in a number of universities to explore this.

And we've produced those case studies which are a key material in workshops on these issues which we're running later in the year. I hope many of you and your colleagues will want to sign up for those. I'll give details at the end.

Lectures on Saturday  
Exams during Ramadan  
Religious observance in halls of residence  
Choice in college canteens

Often these dilemmas focus the attention of university leaderships and management on ensuring compliance.

And this is, of course, crucial if universities are to avoid litigation which is costly and detrimental.

But universities can take this further – going beyond compliance to something much more positive. And that's a central task of the RLLP, as we see it.

This challenges universities to take religious faith on board in a more thoughtful, considered way than simple compliance.

Why should they do so?

Well, one answer is that many universities are already pretty religious places!

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This isn't just true of Oxford and Cambridge which clearly had religious foundations. Nor is it the case for cathedrals group institutions only, either.

Many universities of all kinds take religious mottos, for example and I don't want to over-egg it but they may not be as staunchly secular as they think.

SLIDE

We also conducted interviews with 18 VCs and this was very interesting in terms of coming to a view about how they see religion and its possible role in the HEI sector.

Many universities take a 'secular' stance, by which they mean 'neutral'

That 'neutrality' is often experienced as a stance by students and staff of faith - does this impoverish their experience?

Other VCs see faith in terms of 'risk management' - equalities-compliance led and 'good campus relations'

Some VCs recognise a role for faith as enriching their learning cultures

Some see universities as mediators of a better quality of public conversation about religious faith - intellectually and practically

So I'd argue that religious faith is a matter, not merely to be seen in terms of risk management.

There is an opportunity to engage with it much more positively and shift the culture from legal compliance to human rights and diversity – and ethos in which

the conversation about religion is handled in a much more sophisticated, thoughtful, informed way – whatever your own religious beliefs and stand points.

We are not arguing for more religion – we have no evangelical urge and take no faith position ourselves. We are arguing for a better quality of conversation about religious faith.

This sees religion not as a risk and a threat but as an opportunity:

Greater diversity

Give students of all faiths – and none – better student experience

Underpin good campus relations

Attract students – including international students – from the full range of cultural and religious backgrounds.

This can help meet the universities' remit in the broadest of terms, as laid out by David Ford.

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