



BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH

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Rt. Hon. Baroness Onora O'Neill
Equality and Human Rights Commission
3 More London Riverside
Tooley St
London SE1 2RG

Dear Baroness O'Neill,

From Rt. Rev. Philip A. Egan, Bishop of Portsmouth

I write to you with the best wishes of the clergy and people of the Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth, and the promise of our prayers, as you chair the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The EHRC has a very difficult task with its statutory remit to promote a 'modern Britain where everyone is treated with dignity and respect'. This task is certainly one that Catholics support. However, I also want to express to you some concerns I have as a bishop and pastor about the recent document issued by the Commission, Religion or Belief in the Workplace. Unfortunately, I believe some aspects of this document are problematic not only for us Catholics, but for all Christians in our country and indeed, for the Christian patrimony of our British culture.

First, it seems to me that the document has a philosophical flaw in that it fails to differentiate adequately or robustly between what constitutes a religion and what constitutes a life-style or moral conviction. The result of this is that, for instance, vegetarianism, environmentalism and even having a beard (p. 3), becomes equated with the 'great' religions of Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and so on. Although unintended, this is surely offensive?

Secondly, the document is based on the thesis that every religion or belief must be treated as absolutely equal and identical, rather than respected as essentially different and complimentary. In other words, a totalitarian or absolutist concept of 'equality' is at work. A consequence of this is that minority religions such as Druidism will be treated disproportionately and this will tend to obscure or dilute the religion of the majority, Christianity, in any policy-making. In the long run, this will subvert the core and essence of our national culture.

Thirdly, as the Queen traditionally acknowledges in her Message each Christmas, Britain is a Christian country. This is not only because of the number of those who practice or profess in some manner the Christian faith, but more

importantly because of the self-evident Christian patrimony of our laws, institutions, social mores and traditions. Indeed, even the secular values espoused by the EHRC itself (e.g. tolerance, respect, dignity, freedom of belief) are arguably derived from underlying Christian values. They have vibrancy, not simply because of the law, but because of the implicit adherence of the populace to its Christian heritage and ethos.

Finally, Catholics fear the 'dictatorship of relativism' that arises when governments and legislators impose ethical guidelines and patterns of behaviour upon their citizens that are not demonstrably derived from the natural law and right reason. Without its basis in right reason and the natural law – which Catholics believe was confirmed in the divine revelation of Jesus Christ – British law and social policy will be dominated increasingly by pressure groups. This will lead to social disintegration. Instead, we believe that governments and policy makers ought to foster the traditional religious identity of our culture, that is, our Christian patrimony. This will truly assist greater social cohesion, and the very respect and equality that the EHRC espouses.

I recognise the complexity of all these issues but I raise them out of duty and concern. Please be assured of my prayers for all the members of the EHRC and for God's blessing on your important work. Indeed, I pray, through the intercession of St George, for the peoples of our land that the Holy Spirit will bring about a greater social cohesion, with real respect and love for one's neighbour.

With my best wishes to you and your Commission members,

+Philip

Bishop of Portsmouth

cc Priests and People of Diocese of Portsmouth