

Friday Night Theology, 04/02/10

Religion: A 'Get out of jail free' card?

The spotlight of accusation was last week firmly placed on former Prime Minister Tony Blair as he appeared before The Iraq Inquiry. This week, the spotlight was directed at his wife, Cherie Booth QC, after the National Secular Society (NSS) submitted an official complaint against a judgement she made at the end of January.

Shamso Miah, a devout Muslim, had been convicted of assault after he broke a man's jaw following an argument in a bank queue. Booth QC suspended his six month jail sentence saying, "You are a religious man and you know that this is not acceptable behaviour".

The NSS object! Their president, Terry Sanderson, quoted in [The Guardian](#), explains, "What would have happened if he had been an atheist? Would Mrs Blair/Booth have refused to suspend the sentence on the grounds that non-believers have no guiding principles that tell them that smashing people in the face for no good reason is not the right thing to do? This is a very worrying case of discrimination that appears to show that religious people get different treatment in Cherie Blair's court."

This incident raises some interesting issues. This FNT article will consider just three. Firstly, what is the relationship between behaviour and religious belief? Secondly, how significant to society are the 'guiding principles' offered by religion? And thirdly, is 'being religious' grounds for avoiding jail?

The relationship between behaviour and religious belief presents us with a challenge. Does our lifestyle match our beliefs? Do our actions correspond with our talk? If they don't, our efforts of evangelism will surely be hampered. Not long before the incident occurred, Shamso Miah had been at a mosque. How often do we walk out of a church service, and then within minutes or hours say or do something that is completely contrary to what we've just heard, prayed or sung?

What about the significance to society of the 'guiding principles' offered by religion? If these principles were removed would that be detrimental to society-at-large? Many would suggest that this is exactly what we see happening in Britain today. On the other hand, Sanderson and the NSS would argue that you don't need religion to realise that some things are wrong. As Christians, we may respond by pointing to Romans 2:15, explaining that God has given every human an inbuilt sense of right and wrong.

But, this issue forces us to dig a little deeper. Christians tend to agree on the idea that the Bible contains the ultimate guiding principles for life. However, it is necessary for us to acknowledge that we don't have the monopoly on good guiding principles. Most religions contain principles that we would agree are good and I suspect that the majority of your 'irreligious' friends have at least a few guiding principles you admire. Saying this does not mean I think we should be unconcerned as we watch the erosion of the guiding principles found in the Bible! If we believe that society would be better if the individuals within it embodied the guiding principles of the Bible, we need to make our case. Returning to my first point, I would suggest that exhibit number one should be *our* lives.

So, is 'being religious' grounds for avoiding jail? Perhaps that's the starting point for your conversations this weekend. I'd say it isn't and I suspect Booth QC, who also referred to the fact that he had no previous convictions, would concur. Having a set of 'guiding principles' is not enough, a person has to live by them. That said, I agree with [The Guardian's](#) Andrew Brown, who suggests that it would be interesting to find out whether there is any correlation between re-offending rates and religious belief.

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