

**Myriam Hunter-Henin: *Why Religious Freedom Matters for Democracy - Comparative Reflections from Britain and France for a Democratic 'Vivre Ensemble'***

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This is a long pondered and meticulous examination of how relations between the state and religion may be optimally configured to secure the health of liberal democracy.

Because the author has lived in and been educated in both France and the UK, she is particularly well-qualified to conduct a comparative study of neighbouring countries with contrasting histories and at times sharply different acquired characteristics of governance. Whereas in some ways the two countries have reached similar religious settlements, for example with religious schools, their approaches can also be distinct and opposed, for example over the banning of certain forms of religious dress.

Both countries have experienced significant non-Christian immigration from former colonies where state-led reception has been influenced by different traditions: republican laïcité in France and forms of Christian church establishment in England and Scotland and its shadow in Wales and Northern Ireland. Can principles of right state response be discerned for both France and the UK? As the author at page 56 remarks of burqa bans: 'One should...probably pause before rushing to exclude Muslim burqa-wearers from the democratic process for the sake of democracy.'

An important part of the discussion is a critique of Cécile Laborde's view that an approach which disaggregates religious claims can winnow the acceptable grain from the unacceptable chaff, and that exclusive forms of Christian church establishment can have unacceptable demeaning consequences for non-members. The first point is challenged as relying too much on a thin vision of what constitutes religion; and the second point contested - relying in part on David Miller's elegant challenge to this view grounded principally on the lack of evidence for demeaning effects. Such a discussion is well worth having and helps enrich understanding without being entirely fatal to all aspects of Laborde's argument.

There is certainly, for example, evidence for *subjective* feelings<sup>1</sup> amongst non-Anglican Christians of consignment to a second class and unequal status by Anglican displays of entitlement in automatic membership of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education, automatic leadership in rituals of civil religion, and episcopal membership of the House of Lords where twenty-six bishops may ask questions of, and correspond with, government ministers and expect replies direct. All that said, Hunter-Henin is, of course, right to note that all the *objective* aspects of exclusionary privilege had been repealed in the nineteenth century even if the statutory coronation oath continues to require the sovereign to swear protect the rights and privileges of the Church of England. Parliament discovered from the early eighteenth century that it was possible to tolerate non-Anglican Christians without it being necessary also to *like* them.

It is also true that that Church has repurposed its mission in ways supported, as Tariq Modood has explained, by non-Christian religions to speak for religion as a whole. Almost the Queen's first engagement in her Diamond Jubilee year of 2012 was to attend an ecumenical Lambeth Palace event where, speaking as Head of the Church of England, she said:

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<sup>1</sup> Morris R. (ed) (2008) *Church and State: Some Reflections on Church Establishment in England* (London, Constitution Unit, UCL) especially chapters 2 and 3.

Here at Lambeth Palace we should remind ourselves of the significant position of the Church of England in our nation's life. The concept of our established Church is occasionally misunderstood and, I believe, commonly under-appreciated. Its role is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions. Instead, the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country.<sup>2</sup>

Although this airbrushed away all the Church's history of being distinctly unaccommodating to nonconformity, and there is something self-serving about the Church's stance, it seems to be a position around which all religions can for the time being conveniently cohere.

The principal attraction of the formally well-marshalled argument – a most desirable Gallic import – is that it offers on this occasion a *dynamic* approach to relational issues. It recognises from the beginning that an interactive - dialogical if you like - approach is vital to finding ways forward in a liberal democracy and that this interaction has to be a continuing learning process for all the parties if we are to find ways of living together in conditions of mutual respect and understanding.

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<sup>2</sup> Speech on 15 February 2012 at

<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2355/faith-communities-display-sacred-objects-to-the-queen>