

## **“Extremism”, British values and William Wilberforce**

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” Genesis 9:6 (NIV, 1984)

*“If to profess humanity to our fellow creatures, and to endeavour with zeal to carry into execution whatever measures lay in my power for promoting their welfare, were the hon. Gentleman’s definition of fanaticism, I am afraid that I am a most incorrigible fanatic.”* William Wilberforce (1816)<sup>1</sup>

If you are a Christian I hope you are an extremist. Before you ring the Government’s 24 hour hotline ‘Channel’, let me explain. Jesus said that the most important commandment was to love the Lord with *all* your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself<sup>2</sup>. Indeed he even said ‘love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’.<sup>3</sup> This is the extremism required of followers of Jesus – the sort of extremism which characterised Jesus’ life<sup>4</sup> and motivated the lives of believers such as William Wilberforce. I hope therefore that you are this type of extremist – a ‘good’ extremist and not a ‘bad’ one.

That is the Government’s difficulty. If you want to stop bad people, how do you create a definition which catches the baddies and not the goodies? “Extremism” as a word is morally neutral; it can be bad or good and so the word is not a sensible one to use. But if you choose to use it (as the coalition and this government does), how do you define it?

To deal with the threat of Islamic terrorists the coalition government developed a strategy which it calls “Prevent”. This strategy has defined “extremism” as: “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas”.<sup>5</sup> As far as I am aware, this statement of British Values has not been voted on by Parliament<sup>6</sup>.

If it is to work, this definition of “extremism” should enable us to work out who is a danger to our society and who is not; to sort out the bad from the good. The first thing to say is that there is a lot which is good about the British values identified. Law has been given to us by God in his grace to restrain the effects of the fall and the rule of law is important both for government and to limit government. Liberty equally has an important place in the Bible. The Bible does not prescribe forms of government but democracy was practised in the early church and can be justified as a good way of appointing and limiting governments. Vocal or active opposition to the rule of law, liberty and democracy could be a warning sign that someone might be a danger to our society.

There are however numerous difficulties with defining extremism in this way. First, it is very difficult to identify when someone is actually opposing liberty, democracy or the rule of law. At some point,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in William Wilberforce, William Hague (Harper Press, 2007) p.396

<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:29-31

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:44

<sup>4</sup> John Stott wrote a book entitled “Christ the Controversialist”

<sup>5</sup> Tackling extremism in the UK, Report from the Prime Minister’s Task Force Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism, December 2013 (paragraph 1.3)

<sup>6</sup> This is a paradox given the values are said to include democracy and rule of law

one person's liberty can become another person's tyranny<sup>7</sup>. When does law breaking become opposition to the rule of law? At what point does opposition to an election result become opposition to democracy?<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to use an expression of ideals to identify those who are a threat.

The second problem lies in the words "mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs". The drafting is ambiguous. Is "mutual respect" a British value or are "respect and tolerance" meant to be read together?

I suspect, "mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs" are meant to be read together as one value. This gives rise to a troubling (third) problem. Every time anyone criticises the beliefs of ISIS fighters they may be failing to be tolerant of a different faith and belief. The same is true whenever someone takes issue with my belief that Jesus is the way, truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him<sup>9</sup>. Surely liberty and democracy and a strategy to prevent terrorism require us to have those discussions and to challenge one another's beliefs?

This brings me to one of the biggest omissions<sup>10</sup> of all from the statement of values. At the heart of this fourth problem lies a failure of the stated British values to include any explicit reference to the intrinsic value of human life. As Christians this is of fundamental importance as the Bible tells us all people are made in God's image<sup>11</sup>; indeed in Genesis 9 God makes it clear that taking the life of another human being made in God's image is tantamount to attacking God himself<sup>12</sup>. The value of our lives is bestowed upon us by God and does not lie in what we believe. This is the foundation of our laws on offences against the person<sup>13</sup>. It is the absence of recognition of the intrinsic value of life which characterises the terrorists, torturers, rapists and violent people the government seeks to stop. A 'Prevent' strategy based on the intrinsic value of every human being would be more effective in achieving the Government's aims and less likely to have the harmful and counter-productive side effects of the current strategy<sup>14</sup>. The 'Prevent' strategy should seek to stop those whose ideas or beliefs include the use of force or violence to injure or coerce others.

William Wilberforce understood the intrinsic value of every human being – his understanding of it was at the heart of his campaign to abolish the slave trade. However he had trenchant views on other religions. Thus, for example, he attacked Hinduism, the caste system "and the practices of polygamy, infanticide and *suttee*, and the worshipping of gods who 'are monsters of lust, injustice,

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<sup>7</sup> This dilemma has been classically illustrated by the Ashers bakery case or the smoker/non-smoker debate of a decade ago.

<sup>8</sup> The Scottish nationalists argue for independence as the way to get rid of the Conservative rule over Scotland – is that opposition to democracy? Problems with differing concepts of democracy are illustrated by noting that the former East Germany called itself the German Democratic Republic

<sup>9</sup> John 14:6

<sup>10</sup> The other is arguably the omission of any reference to truth which should underpin everything. The obvious difficulty is that we can no longer agree as a society on what truth is or whether it even exists robbing us of a system of thought and moral framework essential to much needed value judgments on what is good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:27

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 9:6. The verse is quoted in full at the top of this article. The prohibition on taking human life is not absolute but it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the circumstances in which the taking of human life is permitted.

<sup>13</sup> See Offences against the person Act 1861 and Blackstone's Commentaries

<sup>14</sup> One might however question the need for further legislation, and the burden is on the Government to demonstrate to show that current legislation is inadequate.

wickedness and cruelty”<sup>15</sup>. The depth of Wilberforce’s understanding of the value human life meant that his views on Hinduism remained topics for debate and would never have led him to cause harm, mistreatment or suchlike to any of its adherents. All he wanted was for them to hear about Jesus Christ – although he was clear that he was not advocating compulsory conversion to Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

It comes down to this: if Jesus died and rose again to save those who trust in him on the day of judgment, it is worth telling others - atheists, Muslims, Hindus or any non-believer. Freedom to tell others, to speak the truth about Jesus, is essential – but that must mean others having equal opportunity to challenge our beliefs and to tell us about theirs. Parts of the Christian Faith are in fundamental respects at odds with other belief systems and faiths<sup>17</sup> and therefore under the current “Prevent” strategy and the proposed bill to be published this autumn, if Christians articulate those differences, we risk being accused of not tolerating or respecting other faiths or beliefs and being branded “extremists” – even though we only want to use words to set out the claims of the gospel. Our liberty to tell the truth about Jesus is at stake. We must act now to persuade the government not to legislate in such a way as will make sharing the gospel that much harder and more costly.

Action:

1. Follow the debate carefully.
2. When published read the Bill.
3. Raise these issues with your own local MP and contact Peers.

Prayer

4. Bear in mind the words of, and pray in accordance with, 1 Timothy 2 v 1-4.

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<sup>15</sup> *William Wilberforce*, William Hague (Harper Press, 2007) p.410

<sup>16</sup> “Compulsion and Christianity! Why, the very terms are at variance with each other: the ideas are incompatible.” Wilberforce, July 1813. Ibid p.411

<sup>17</sup> A moment’s thought shows this to be true. Christianity is theistic and not polytheistic or atheistic, it holds that Jesus was/is the Son of God and not just a prophet, it holds that we are sinners only saved from God’s judgment by Jesus’ substitutionary death on the cross etc.