

## Allies, enemies or critical friends? Religion and Enlightenment

Robin Richardson



*The title of the CORAB report was derived from a submission received from an academic lawyer. 'There is much to be grateful for and proud of,' he wrote, 'in the legal traditions of the United Kingdom. But it is important to*

*ask whether the law is doing all it can to help us live with our differences.' Toleration, he said further, quoting Baroness O'Neill speaking about CORAB in the House of Lords, is a 'profoundly, excruciatingly difficult virtue'.<sup>1</sup>*

When the commission began in 2013, its provisional title was 'Commission on Multi-faith Britain', and this is what potential members were invited to join. The expectation was that essentially the commission would be about differences between major world faiths and worldviews, particularly differences between Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

As soon as its members began meeting and talking, however, a different title for the commission was chosen, a phrase in equalities legislation: it became 'the Commission on Religion and Belief'. In due course but slowly, and in retrospect rather obliquely and hesitantly, the commission was concerned not only or even primarily with differences between various religions but with the difference and relationship between 'religion' on the one hand and what it called

'Enlightenment values' on the other. 'The present interplay between religious faith on the one hand and the humanism of the Enlightenment on the other,' remarked the commission, 'is a specific achievement that has been worked out over a long time, and with great difficulty.'<sup>2</sup> The interplay has required, and continues to require, what was referred to above as a 'profoundly, excruciatingly difficult virtue'. It is an essential key concept in what CORAB called 'religion and belief literacy'.

The term Enlightenment refers the cluster of values, ideas and practices that gathered strength in the intellectual, cultural, moral and political climate of Europe and North America through the eighteenth century

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and whose legacy is seen in, amongst other places, equalities legislation and international human rights standards in the modern age.

Frequently Enlightenment values have been and are in opposition to religion, and religion in its turn has been and is suspicious of, or downright hostile towards, the values associated with the Enlightenment. This was reflected in some of the media coverage of the commission's report,<sup>3</sup> and in responses to it from the Church of England.<sup>4</sup> The two sets of values have also, however, sometimes intertwined and converged, and have deeply influenced each other.<sup>5</sup> At best, they can and

do critique each other, and there can be synergy and mutual reinforcement between them. They can therefore be, in short, critical friends. As such they may then combine to challenge and oppose, and propose alternatives to, the values known loosely as neoliberalism and neoconservatism, and the populist and nativist discourse that was so evident during 2016 around the EU referendum in Britain and the presidential election processes in the United States.

The interplay of Enlightenment and religious ideas has crucial implications for the concept of religion and belief literacy. In this connection CORAB made the following observations, among others.

1. There are significant differences within each religious tradition, for no tradition is monolithic, none is unchanging and none exists independently of specific cultural, historical and political contexts and circumstances. There are tensions between tradition and reform, between the perspectives and experiences of women and men, and between different approaches to the interpretation of sacred texts. Specifically, and bluntly, there is a need in every tradition to discern the difference between toxic religion and healthy religion. Skills of such discernment are, to recall again some words cited earlier, a profoundly, excruciatingly difficult virtue.

2. It often happens that belonging or not belonging to a religion is to do with heritage and sense of identity more, or much more, than to do with holding certain beliefs or engaging in certain practices. Religious identity can therefore be bound up with ethnic or national identity, and can therefore be given rather than chosen. The concept of ethno-religious identity is as relevant for understanding Christianity in the UK, and in other western countries, as it is for understanding other religions in other parts of the world.

3. The relationship between what someone believes and what they do is often difficult to unpick. Two people may have similar beliefs but perform different actions. Or they may perform similar actions but have different beliefs. Also it happens that human beings do not always know accurately why they did something and may be prone to self-deception in the reasons they give for their actions and the explanations they offer regarding their mo-

tives and purposes. An important implication, incidentally, is that 'religious ideology' is a dubious and unreliable concept for adequately understanding the factors associated with terrorism.

4. It is possible to appreciate religious art, architecture, stories, poetry, music and theatre without necessarily sharing the beliefs which they express or assume.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, all or most religious and philosophical traditions contain concepts, wisdom and teachings that can valuably challenge the strategies, policies and priorities of secular governments, both national and local, and which therefore merit a presence and a hearing in the public square.

Of course, key points such as these were offered in the report, and are offered now in this brief memorandum compiled twelve months after the report's publication, as a tentative starting point for discussion, not a final position.

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<sup>1</sup> House of Lords Hansard, 27 November 2014, column

<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 3.6 of the CORAB report.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, John Bingham and Steven Swinford, ‘Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop acting as if it is, says judge’, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 December 2015,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/12036287/Britain-is-no-longer-a-Christian-country-and-should-stop-acting-as-if-it-is-says-judge.html>

<sup>4</sup> For detailed references see Jonathan Chaplin, ‘Living with Difference: time for a constructive Christian engagement’, *Law and Religion UK*,

<http://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2016/01/20/living-with-difference-time-for-a-constructive-christian-engagement/>

<sup>5</sup> Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: the origins of Western liberalism*, Allen Lane, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> As argued by, for example, Alain de Botton in *Religion for Atheists: a non-believer’s guide to the uses of religion*, Penguin 2013 and Simon Loveday in *The Bible for Grown-Ups*, Icon Books 2016.