

## The government's changes to faith schools side with hardline religion

*This month the government announced its plans to remove the 50% cap on selection by religion for faith-based free schools and academies. Here **Linda Woodhead** argues that in striving to protect the rights of religious minorities, the government is undermining the religious centre ground. In today's majority 'no religion' society, she warns, we need to be careful: growing ignorance about religion does not have to mean growing gullibility, understanding the actual weight of religious opinion is crucial.*



Prime Minister Theresa May. Image: Flickr, DFID

Theresa May's first major policy statement concerns education. One of its headline proposals is to change legislation to clear the way for 100% selection on the basis of faith religion by new academies and free schools. This represents another in a long line of victories for hardline religion over more moderate wings.

The small print of May's **speech** reveals the logic. She is responding to lobbying by religious leaders against a cap on faith-selection which was designed to safeguard diversity and avoid mono-faith schooling. By lifting that cap, they will have carte blanche to admit only pupils from their own faith.

This represents a shift away from the ideal of state-funded faith schools serving the whole of society to one in which they serve only the children of the most committed and active members of a religion. Most Church of England schools remain committed to the more open societal model, but the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Chief Rabbi, have been actively pressing the sectarian alternative.

Theresa May has not only acceded to their demands, she seems to have swallowed the **Catholic Church's argument** that canon law requires this change. There is in fact **no such canon**. It's the subtlety and openness of canon law on this matter which allows the Catholic Church across the world to operate in a wide variety of educational and legal situations with maximum flexibility. To be fair, May hedges her **comments** by saying that the Catholic Church "believes" the **current**

legislation contravenes its own rules. Who is “the Catholic Church” here? Presumably, officials who spoke to the Department for Education. Why rely on their word alone in a matter of such importance, especially if it is mistaken and out of step with wider Catholic views.

Recent surveys of British Catholics, including **my own**, show starkly how out of step most Catholics are with their increasingly conservative leaders. If we measure ‘faithful Catholics’ by obedience to their leaders’ teachings on weekly churchgoing, belief in God, religious authority, and opposition to abortion, same-sex marriage and euthanasia, only 5% of Catholics fit the bill, and only 2% of Catholics under 30.

Ordinary Anglicans are even more liberal in their attitudes. **Polling in 2016** found more saying same-sex marriage was right than that it was wrong. Yet the Cameron government, harkening only to the views of Anglican leaders, locked the CofE out of ever conducting a ‘gay wedding’ by putting in place a so-called ‘quadruple lock’ of legal protection. This rides roughshod over powerful alternative interpretations of scripture and tradition, and the consciences many Anglicans. It follows on from successful lobbying by religious leaders since the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 to be exempted from the law of the land in order to discriminate against people on the grounds of their gender, sexuality and religion.

The gradual hardening of religion in Britain is tied up with the worldwide growth of fundamentalism, a 20<sup>th</sup> century movement which owe much to mass printing and mass advertising. Fundamentalists seek to ‘purify’ religion, boiling it down to a small set of timeless textual propositions, and pursuing a holier-than-thou moral puritanism. They sanctify heterosexual male headship, and promote a sectarian versions of religion which draw a hard boundary between the saved – themselves – and wider society.

It’s this tendency which the British government keeps reinforcing. The media, which love a good fundamentalist, give a helping hand. Both are willing to accept the claim that the most sexist, homophobic versions of a religion are somehow the most authentic. This sets up a vicious cycle: hardliners drive out moderates; religion becomes more dogmatic and illiberal; more moderates leave; religion becomes the preserve of a shrinking, illiberal minority.

The motives are often honourable. Politicians and lawyers seek to respect the freedom of religious minorities, and to steer clear of internal ‘theological’ matters. But they end up dancing to the tune of the hardliners. In striving to protect the rights of religious minorities, they violate the conscience of religious majorities and undermine the religious centre ground.

The views of unelected religious leaders should not be taken as gospel truth. All religious traditions are plural and all interpretations disputed, but there are academic specialists who can sift and weigh theologically, and report on the actual weight of religious opinion. When religion was part and parcel of British life it was harder to pull the wool over people’s eyes. In today’s majority ‘no religion’ society we need to be more careful. Growing ignorance about religion does not have to mean growing gullibility. More critical discernment is urgently needed.

## About the author



**Linda Woodhead** is Professor of Sociology of Religion at Lancaster University and Director of the Institute for Social Futures. Her most recent book is *That Was the Church That Was: How the Church of England Lost the English People* (Bloomsbury 2016).

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