

Threats to religious freedom in England and Wales today

The road to religious toleration in England has been long and rocky. During the Reformation hundreds of persons were burned to death merely for possessing or reading the Bible in English. And the Pilgrim Fathers embarked on their perilous voyage in the *Mayflower* in 1620 because they were refused the liberty to practice their faith in England. We all have cause to thank the United States of America for its dedication to freedom, so it is appropriate that the earliest colonisers of that great nation were themselves victims of religious persecution.

That was all a long time ago. And today, freedom of worship is established without question in the UK.

Or is it?

In the 2011 census in Britain some 33 million gave their religion as Christian – about 59 per cent.

But of course we are also neighbours to our Jewish brethren, our Muslim friends – and to Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and others. And more than 14 million stated they had no religion. The British government is committed to diversity and to accommodate all these different faiths, or no faith.

One of the ways this has been done successfully is by charity law, which gives valuable tax concessions to charitable institutions. English charity law goes back to 1601. Ever since then a charity committed to advancement of religion has been regarded as charitable.

But not any longer.

In the 2006 Charities Act the presumption to public benefit was removed, and a requirement was introduced that public benefit had to be *demonstrated* by the particular charity.

However the Act failed to specify exactly what public benefit meant, and this is causing considerable problems.

Let me tell you what the effect has been on one particular Christian group – the Plymouth Brethren.

I declare an interest, in that I am a member.

The Plymouth Brethren are sometimes called fundamental Christians. They originated in the 1820s. There are about 14,000 members in England and Wales, and some 45,000 world-wide. There are Brethren in many OSCE countries including Canada. During World war 2 Brethren in Le Chambon, France, saved the lives of many Jews.

We believe in the Bible. Every member has faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, as his personal Saviour.

After the 2006 Charities Act the Charity Commission refused to register a new Plymouth Brethren trust, although the Brethren have been charitable for more than one hundred years.

At first they said the law was unclear. Then they said they were not sure if the Brethren satisfied the 'public benefit' test.

We do not know why the Charity Commission has acted against us, when they have freely registered numerous other religious charities without question, including hundreds of Muslim charities.

They have also given charitable status to the Druids, thereby giving a polytheistic pagan movement the status of a mainstream monotheistic religion.

They have never told us what we must do to qualify for charitable status.

This is a very serious matter for us.

Already it has cost us well over two million pounds in legal fees, and this money has all been raised voluntarily from members, including young people.

So that is the situation I invite you to consider. A minority Christian group in England risks losing its charitable status which would threaten its survival.

Thank-you for listening to this story.

We invite you to appeal to the British Government to resolve this matter urgently so that freedom of worship is maintained for all Christians worldwide, and indeed for all faiths.

608 words

FURTHER INFORMATION: www.plymouthbrethrenchristianchurch.org

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