

**Title:** Overcoming religious hatred  
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Not long ago there was rejoicing in the camp when the government's proposed legislation to criminalise incitement to religious hatred was narrowly defeated. This represented a victory for a remarkable coalition of evangelicals, secularists, entertainers and others who feared that freedom of expression was under threat. For some, the fear was that however well intentioned the legislation may have been, it would almost certainly fall under those intractable laws of irony and be used against the robust preaching of the gospel in ways that had never been intended.

As one deeply dedicated to the laws of irony I confess to having shared some of these concerns. At the same time I was struck by another irony. Here were committed Christians whose ethic is rooted in love of God and love of neighbour opposing legislation whose object was to penalise hatred. You might have been forgiven for thinking that Christians actually wanted to hold the ring open for hatred of others and extreme behaviour, as if that too belongs to our palate of possibilities.

The tragedy is that religious hatred exists, and does so not least on the fringes of the Christian church. It is not just, for instance, an Islamic problem. Writing this article, I have just returned from the United States. This is truly a remarkable country. But not for the first time I have had cause to compare the US with the UK. In so many ways the US wins this competition hands down, above all when it comes to warmth, generosity and courtesy. But it is also a land of extremes, and whereas the British instinct is to seek for the middle-ground and find that on which we can agree, Americans love to polarise and politicise. In particular, religious opinions can be stated with extreme vigour and in the process are transformed from being legitimate expressions of perspective into weapons in a battle for cultural power.

On Memorial Day, when Americans remember their war dead, I happened to visit Arlington Cemetery. From the Metro I was greeted by a silent group of Christian demonstrators holding up placards proclaiming God's love for the USA, especially for the military who were fighting in the cause of apparently Christian righteousness. No doubt they were right-wing 'fundamentalists' who found it hard to distinguish between the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and the gods of idolatrous nationalism. I wasn't sure whether the god they worshipped was the same one I confessed.

But then with a second group, glimpsed on CNN, I had no doubts whatsoever. In every outward respect they resembled the first group. They had the same kind of placards and general appearance, including the same confident access to the will of God. But their message was quite to the contrary: God hates the USA, he hates the military and was causing soldiers in Iraq to die and go to hell on a daily basis; and God himself made 9/11 happen as a sign of his hatred. Moreover, they were prepared to proclaim their message at the funerals and in the tribute books of soldiers killed in Iraq, bringing massive distress to their families. And the root of their concern? Not that America had gone to war illegally and unwisely. Not that nationalistic militarism threatens to become an idolatry in which the Christian religion is implicated. God hates America because, as another placard proclaimed, 'God hates fags'. God's hatred of America was founded upon his prior and apparently absolute hatred of homosexuals. America's willingness to tolerate them was the real reason for 9/11, an event inspired not after all by extreme Islamists but by the God of the Christians.

There is so much wrong with this mentality that in denouncing it, it is difficult to know where to begin. It is one thing to regard events such as 9/11 as crises that in some sense bring us into judgment and cause us to reflect upon ourselves and our values. In many ways such self-critical stock-taking is appropriate. It is quite another to take such events and use them to victimise one group or another that we happen not to like – or even to hate. And to attribute all this to God in order to absolutise our position and allow us to feel self-righteous about it is not Christian faith but the depths of religious corruption. It needs to be exposed as such.

Of course, in the US such displays are not only not banned by religious hatred legislation, they are actively protected under the freedom of expression clause of the Constitution. All of this goes to show what a blunt instrument legislation is and how it can be used for purposes which were never intended or envisaged by those who originally framed it. The law has its place both in restraining wrongdoing and in setting out a kind of behaviour to which we might rightly aspire. But there is no substitute for a law which is written on the heart, for a public morality which operates within a culture of respect and civility which does not need to be compelled by the power of the state. This is surely where Christians should most of all be active in seeking to shape the public realm.

In opposing the religious hatred legislation I do not for one moment believe that Christians were wanting to leave room for religious hatred to be endorsed. The concern was to do with means rather than ends. Christians stand solidly against any kind of hatred. The best way to combat hatred is by nurturing different habits of the heart, to create a climate of virtuous behaviour in which people learn the habits of civility and consideration. Secularists and others will have their own ethic and ways of proceeding. But Christians need by means of public statement and personal behaviour to denounce attitudes struck by religiously-minded people which fall short of an ethic of love. To take responsibility for opposing the legislative route in combating hatred they need to be in the vanguard of those who believe there is a better way. They need to model instincts in which differences of ideas and conviction can be expressed while acknowledging we are all made in the image of a gracious God who does not hate but loves humankind, and hates only those things which diminish their humanity.

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