

British Airways and the Christian cross controversy

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At the weekend, British Airways announced it would review its uniform guidelines. The move came after a hysterical campaign, orchestrated by sections of the media, politicians, bishops and Christian groups, in support of a BA employee who had insisted on her right to display her cross necklace at work.

The case of BA employee Nadia Eweida has been presented by the *Daily Mail*, the *Times* and other media outlets as a matter of religious freedom. But Eweida's right to wear a Christian cross has never been at issue. BA states that items of jewelry can be worn beneath employees' uniforms. This is for health and safety reasons, as necklaces worn openly, especially by those like Eweida who work at check-in desks, may become entangled in conveyor belts.

Eweida has argued that "Muslim staff are permitted to wear headscarves; Sikhs are allowed to wear turbans and bangles.... Britain is a Christian country. It values tolerance and compassion. But in the clamour to respect others' beliefs, the needs of the majority seem to have been forgotten."

A statement by the company explained, "The policy does not ban staff from wearing a cross. It lays down that personal items of jewelry, including crosses, may be worn—but underneath the uniform. Other airlines have the same policy.

"The policy recognises that it is not practical for some religious symbols—such as turbans and hijabs—to be worn underneath the uniform. This is purely a question of practicality. There is no discrimination between faiths."

However, Eweida insists that her necklace must be visible because "Jesus has to be glorified." Earlier this month, she withdrew from work and launched an appeal against BA's dress code, which she lost.

BA appealed for her to return to work, stressing that it would not take any disciplinary action and offering her a non-uniformed post where she could wear her cross openly. Eweida has refused this offer as well as a subsequent BA proposal that she wear a lapel badge displaying the Christian cross.

Eweida's case has been taken up by the right-wing media, which has accused BA of kowtowing to multiculturalism by "discriminating" in favour of ethnic minorities and/or trying to impose "secularism." They have been joined by a number of cabinet ministers and Church leaders, and some 100 members of Parliament (MPs) from all parties signed a Commons motion condemning the company.

A double standard is clearly at work here. In recent months,

there has been a vociferous campaign by many of the same media outlets and politicians against Muslim women who wear veils. On November 24, Aishah Azmi, a Muslim teaching assistant who was suspended for refusing to remove her veil in the classroom, was sacked by the Church of England school that employed her. There has been no campaign by the media to defend Azmi's right to religious freedom.

Amongst those decrying BA and demanding "equal" treatment for all religions is government minister Jack Straw. Only last month, he wrote a newspaper article complaining that women wearing the veil made him feel "uncomfortable" and defending his decision to ask his female constituents to remove the veil in his presence.

Straw's hypocrisy is by no means unique. Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe's complaint that Christians were "being persecuted" was echoed by some 20 Church of England bishops. The Bishop of London Rt. Rev. Richard Chartres said that BA's actions suggested that "the historic majority faith is being treated with a greater measure of disrespect than others."

These claims in a country where the Church of England is the established state religion, and where bishops sit in the House of Lords, Britain's second chamber, are perverse. A report by Church commissioners on the financial state of the Church of England, released in April, revealed that it owns 120,000 acres in rural areas alone, vast swathes of land in towns and cities across the country, and a stake in ING Property Fund Central Europe.

Nonetheless, the Church feels that its privileged status is under threat. Although Britain is described as a "Christian country," just 6 percent of the population attends church and just one in three weddings is held in church. A survey by the British Humanist Association found that 62 percent of respondents agreed that "scientific and other evidence provides the best way to understand the universe," compared to 22 percent who felt "religious beliefs are needed for a complete understanding of the universe."

The overwhelming majority of the population opposes government support for faith-based schools, most of which are Christian. On homosexuality and abortion, popular opinion is at odds with religious orthodoxy. Indeed, one of the issues vexing the Church is that it might fall foul of equality legislation outlawing discrimination based on sex or sexual preference.

Writing in the *Times*, James Harding stated that it was "possible to understand BA's bewilderment and frustration at the outcry" over its dress code. Nonetheless, he concluded that the airline was

at fault for failing to recognise that there are “a growing number of Christians who feel threatened by secularism.” It was in order to fight this threat, he continued, that “Christians, particularly evangelicals, are adopting the activist habits of other religious communities.”

An example of the “activist habits” cited by Harding is provided by a report published by the Evangelical Alliance. Entitled “Faith and Nation,” those involved in its production include Conservative MP Sir Brian Mawhinney, Labour MP Andy Reed and Liberal Democrat MP Steve Webb.

The purpose of the report is to defend “traditional Judeo-Christian values” under conditions in which “The inherited traditions of Christendom...appear anachronistic relative to the majority of the population.”

It warns the government that any attempt to ban proselytising by publicly funded Christian projects would be “recognised by Christians as perpetrating evil that has to be resisted by deliberate acts of defiance.” If necessary, it continues, such defiance may “take the form of active resistance to the state. This may encompass disobedience to law—civil disobedience, involving selective, non-violent resistance or, ultimately, violent revolution.”

The Alliance, which has supported Eweida, is campaigning for the government to exempt Christian organisations from having to comply with legislation on homosexual rights and has opposed any measures that would dilute the role of bishops in the House of Lords on the grounds that they “would send the wrong signal about the role of religion in public life.”

Christian groups have also been up in arms over the government’s new Charities Bill, under which religious charities must justify their “public benefit.” Despite government assurances that a religious charity will not be disqualified for its stance on sexual morality, the Christian Institute complained that the bill could lead to “secularists” arguing that “organisations or charities which hold to traditional Christian belief on abortion or human sexuality” were not in the public interest.

Eweida was flown to the US by a TV company to drum up support for her cause amongst American fundamentalist Christian groups. In her appeal against BA’s dress code, she engaged the services of barrister Paul Diamond, who has been active in advancing legal challenges by anti-abortionists. In 2002, he represented the Christian Fellowship School in Merseyside, which was seeking to overturn laws barring corporal punishment in schools. At the Court of Appeal, he argued, “It is a central tenet of the Christian religion that mankind is born with a heart inclined to all kinds of evil. Discipline in the educational context is therefore vital.”

“Religious liberty” cases are promoted by the Christian Institute, which is committed to belief in “the personal and visible return in glory of the Lord Jesus Christ to raise the dead and bring salvation and judgment to final completion. Evil-doers will suffer eternal punishment. God will fully establish his kingdom when he creates a new heaven and a new earth from which evil, suffering and death will be excluded, and in which he will be glorified forever.”

That sections of the media and political establishment have made common cause with such groups is part of an effort to poison the political atmosphere. Its aim is to divert attention from the social

crisis confronting millions of working people as well as the military debacle facing the US and British military in Iraq and Afghanistan. Under the banner of “cultural identity,” nationalism, racism and all manner of prejudice and backwardness are to be promoted as the ideological basis for a renewed offensive against democratic rights, including the scapegoating of ethnic minorities, as well as a justification for further wars of imperialist aggression.

The crusade in behalf of Eweida stepped up a gear on Friday with the announcement by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams—head of the Church of England and the worldwide Anglican Communion—that he had begun consulting on a possible disinvestment of the Church’s £10.25 million in BA shares.

Williams was speaking after a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI in Rome. According to the *Guardian*, the purpose of their talks was to set out a “common purpose for Christianity, the capacity to speak as one on the great questions of the day. In a secular world, what Anglican and Catholic share is greater even than what divides them.”

The pope, who has close ties to ultra-conservative factions within the Catholic Church, has made clear his intention to utilise the Vatican’s influence to promote the most reactionary forces in Europe and oppose the separation between church and state. In a provocative lecture at Germany’s Regensburg University in September, he pointedly contrasted “reasonable” Christianity with an irrational and “violent” Islam.

For some in the media, Williams’s intervention was too little, too late. Amongst the right wing, Williams is perceived as too “nice” to conduct the type of ideological struggle signaled by Pope Benedict’s lecture.

Commenting in the *Daily Telegraph*, Damian Thompson stated that “The Archbishop’s days are numbered” and noted that theological web sites are openly discussing that Williams could soon be forced to stand down.

The favourite for his replacement is Ugandan-born John Sentamu, archbishop of York. Britain’s first black archbishop, who is second in the Church hierarchy, last year denounced multiculturalism and called on the English to rediscover their cultural identity.

In his maiden speech in the House of Lords earlier this month, he defended the role of Christianity in shaping English law, stating, “The separation of law from morality and religion from law has gone too far.” In the BA row, he demanded that the company “look at the history of the country it represents, whose culture, laws, heritage and tradition owe so much to the very same symbol it would ban.”

Sentamu’s intervention won him the praise of the *Sunday Times*, which lauded him as the “champion of Christianity” and as a “new leader of the Church of England who will stand up against the attacks on Christian culture.”



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