

Having your cake and Eating it

Phil Jump reflects on the recent Ashes controversy



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It is pretty difficult to express a view of the recent Ashers Cakes ruling in Northern Ireland without it being assumed that you are taking one side or other on the issue of gay marriage. The story revolves around a court judgement that a baker with strong conservative Christian values was wrong, and acting to discriminate by refusing to make a cake that advocated gay marriage. And it is perhaps because there is such a highly emotive issue at its heart, that I sense some of the deeper implications of this judgement have been overlooked. So let me stress from the outset, that this is not a rant in favour or against gay rights, but an attempt to ask deeper questions about the nature of work and commerce, and whether it can even survive without some underlying morality.

A number of commentators, including Simon Jenkins writing in the Guardian, have not been slow in seeking to draw a parallel between this and a Muslim printer being asked to reproduce images of the prophet Mohamed, or indeed any form of anti-Islamic propaganda. But it is not this that concerns me in this context, so much as the basis on which the court judgement was made. In essence the prevailing argument is that laws defending religious belief do not extend to a context where adherents are “conducting a business for profit.” In short, your moral values have no place in the world of work and employment.

This is a way of thinking that flies in the face of what Industrial Christian Fellowship and other faith and work organisations have sought to advocate for over a century - that the beliefs, behaviours and principles of any faith, are a vital component within the working lives of those who adhere to it. The Evangelical Alliance summarise this well in suggesting that religion has been “effectively banished from the commercial sphere.”

The whole idea of vocation, which is a concept that I would want to extend well beyond ecclesial office, is a crucial reality that finds expression in many aspects of work. An artist, musician, architect, designer, writer, chef and yes even a cake-maker, will express something of themselves in the work that they do. In fact I would argue that it is when vocation is lost, that work becomes dehumanising, exploitative and demoralising. I can remember on one occasion as I complemented a chartered accountant on the clarity and presentation of an annual report he had produced, his response was essentially “this is what I do; I can’t dance or sing or paint pictures but it’s my way of saying that the work I do matters to me - laying them out well is what brings me satisfaction.”

Our faith is an essential part of who we are, and so in essence if it is to be excluded from our commercial activity, people who hold it

dear are being asked to be less than themselves while they are at work. This is a ruling that has no place for vocation. And lest any should doubt – to me it would be no less alarming if a similar judgement had been cast on a gay baker who wished to reserve the right not to manufacture a cake which promoted a clear anti-gay message.

It did not escape me that this particular reality dawned in a week that Mirror Group Newspapers faced unprecedented compensation payments to the victims of years of organised phone-hacking, while big name banks were once again exposed and fined; this time for manipulating foreign exchange rates, and in consequence profiting at the expense of their own clients. As we lament a growing culture of dishonesty and self-seeking that increasingly expose the moral illiteracy of a number of business sectors, at the same time our judiciary is declaring that the very thing that once provided their moral framework, must be further banished from any commercial context.

It is at this point that I find myself drawn back to the point that Simon Jenkins makes in the Guardian, because it does indeed set the

precedent that anyone of religious faith, cannot even be guaranteed that if they run their own business, they are free to operate it within the confines of their own belief system. So in essence this is a judgement that places the hypothetical Muslim printer in the very position that Jenkins describes. I do not condone for a moment the appalling attacks on the offices of Charlie Hebdo at the beginning of 2015, or other acts of religiously motivated terrorism against free society – but if the message we are sending out is that Western Capitalism has the right to usurp the religious sensibilities of anyone who is exposed to it, we cannot be entirely surprised that some will seek to destroy it.

Sadly, these are points that seem lost on scores of public figures who appear to portray this solely as an issue of gay rights. As I have maintained from the outset, this is not an attempt to support, condemn or even influence thinking on that particular issue, but raise the serious questions that emerge when moral conviction is declared as having no place in commerce and enterprise. What no-one seems to acknowledge is that this is no less an expression of ideology and belief than any religious dogma.