

Beware the Taleban of tolerance

Carla Powell says that the case of Catholic agencies and gay adoption points to a slippery slope, at the bottom of which sermons are recorded and handed to the police

The temper of the debate on gay adoption and the Catholic Church has been astonishing. I have never seen such a concentrated display of anti-Catholic venom as I did from Westminster and what used to be called Fleet Street. Read the articles on the subject published in the *Independent on Sunday* recently and judge for yourself. In place of reasoned critique are vicious and personal attacks on Catholicism. If you were to substitute the word 'Jew' or 'Muslim' for 'Catholic', the police would already be making incitement-to-religious-hatred inquiries.

Nick Robinson of the BBC pointed out that it was stated repeatedly, as if fact, that Tony Blair was acting under orders from his Catholic wife. And almost every time Ruth Kelly was mentioned, she was referred to as 'Ruth Kelly, a Roman Catholic', or 'Ruth Kelly, a member of the secretive Roman Catholic Opus Dei sect', even by the BBC. Fair comment, yes, as both facts are certainly relevant. However, the three MPs leading the opposition to any opt-out for the Church all campaign on gay issues, and one is an office-holder in the National Secular Society.

How is it that when it comes to gay adoption and Catholic charities, 'being Catholic' is a conflict of interest but 'being gay' is not? A notable journalistic exception was Matthew Parris, usually a critic of Catholicism, who pointed out the sheer lack of proportionality from the opponents of the Church's position and asked how much of a problem this would really have presented in the first place. How many gay couples would want to approach a Catholic adoption agency in any event?

So much for the way the debate was conducted, but what was it actually about? Not, primarily, homosexuality, nor fundamental human rights. At heart, this debate was about conscience.

After all, Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor, the Anglican Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Muslim Council have not been calling for a ban on gay adoptions. What they have said is, 'You do what you want as a society. That's part of the democratic process. But we are not able to do this for reasons of conscience. Since this is so, we ask for a space for people who cannot in conscience participate. Why do we

need this space? Because we are part of this society, and we want to continue providing what everyone sees as a first-class service for society's most deprived children — something we have done with distinction for over a century.' That's what the Cardinal and others have been arguing. And we have found, in the last few weeks, that this is something the anti-discrimination fundamentalists cannot contemplate. It has been amazing to observe the intolerance of those who have been so loudly crying for tolerance.

You may say that this doesn't affect you. But it does. There are very serious issues here. The democratic process is being bypassed and legitimate views marginalised. Where will our society end up when compromise is not even discussed?

The question is simple: is any politician who is Christian, Muslim or Jewish — or indeed of any faith — to be vilified for believing their faith's teaching? The answer from the fundamentalists is 'Yes'. It's happened already with Ruth Kelly. And it's happened in Europe. Three years ago Rocco Buttiglione — renowned as one of the most thoughtful politicians in Italy — was vetoed as Italian European commissioner by a militant alliance of gay activists and pro-abortion advocates because he held mainstream Christian views on family life. What if your Christian, Muslim or Jewish sons and daughters want to take part in the political life of their country or of Europe? Are they to be told effectively to hang their religion and conscience at the door or abandon any hope of advancement?

Let's be more practical. What about Catholic doctors who will not refer women for abortions? What about the surgeons who will not perform them? At present there is a conscience clause, but many within the NHS wish to remove it. They would like medical students to agree in advance



'There should be a trophy we can nick.'

to 'deliver the full range of services provided by the NHS'. This means, of course, performing abortions and a range of other morally problematic procedures. Catholics and others who cannot in conscience perform them will be told to leave their religious views at the door, or give up their places at medical school.

What about schools? If schools refuse to promote abortion, contraception or the equality of gay partnerships and marriage — as Catholic schools can never do — are they to have their funding removed because they are deemed to be failing in their duty to promote equality and citizenship? And teachers who cannot teach these things because they are against their conscience — are they to be removed from the register of approved teachers?

What about books such as the Catechism of the Catholic Church? Are copies to be removed from shelves because they promote 'hatred based on sexual orientation'? Perhaps you regard this as an exaggeration. Well, it's already happening in Canada. The government there is engaged in a policy debate in which it is proposed to stop funding Catholic schools unless they stop teaching RE where it ties in with sexuality.

Perhaps you find this far-fetched? Try this: what about people sitting at the back of churches recording sermons and passing the tapes to the police? It's already happened: last year a Swedish Lutheran pastor was arrested after he delivered a homily on sexual mores. He was convicted. The transcript of what he said is available on the internet. Judge it for yourselves: completely mild — a simple explanation of the New Testament sayings of Jesus and St Paul. But intolerable to the Taleban of tolerance.

Think about it. This debate is not code for homophobia. It's about the proper boundaries between the state and the individual; it's about conscience in a free society, and it affects all of us in a free Europe. Gay people have experienced vilification for many years, yes — and often from people who identify themselves as religious. But now the attitudes displayed towards religious believers in public life look exactly the same: a form of prejudice and discrimination.

The legislation under discussion in Britain is not yet law, but in Northern Ireland it is already on the statute book. It was imposed by proconsular edict from Peter Hain on 1 January — rushed through by Order in Her Majesty's Privy Council without the normal process of consultation proper to a democracy.

Have we forgotten the lessons of the totalitarianism of the 20th century? The bloody histories of other 'new moralities' — in Germany, Russia, China and Cambodia to name only a few — have shown that the real threat to a democracy comes from the encroachments of the state on individuals, not vice versa. For democratic societies to thrive, individuals must fight vigorously to retain the right to practise their faith.