

FAITH AND SILENCE

ANN WIDDECOMBE

RUSSIA CELEBRATED THE COMING OF THE MILLENNIUM WITH A NEW CATHEDRAL WHICH PRESUMABLY STANDS SOME CHANCE OF BEING AROUND TO SEE IN THE NEXT ONE.

Britain decided on a temporary Dome, in which Christianity was relegated to part of the Spirit Zone. Ministers wrote letters assuring people that the Dome would contain no suggestion of Christian triumphalism, the Bishops had to put up a massive fight to get a prayer said at the official midnight celebrations and when the churches themselves produced a Millennium resolution it carefully omitted any reference to the One whose birthday was being marked.

And the reason for all this timidity? If Christians celebrated the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Our Lord too enthusiastically it might offend those of other faiths. Therefore it was necessary somehow to pretend that there was nothing specifically Christian about it.

The net result was that those of other faiths thought we were mad: they understood why we wanted to invite everyone to the party but not why we wanted to deny ownership of the party in the first place. The tolerance of other faiths does not and must not mean the surrender of one's own. It is perfectly possible to promote and to proselytise in a multi-faith country or a multi-faith world. It is certainly not necessary to apologise either in word or deed for one's faith.

It is the business of politicians to remember this. We are a Christian country, we have an Established Church, we have compulsory Religious Education in schools. None of that is incompatible with religious freedom: we do not stop anyone else from erecting a synagogue, mosque or temple and teaching something different, from observing a different sabbath, from rejecting Christianity.

"We believe and therefore speak", St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, yet there are those who feel that in a multi-faith society there is something almost indecent about trumpeting one's faith. Failing to promote Christianity is failing to do God's work. It is as simple as that, but it is also true that everyone has free will and can choose to reject or heed the missionary message. Suppressing opposing messages is not and never has been the answer.

The politician, of course, passes laws which apply to all citizens not just to those of one faith. The liberalisation of the laws on Sunday trading, for example, affected not just Christians who wanted to rest and go to church but anyone of any faith and none who valued one quiet, family day each week. The denial of Religious Education in schools would affect the children of practising Christians ►



THE RIGHT HON. ANN WIDDECOMBE is MP for Maidstone & The Weald. She entered Parliament in 1987, having previously served in local government. She has held various ministerial and Shadow Cabinet posts, most recently serving as Shadow Home Secretary. In 2001 she left the Shadow Cabinet in order to care for her elderly mother, and to speak more freely on issues of conscience. Her second novel, *An Act of Treachery*, will soon be published.

► the least because they would still absorb knowledge at home but it would detach a huge proportion of children from contact with an essential part of our culture and deny to many their only chance to hear the gospel message in childhood. The fact that they may also learn about other faiths at the same time to give them a better understanding of both their own country and the world does not negate the importance of their learning about Christ.

It is right that a country should forbid polygamy regardless of whether there are those within its territories who believe otherwise on religious grounds. Yet many decisions which confront politicians are much less straightforward and many centre around the issue of how far we should go to protect religious freedom. The current Government was recently obliged to drop a proposal to create an offence of inciting religious hatred because it would have been pretty well unworkable, but the Human Rights Act also produces anomalies by protecting the right of unbelievers to be employed in religious institutions. I would argue that if you have a mission you need to make sure the workforce shares it.

The crunch question, however, is how far we should go in persuading those of other faiths that Christianity is uniquely right while at the same time protecting their rights to their own beliefs. There is less of a contradiction than might at first sight be apparent. St Paul famously used a dedication to the Unknown God to spread the Word. Missionaries throughout the ages have dispensed medicine and education to those who needed it as a prelude to urging the claims of Christ, but they have not denounced those who resisted or pulled down their shrines.

Premier Christian Radio should be able to say why Christians do not accept the Islamic faith without being accused of intolerance; Ian Paisley must be allowed to say why he does not think the Pope is infallible when pronouncing *ex cathedra* and I must be allowed to assert that he is without either of us facing sanctions for doing no more than proclaiming our faith. True freedom means the freedom to argue and the freedom to proselytise, the freedom to win others over.

Faith and silence do not mix.

It is right too that the more intrepid, such as James Maudesley, should take the Word to those countries where the Bible is forbidden. Missionary work cannot just be confined to giving physical relief amid flood, famine and war. Its prime purpose must always be the salvation of the soul regardless of whether the recipient is rich or poor. If the gospel is to be spread across the whole world, then there can be no no-go areas.

To fear giving offence will make for a cautious approach which is by no means bad, but to take a view that one has no moral right to challenge another's religion would be tantamount to singing "Backward, Christian soldiers".

Treading warily in a country which draws its laws and practices from another religion is one thing, not treading the ground at all is quite another. To fear giving offence will make for a cautious approach which is by no means bad, but to take a view that one has no moral right to challenge another's religion would be tantamount to singing "Backward, Christian soldiers".

It is tactless, insensitive and counterproductive to assail people leaving their place of worship with leaflets condemning what they do, yet incredibly there are groups who do this with huge certitude that it is the right approach. It is worth pointing out that Christ reserved his condemnation for hypocrites, not for those who as yet did not know him. He also, however, told us not to hide our light under a bushel but that is exactly the action with which so many equate tolerance. It is as well the Apostles and the Early Church took a different view or we would still be worshipping Zeus.

Christianity has in the past been responsible for a great deal of persecution and suffering in the name of refusal to compromise but a forced conversion is not worth having, and the lesson from the past must be that our duty is done with the spreading of the message and the kind reception of those who hear it. The lesson is most emphatically not that we need dilute the message.

The loudest objections to Christian missionary work come not from those of other faiths but from those of none, from the apostles of secularism. A recent move in the House of Commons to force faith schools to refuse their own and take instead children of other faiths drew no support from minority faiths in this country. It was a piece of folly swiftly defeated with both Government and Opposition voting against and only the Liberal Democrats whipping in favour.

We have always lived in a multi-faith world; the difference now is that we do not regard that as a reason forcibly to impose our own. Equally, it is not and must not be a reason to surrender our own. ■