

BHA BRIEFING 2008: Moral, But No Compass

What is it?

‘Moral, But No Compass: Government, Church, and the Future of Welfare’ is the first of three related reports commissioned by the Church of England. Its stated aim is to assess the Church of England’s current social contribution and ‘potential for its involvement in welfare reform, voluntary activity and public service delivery in pursuit of the common good’ (p13).

What does it say?

The Church has been **encouraged and supported** to take on public service contracts by many parliamentarians including **Government ministers**.

In addition to academy schools and ‘faith schools’, the report claims that there are many public services that the Church could potentially run, including GP’s practices and NHS dentistry.

The report presents the Church as being discriminated against by Government, in part because it sees Government as concerned to focus its attention wholly on minority faiths and because, the report argues, the Government vastly underestimates the social contribution already made by Christian churches and underestimates the resources they can offer.

The report asserts that a Church-provided service is distinctive and that it is Christian organisations in particular that give a real ‘added value’ to service provision (a position that has been comprehensively rejected by the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)) hence it is the Church of England in particular that should run many welfare and other public services.

What’s the problem?

The report makes clear that the **involvement of the Church in welfare and other public services is primarily to evangelise**: ‘This is the dimension of the Church’s work that self-defines it as a Church *qua* Church rather than just another simplistically categorised voluntary sector agent. A Christian Church exists primarily to preach the Kingdom wherever it can. This task is defined not by Government, but rather by Scripture, tradition and the Spirit’ (p87).

Indeed, the report **demands** that, not only should the Church be a key organisation in line to **run public services**, but that this should **all be on the Church’s own terms** – at the same time as the Church vehemently opposes any extension of the Human Rights Act to it, as recommended by the Joint Committee on Human Rights¹ and by the Commons’ Public Administration Committee².

In essence, the report’s **aims are theocratic**. Should the Church of England contract with Government to provide public services, **Government** would be **required to adopt Christian language** in the way it approaches contracting and develops relationships with religious groups. Indeed, it expects Government to **change the way it contracts to fit a biblical model** based on Christian principles as **dictated by the Church**.

¹ <http://tinyurl.com/2asueg>

² <http://tinyurl.com/5szzys>

The report's recommendations also seek to increase the **privileged position** of the Church of England in Government and governance, with **specialist ministerial and other posts** dedicated to them, large amounts of **funding to Christian organisations** and to **change the commissioning process** so that contracts are replaced by 'covenants' lasting for many years.

The report recommends developing a faith standard similar to the 'Faithworks Charter'. The 'Faithworks Charter', while recommending principles of non-discrimination in service provision, **leaves open the option for religious organisations to discriminate in their employment practices**, and its emphasis on religious ethos implies that religious organisations will discriminate in employment.

If the proposals in this report are adopted, and if religious organisations are able to – and do – discriminate in employment, then this has **potentially very damaging** and far-reaching consequences, given the range of services the Church is looking into taking on (e.g. NHS dentistry) and the length of contracts (long term 'covenant' relationships in commissioning (p95)).

The report demands increased 'religious literacy' on behalf of **Government** and other bodies but especially from a Christian perspective, even **adopting specifically Christian language and research into theology** and the 'importance of non-economic performance measures' (p95) such as **Christian care and spirituality**. This is not only **clearly discriminatory** – using one religious perspective and measurement – it suggests a **totally reformed role of Government** from being functionally secular and working from a basis of equality and rights to that of being a promoter of and vehicle for the promulgation of Christian ideas.

What can be done?

The proposals in this report should be rejected. As they stand, the demands for increased privilege and standing of the Church in relation to Government and the inevitably changed role of Government to something compatible with and guided by **principles dictated by the Church are unacceptable in a diverse society and diverse market.**

Should the Government pursue its desire to contract with religious organisations, including the Church of England, it must do so on its own terms, treat all organisations **equally and without privilege**, and **ensure that legislative and contractual safeguards** are in place to minimise the possible problems associated with contracting to religious organisations.

In particular – and a minimum – the **HRA should be extended to all those performing a public function**, as was the original desire of Government when it passed the Act in 1998 and as recommended by both the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Public Administration Committee. The **exemptions allowing discrimination in employment should not apply** when working under contract to provide public services. There should be strict **no proselytising clauses in all contracts**. Any contracts made with the Church or other religious organisations must be on the same terms as those made with other third sector or private sector organisations.

For more information, see the British Humanist Association's report '**Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations**' <http://tinyurl.com/25w2hb>.