

PREVENT, the Equality Act 2010 and religious freedoms

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The PREVENT strategy asserts public bodies such as schools, colleges and universities, health trusts, and prisons must *safeguard* people deemed to be at risk of being ‘radicalised’ towards violent political causes. Moving away from countering *violent* extremism to a more explicit concern with extremist *ideology*, the latter is now viewed as a ‘gateway’ or first step towards violence, despite this theory being widely discredited. **These developments create some of the very harms they are designed to mitigate and also risk breaching the civil rights of individuals whose actions should give no cause for concern.** The requirement has a particular impact on organisations involved in education, such as universities and schools.

Indeed, this indicates a move toward an ‘authoritarian’ form of liberalism, one which is increasingly directed against freedoms of religious expression. The counter-extremism strategy now draws upon the Equality Act 2010 to instantiate British values in the form of an assertive insistence upon the active acceptance of procedural norms as substantive values. The active assertion of liberal ideals as values renders them ‘collective’ and potentially places them in conflict with other collective interactions (while disguising the fact that procedural norms have thereby been transformed into values). **This is different from recognising their role in facilitating a public sphere where difference can be expressed. This has had particularly serious consequences for civil rights and religious freedoms, with minority religious faiths particularly affected.**

Recent illustrations of this approach involve a curriculum at Parkfield primary school in Birmingham. In 2019, Parkfield School adopted a curriculum called ‘[No Outsiders](#)’ as a ‘whole school’ approach to ‘fundamental British values’ based on the Equality Act 2010. It adopted an LGBTQ+ perspective to teach about diversity and difference more generally, which should include ethnic and religious difference. Most of Parkfield school’s pupils are of Muslim heritage and there were [major protests against this curriculum](#). The curriculum does not represent the different protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010 equally, but presumed that religious commitments potentially were in conflict with equalities. Properly understood, the particularities of cultural and religious differences do not conflict with commitments to ‘democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and respect and tolerance for different faiths and beliefs’ outlined in the Equalities Act. From the perspective of liberal constitutionalism, it is precisely such principles underpinning participation in the public sphere that enable living with difference in multicultural societies. **What has changed is the attitude of politicians toward multiculturalism itself and to the role of religion, representing the latter as potentially backward and in need of education.**

The failure to reconcile the different rights associated with the Equality Act through a dialogue that secures inclusive schooling has serious consequences for children’s schooling. The Prevent agenda has utilised a concept of ‘fundamental British values’ against a religious ethos in the schooling of Muslim pupils. The Human Rights Act of 1998 includes the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Government policy under Prevent now seeks to displace that right in the name of safeguarding children from the religious convictions of their parents. They have done so by suggesting there is a concern for British Muslim integration, representing Islam as a backward religion at odds with British values.

The focus on minority religions are under particular scrutiny. This approach itself is at odds with the Equality 2010 Act’s provisions for equal and non-discriminatory treatment. The particularities of religious commitments and cultural difference do not conflict with commitments to ‘democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and respect and tolerance for different faiths and beliefs’. **The Prevent strategy risks civil liberties for everyone by its attempt to criminalise values and beliefs, and to conflate traditional, even conservative, values with extremism.** This has particularly negative consequences for British Muslims, but has consequences for other religious commitments too