



Religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination (part 2) – What are they?

KEY QUESTIONS ??

- What are religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?

EXERCISES

Q1. What do these terms mean to you: **a) privilege, b) tolerance, c) discrimination?** Write down some key words or phrases in the boxes.

Q2. What do these terms mean to you: **a) religious privilege, b) religious tolerance, c) religious discrimination?** Write down some key words or phrases in the boxes.

STIMULUS

Principles

What are religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?

Privilege, tolerance and discrimination are key concepts within sociology and social justice. They are also key to secularism, and to arguments for or against a secularist approach.

Privilege describes the benefits and advantages held by one group relative to another, which are the result of power dynamics.

Privileged groups often view the imposition of their values as natural or normal. Because religious privilege is so normalised, many people have difficulty identifying it. To get around such “privilege blindness” we need empathy. If you are comfortable with one form of religion being imposed, how would you feel if it was another religion or belief system?

“When you’re accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.” – Anonymous

Tolerance is the ability or willingness to allow practices or opinions that one differs from, dislikes or disagrees with. Synonyms include: forbearance, toleration, sufferance, liberality, open-mindedness, lack of prejudice, lack of bias, broad-mindedness, liberalism and pluralism. In terms of religion, tolerance is the ability to practise your religion or belief without interference and without impinging on the rights of others; in this way tolerance is not and cannot be absolute.

Discrimination is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people. Religious discrimination would be laws or practices which treat people unfairly or restrict their freedom because of religion or belief – either the religion or belief of the person being treated unfairly, or that of the person practising the unfair treatment.

Privilege and discrimination can be seen as a horseshoe, as privilege for one group or idea inevitably means discrimination for alternative groups and ideas that are relatively disadvantaged by not receiving this privilege. For example, privileging group A in school admissions discriminates against group B as they are moved towards the back of the line.

Many people are beneficiaries of privilege in some ways and victims of discrimination in others.

Examples

In this stimulus you will examine six examples where religion impacts public life.

Example A: Bishops in the House of Lords

The UK House of Lords is an unelected chamber. That means most members hold their position – and can vote on laws that affect all of us – after being appointed. An exception to this (the appointment, not the voting) is the “Bishops’ Bench” – twenty-four bishops and two archbishops of the Church of England hold seats in the House of Lords based on their church offices.

Example B: Article 9 of the Human Rights Act

Article 9 of the Human Rights Act (which is also Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights) states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

Example C: Equality Act

The Equality Act sets the standard for equality and anti-discrimination law in Great Britain (Northern Ireland has its own version). It sets out the conditions where it is legal or illegal to treat people differently based on their “protected characteristics”. Among these are religion and belief and sexual orientation. That means that it is generally illegal for a business like a shop, restaurant or taxi company to refuse to serve someone because they are a member of a group the business owner doesn’t like.

For example, Barry the baker could refuse to sell Cindy a croissant because Barry doesn’t like Cindy. This would be legal. But if Barry refused to sell Cindy a croissant because Barry didn’t like women, or didn’t like gay people, or didn’t like Christians, or didn’t like Asian people, or didn’t like people with disabilities or didn’t like old people, this would all probably be illegal.

Example D: Blasphemy laws

Blasphemy is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as “something that you say or do that shows you do not respect God or a religion”. Generally, the term is applied by different groups to describe beliefs or statements they have a theological disagreement with, because either they differ on interpretations of a religion, or criticise religious ideas and institutions. Blasphemy laws can take the form of laws banning insulting religions or causing religious offence.

The common law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel were abolished in England and Wales in 2008. As of 2018, blasphemy remains a common law offence in Scotland and Northern Ireland although these laws are probably not enforceable.

Elsewhere in the world, blasphemy laws are enforced, and in some theocracies carry the death penalty. Some people would like to see blasphemy laws introduced or other laws against insulting religions, though very few advocate such extreme penalties.

Example E: Non-stun slaughter

Animal welfare legislation in the UK requires all animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to minimise suffering. The only exemption is for religious communities to meet Jewish and Muslim religious dietary preferences.

Example F: Separation of church and state

Many countries have a formal legal requirement for religious and state institutions to be separate. Others have the opposite (i.e. they require the state to maintain religious institutions). Others have something in between. Perhaps the clearest example of a country with a formal separation of church and state is the USA, whose constitution's First Amendment reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

EXERCISES

Q3. Are each of the examples (a–f) religious privilege, tolerance or discrimination?

Q4. Why? (a–f)

STIMULUS

Privilege or discrimination?

Imagine Kya and Lola are two students of equal ability who are running against each other in the final race of the school sports day. Mr Kelly the PE teacher is Lola's father and wants her to win, so gives her a 10m head start. This could be considered an example of tolerance if the advantage was earned in some relevant way (e.g. the rules of the race could agree that the runner with the best score in qualifying gets a head start) or necessary to offset another advantage (e.g. on a circular track, athletes on the outside lane would need to run further if they started in line).

The question is, has Mr Kelly:

- a. Privileged Lola by giving her a 10m advantage **or**
- b. Discriminated against Kya by giving her a 10m disadvantage

Often whether we describe something as privilege or discrimination is simply a matter of emphasis.

For example: A law which discriminates against atheist citizens would be an example of religious privilege (because it would give the religious a comparative advantage). A law which privileged religious citizens would be discriminatory against non-religious citizens (because it would deny them a comparative advantage).

What follows are ten statements, five of which secularists generally consider to be examples of religious privilege and five of which secularists generally consider to be examples of religious discrimination.

Privilege

- a) The views of religious leaders are treated with greater weight because they are assumed to be of higher moral value or to be representative of large groups.
- b) There are many religious exemptions to laws ranging from animal welfare legislation to employment law.
- c) Religious based conscientious objections are often given greater weight than those based on other personal preferences.
- d) Societal taboos protect religious beliefs or practices from criticisms levelled at non-religious or irreligious comparisons.

- e) Certain positions in public office or employment are reserved for people of specific religions.

Discrimination

- f) Some people are insulted or attacked because of their religion or lack of religion.
- g) Some people are turned down from certain jobs because of their religion or lack of religion.
- h) In some places the practices of certain religious or irreligious groups are banned without good justification.
- i) In some places it is illegal to hold certain religious or irreligious views.
- j) Some people refuse to serve others because of their religious beliefs.

EXERCISES

Q5. For each of the examples of religious privilege (a–e), rephrase this so it is an example of religious discrimination. For each of the examples of religious discrimination (f–j), rephrase this so it is an example of religious privilege.

Q6. Do you agree that this is an example of religious privilege (a–e) or discrimination (f–j)?

Q7. Why or why not? (a–j)

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Create a poster called “10 rules for religious tolerance”. What will these rules be? Who will create/enforce them? How will they affect people with different religious/irreligious views?
- Create a poster to illustrate the concepts of religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination.
- Think of three examples of religious or religion-related practices which are privileged, tolerated or discriminated against. Why is this the case? What would it look like if they were treated differently (e.g. if a practice that is currently privileged were tolerated, or a practice that is currently tolerated were discriminated against)?