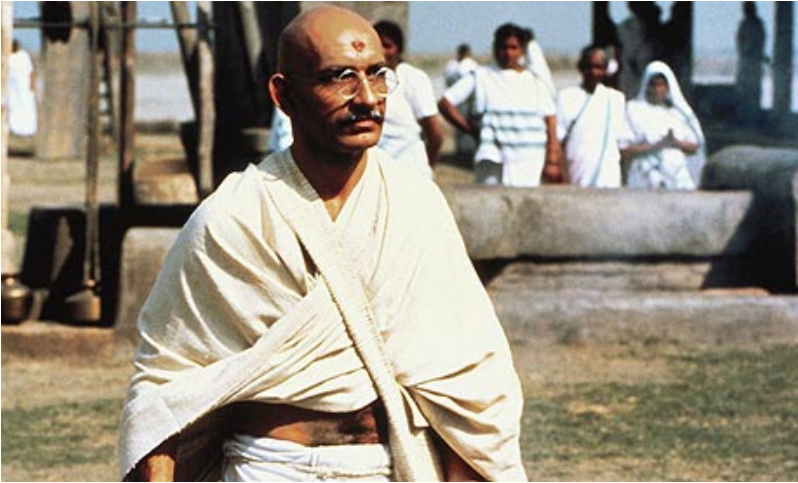


No place for Jesus in RE, but there's always Gandhi



Aged eight, my daughter knew that she must take her shoes off when entering a mosque. But ask her to recite the Ten Commandments, and she couldn't. This, despite being at a Catholic state primary. I wasn't too surprised, therefore, to learn that religious education in state schools is inadequate – so much so that Ofsted claims most pupils don't know who Jesus was. *Ben Kingsley in Gandhi*

This is not a metropolitan, or even a British, phenomenon. One irate mother tweeted last night that in her child's primary school in Ireland, RE consisted of watching videos of Gandhi. (In his Ben Kingsley reincarnation, I am willing to bet.) I have nothing against the Mahatma, who probably does come as close to holiness as human beings can get. But if Gandhi deserves a role in RE, Jesus should star. This is a Christian country, not a Hindu one.

Yet Jesus is being sidelined, and His teachings with Him. If we treat the nation's religion so casually, as if we valued it no more and no less than an inspiring human rights campaigner, it stands to reason that we should erase it from serious places such as the courtroom. It becomes perfectly legitimate for judges to propose to remove the Bible from the court – which is what they plan to do next month. Henceforth, they suggest, when witnesses have to swear to tell the truth, they'll just hold up their hand and... and what? Cross their hearts and hope to die? Mouth the Scouts' pledge, now that God's been banned from that, too?

Christianity was once the lingua franca in the West. Today, it is as exotic as Shiva, Ganesha and Kali, of Gandhi's Hindu faith. Sadly, ignorance often feeds hostility. Grown-ups unschooled in the basics of their religion – the catechism, say, or the parables of the New Testament – are suspicious of its influence. Their discomfort grows with talk, now unfamiliar, of sin and Judgment Day. Jesus may be hailed as meek and mild, but his message sounds scary to an audience used to the comforting tut-tuts of their shrink, or the happy pill sold by their GP. Far easier to quash such disturbing talk and banish the trouble-makers. Or, at least, warn them not to pipe up in public with their puritanical notions.

I wrote about this recently in my ebook *No God Zone*. In the course of my research, I interviewed men and women who had learnt that religion had become a secret pastime to practise behind closed doors. Each one had to choose between their work and their faith – or between the boss and God. They included a nurse, a couples' counsellor and a pharmacist.

They had hoped that the state, which pays lip service to freedom of conscience, would exempt them from doing what they held to be wrong. The pharmacist who didn't believe in abortion, for instance, wanted to be exempt from selling the morning-after pill; the couples' counsellor who didn't believe in gay marriage wanted to be exempt from advising a homosexual couple. They were disabused of this blind hope when they were sacked, suspended from their job, or humiliated in public. In effect, a number of professions now are closed to believers.

But, as the judges' proposal proves, ignorance of religion affects lives beyond the workplace. People's identity, not just their job, is at stake. Who are we, and what do we believe in? When Christianity was at the centre of British life, that answer was clear – from classroom to courtroom. Not everyone practised, or believed, in the nation's Church. But they knew what it stood for. Today, few can distinguish between Jesus and Gandhi, or Shiva and Yahweh. That's not multiculturalism, but the hollowing out of culture. We are the poorer for it.

Cristina Odone - The Daily Telegraph