

Keeping the faith (to yourself)



By [George Wood](#), Deputy Muse Editor (2012/13)

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Cartoon by [Brandon Seager](#)

Religion has never walked hand in hand with the field of work. Globalisation and the cumulative effects of diversity, tolerance, and political secularisation have left religion in an awkward place when it comes to UK public debate, complicated further at a time when religious extremists gain a disproportionate hearing in the media and fail to represent the true values and ways of life of religious communities.

Using the workplace as an indicator, it is clear that there is an increasing pressure for faith to be privatised. But a seemingly breakthrough case was made recently when the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that rights of Nadia Eweida, a Christian British Airways employee who refused to stop wearing her cross at work, trumped the argument that it would affect her employer's public image.

Miss Eweida's victory makes it all too easy to paint companies as the villains when it comes to the right to express one's religion. But while I firmly believe that no one should be discriminated against on the basis of their religion, companies shouldn't have to accommodate beyond this. It should be noted that similar cases of claimed discrimination presented to the ECHR were dismissed; Miss Eweida only won because it was deemed that a discreet cross would have no effect on the public image of British Airways. She didn't win on the assumption that she could freely express her religion at work.

In reality, the workplace is not a suitable arena for discussing the place of religion in society. I'd argue that wearing the cross is almost exclusively an expression of faith, and while I struggle to see how such a small piece of jewellery can affect a company's public image – and certainly the ECHR couldn't – I also struggle to see how it symbolises the right to religious freedom, when surely it is the actions of an individual that should represent Christian values rather than anything material.

Conversely, I see the Islamic concept of hijab, or guarding one's modesty, as more than simply religious expression, and as potentially fundamental to one's faith. But I can also understand the potential difficulties that such a concept brings to the workplace, concerning safety or security.

To employers, these differences are inconsequential. Unfortunately, if a person feels they should be able to express their religion freely in spite of professional codes of conduct, or they feel that their religion dictates how they dress or act in public, then frankly they are not suited to certain workplace environments.

Employers aren't to blame here – the differences between religions and interpretations within faiths

makes the issue far more complex than what employers can handle.

If employers have to treat all employees the same, then everyone is entitled to equal rights. So companies are faced with an all-or-nothing approach for the code of conduct regarding religion. Either everyone can express their religion, or no one can.

The Queen may be both head of state and head of the Church of England, but regardless of such religious formalities in Britain, businesses here must operate outside of the context of religion.

Where we should be coming up with solutions to issues of religion in society is here, at university. The university environment is far more accommodating towards the differences between our values and beliefs than the workplace, and instead of trying to end issues in some legal fiasco, universities encourage such debate.

So now's the time to question how a belief in equal rights can still support the promotion of religious freedom, or the freedom to any particular freedom or way of life.

If we ignore these issues altogether, in the future we may find ourselves in the same position as Miss Eweida.



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