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The partially reconstructed ruins of ancient Beer-sheba, the place to which Elijah fled initially from the wrath of Jezebel.

face [with Israel] in the mount out of the midst of the fire" (5:4)!

When the prophet finally "came to Beer-sheba" he "left his servant there" (1 Kgs. 19:3). The prophet, desiring to be alone in isolation and solitude, and anxious to spare his servant from the journey ahead, pressed forward unaccompanied.

Elijah would certainly have recollected the journey of Abraham, as he ascended Moriah, and how he had assured his two servants, "Abide ye

here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you" (Gen. 22:5). And let us remember that Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, preferred to leave his disciples behind while he went to pray and be alone with his Father. And what did Jesus say to Peter, James and John on finding them sleeping? "My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch" (Mk. 14:34).

(To be continued)

## Religious hatred

Trevor Maher

*Brethren and sisters living in the Western world have long enjoyed freedom of worship, but is this freedom under threat from new legislation? We have to be prepared to follow the faithful examples of those in the past who preached the Truth despite opposition from the authorities.*

**A** GREAT DEAL of publicity was given earlier this year to the case of a schoolgirl who attended Denbigh High School in Luton, and was excluded from school because she insisted on wearing a *jilbab* (head covering), which was not allowed under school regulations concerning school uniform. The girl held the Muslim faith, and argued that she had a right to "manifest her religious beliefs" in this way. The matter went to court, and ultimately the law lords who heard the case agreed with her. This legal

decision will have far-reaching implications in relation to a school's ability to determine its own 'uniforms policy'.

Another, much broader, question is raised, though, by these events. Who decides in future what is an authentic manifestation of a religious belief? The decision of the court was described by the pupil and her family as "a victory for Muslims who wish to preserve their identity and values despite prejudice and bigotry". What seemed like a normal everyday rule concerning school uniforms had become in the minds of these people an act of "prejudice and bigotry", a form of religious hatred.

In December 2004 a violent demonstration by large numbers of Sikhs in Birmingham over a play's portrayal of their faith caused the play to be cancelled. They were offended, claiming that the play mocked their faith (even though it

was written by someone holding their faith!). It was reported on the BBC News Online that "the government's proposals for laws to ban incitement to religious hatred had been blamed for exacerbating the protests".

### **A new law**

The government in Britain is amending the law on incitement to religious hatred, a crime covered by statute. The Home Secretary has stated that the offence will be redefined so that materials need only to be "likely" rather than proven to encourage a crime. This latest proposal is one clause (Clause 119) in what would otherwise be described as a non-controversial bill, the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill. With it comes a maximum sentence, if found guilty, of seven years in prison.

The press carried a report of an incident in Lancashire in 2002 which went largely unnoticed by the majority of people. Members of an evangelical church distributed 'Christian literature' to Muslims, obviously with the intent of converting them. As a consequence they were visited by the police, who indicated that such action could be viewed as a serious racial offence. This was not proceeded with because of legal advice received by the church, and the robust official complaint that they filed, but such incidents show how the law in its previous form could be misapplied.

This latest development, of having a new offence of "incitement to religious hatred", makes similar incidents far more likely, and may well affect our freedom to preach the gospel. In Australia, two pastors who criticised Islam were recently found guilty of "inciting religious hatred" under a similar law. It is the belief of government ministers that by putting the word "hatred" in the bill they are not stifling genuine discussion, expressions of dislike, even criticism, of any particular religion. They also claim that, as the Attorney General would have to approve any cases brought under this new law, sufficient safeguards are in place to prevent abuse or misuse of the law.

One is led to ask what the new law sets out to do. We already have laws that prohibit discrimination, intimidation and incitement to violence, yet the government now looks to include religious hatred as a category under which prosecutions can be mounted. Underlying this new law appears to be a desire to protect those who hold the Muslim faith. It seems as though the government wants to stifle any likelihood of public disorder

brought about by opposition to or criticism of those belonging to the Muslim faith. It has to be said, though, that even the Islamic Human Rights Convention has expressed disquiet over the new legislation because it thinks Muslims could be targets of prosecutions under the proposed legislation.

The ambiguity and uncertainty caused by this new law can be seen in relation to minority interest groups, such as those which promote homosexuality, feminism and humanism. They could use the new law to stifle opposition to their views, or true Biblical teachings, but they could also claim that it could prevent them from taking issue with those who do not agree with them on religious grounds.

### **"Preach the word"**

Will this new law affect Christadelphians as individuals or as a community? It may well do so over a period of time. The proposed offence of incitement to religious hatred excludes behaviour in private dwellings but not in churches or places of worship. The words used in our preaching talks, in titles for Sunday Bible addresses and in our literature may well come under scrutiny. Muslims who do not accept the right of Jews to the land of Israel may well object to our preaching on the topic of 'Israel in the purpose of God', and gay groups who do not accept that their way of life is condemned in Scripture may object if we present Scripture teaching on homosexuality.

We may think this unlikely at the present time, given the public apathy normally displayed to our preaching, but if Christ remains away for a further five, ten or even twenty years, and attitudes harden and civil conditions worsen considerably, who can tell what we might face? We anticipate that a more totalitarian, autocratic form of government will exist in Europe when the time for confrontation with Christ comes, and the Orthodox and Catholic Churches will be more dominant as well at that time. Having enjoyed freedom of speech for many years, it may well be that such freedom will become restricted because of problems of terrorism, trends in society or totalitarian governments.

When we turn to Scripture, we find that the situation that we are concerned about is not a new one for the faithful. Examples abound throughout the Old and New Testaments of individuals, groups and governments who opposed the Truth, tried to prevent the gospel being preached and persecuted those who fearlessly spoke the Word

of God. Daniel's enemies admitted that the only way they could prevail against him would be through his religious beliefs and behaviour (Dan. 6:5). Yet even when his enemies engineered a law designed to restrict Daniel's proclamation of his beliefs, his faith meant that such actions were doomed to failure and even led to a furtherance of the truth (v. 26).

For the disciples in Jerusalem, following the resurrection of Christ there was a time of testing when the authorities tried to ban the gospel of the risen Christ. Having been imprisoned and then miraculously released, the apostles "filled Jerusalem" with their teaching, as instructed by the angel. Their response to the Sanhedrin's attempts to stop them was, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:28,29).

The New Testament writings have examples where the Spirit led the apostles and angels to use language that some describe as circumspect, in that descriptions of adversaries and enemies to the Truth and the disciples are couched in symbolic language that only the faithful would fully comprehend; for example, the "man of sin" prophecy of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-5, "your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion" (1 Pet. 5:8) and "Satan's seat" (Rev. 2:13).

It has not, however, been the way of God to be sensitive to sinners' feelings when confronting them with the truth concerning their actions. The language used in the quotations referred to above is consistent with symbolic language in other parts of Scripture, and was needed to allow the message to be relevant to future generations, not just those who heard it the first time. The stark contrast that now exists between Biblical teaching on marriage and what society deems acceptable in human relationships has resulted from a change in people's thinking in a relatively short period of time. This is a clear indication to us that we should expect to encounter difficulties in preaching and living the Truth in the last days.

When Paul reached the city of Philippi, the reaction of certain people and those in author-

ity was that the gospel required them to follow customs which were "not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans" (Acts 16:21). That attitude is already being developed, if it is not already established, in our world today. Jeremiah despaired of the attitude and life style of his society in Israel, and determined not to continue preaching because of the consequences to him and the refusal of people to respond. But his realisation that such a course of action is not for the servant of God is a wonderful exhortation to us all.

### **"The everlasting gospel"**

It is obvious from the examples of Scripture that, whatever changes take place in the society we live in, we cannot forbear or fail to preach. History shows us from the time of the Flood, through the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the times of decadence of collapsed empires, that human nature sinks to the basest of behaviour while justifying and enforcing such actions. Even if the law prevents ecclesias from holding public meetings for preaching, or dealing with certain topics in a public forum, as brethren and sisters in Christ we each have to speak the Truth, "in season, out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). No matter what the climate of public opinion is, we must not be responsible for the Word of God being "bound", as Paul emphasised when he was in prison as a result of preaching (2:9).

The time may well be coming when disciples of Christ will have to stand up and stand out for "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude v. 3), whatever the consequences. We have this assurance, though, that it is God's purpose to establish His Kingdom on the earth, and that "the everlasting gospel" (Rev. 14:6) will be proclaimed throughout the world at that time. Those who have in this life preached the gospel as it is in Christ, and have been deemed faithful in all things, will also participate in that glorious time when "out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:3).

That the state cannot be permitted to assume absolute control of the life of the disciple in those matters which concern faith is . . . plain from the example of our Lord. Despite the plainest of indications that the rulers deplored his preaching, he continued to preach . . . [and] allowed no one to hinder him from proclaiming the gospel. His counsel to his disciples was that they should bend before persecution, and flee to preach elsewhere (Matthew 10:23); but he plainly did not envisage the possibility that the disciples might bow to the authorities to the extent that they would meekly surrender their duty to bear witness to the word of Salvation, simply because it was unwelcome to the civil power.

Alfred Norris, *Acts and Epistles*, p. 67.