*Café Philo*

Tuesday 5th December 2017, 7.30 p.m.

The topic, chaired by Professor Gerard Kilroy, will be:

*How tolerant are we?*

It is certainly true that modern society sets a high store by tolerance, especially tolerance of race and gender, and nearly everyone would agree that this has been a major step forward. Few would like to see a return to the racial prejudice that was so flagrantly expressed in the 1950s. There have been real advances, helped by changes in the law. Exacting standards of language permissible in private and public discourse also seem firmly in place. There are many pejorative words, once in common use, that are no longer acceptable. The result of all these changes is that we think of ourselves as an unusually tolerant society. But are we?

Changes in the law on homosexuality between 1967 and 2013 (the date when Peter Tatchell argues homosexuality was finally decriminalised) have been described as the ultimate test of a more civilised society. Yet when Catholic adoption agencies asked for an exemption from the obligation to include homosexual couples on their lists (in 2010–2011) they were not allowed to do this, and were forced to close. The arrival of trans-gender politics is now having a disturbing impact on schools, and there are concerns that schools will be forced to use ‘the preferred pronoun’, to install new facilities, and to allow pupils to choose their gender. Ofsted inspectors this year failed Vishnitz Girls School in north London because the Jewish school did not give enough attention to ‘encouraging respect for other people, paying particular regard to the protected characteristics as set out in the 2010 Equality Act’.

The desire to eliminate discrimination on grounds of gender is merely adding fuel to a growing tendency to portray religious commitment as a form of extremism. The leader of the Liberal Democrats, Tim Farron, said he was resigning because he had daily faced questions (hostile ones, he implied) about his Christian faith. Jacob Rees-Mogg has been called a ‘bigot’, and his views ‘despicable’, because he said he did not agree with abortion or gay marriage. Those with strong religious views, it seems, may keep this hobby, like collecting matchboxes, in the garden shed, but they must not bring it into the public space. In France, the Mayor of Clichy led a protest against Muslims praying in the street after they had been shut out of the hall they had been using for literacy classes as well as prayer.

The problem is part of wider one where patterns of violent extremism attached to one religion have been allowed to taint all religions, and religion itself has come to be viewed as an unnecessary obstacle to clear thinking. There is what Charles Taylor (author of *The Secular Age*) calls the ‘continuing danger’ which comes ‘from the narrowing of ethical vision’, where, in the pursuit of one ‘good’, we forget about other important goals. ‘People trapped in a tunnel vision,’ he argues, ‘seeking only negative liberty whatever the cost to the community, could be sawing off the branch on which they sit.’ Are we in danger of destroying the very community, the very society that makes individual liberty possible? More immediately, how selective is our tolerance?

In order to encourage a convivial atmosphere, wine will be available at a reduced price from 7.00 p.m., and the discussion, open to all, will start at 7.30 p.m. Entrance will be £2 for members of BRLSI, and £4 for non-members. ***BRLSI****:*

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