

What's equality?

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 18 January 2006

Identity has been much in the news this last week, what with Gordon Brown's ideas on Britishness and the publication of the ethnicity and nationality questions for the Scottish test census. We've also had Richard Dawkins' evangelical atheism on television, another proposal for a Muslim school, and of course, Cardinal O'Brien's remarks on the re-Christianisation of Scotland.

So where do I fit into all of that? What is my identity? – is it my nationality, my faith, my ethnicity, my culture? Add to those my gender, my sexual orientation, my age - all factors which during the last decades have developed a politics of their own. So, who am I?

The answer, of course, is that each of us is all these things: we each have *an* age, *a* gender, *an* ethnicity, *a* nationality, *a* religion (or lack of it), and so forth. Each of us is the intersection of a whole host of identities - and that's what makes us interesting to each other!

But that answer provokes another question: what do we mean by promoting equality? Everyone agrees it's a worthy aim, but it doesn't take a genius to realise that one man's equality is another woman's detriment! Many faiths ascribe distinct roles to men and women, so if we promote gender equality, we undermine religious rights; and if we promote religious freedom, we undermine gender equality.

Each of our identities generates a different claim for equality - do we want men to be by and large like women, or Jews to be more or less like Christians? And at the same time we want to respect everyone's human right to be themselves. But all these claims simply can't be satisfied at once. Ultimately the goal of equality for all is not just unattainable but unintelligible!

These issues are now all in the public eye as Parliament debates the creation of new structures to promote equality and human rights. They won't have an easy job, but one thing's for sure: whatever they conclude, we'll all be different - but we'll all still be Jock Tamson's bairns.