Not all Equality is Equal

Thought for the Day
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On the surface, this week's Appeal Court ruling in favour of two Catholic midwives who refused to have anything to do with abortion procedures looks like a victory for religious rights. However, what was really at issue there was the interpretation of words: does managing or supervising staff count as participating in what they do?

But there's been no shortage of recent challenges to religion in public life. Earlier this year the European Court of Human Rights decided four British cases that raise similar issues. Two were about Christians wearing a cross to work, and were decided on the basis of whether or not there were good reasons to ban it. The others both related to services for same-sex couples, and the Court held that the right to act on one's religious beliefs is outweighed by other equality considerations, in this case freedom of sexual orientation.

Personally I find this a worrying trend, not because I'm against equality, but because, to echo Orwell, some equalities seem to be treated as less equal than others. A hierarchy of equality strands seems to be emerging, and some of these rulings could be interpreted as telling religious believers what to believe. For example, courts have declared that wearing a cross is not central to Christianity, or the hijab to Islam, and just this month that Zionism is not "intrinsically a part of Jewishness", despite being central to our prayers for 2000 years! But, at the same time, other courts have held that beliefs such as vegetarianism, or climate change, or pacifism have protection under the law.

Beliefs used to be protected only if they were similar to religious beliefs, but perhaps the law has now moved too far the other way; it seems to protect philosophical beliefs, while religious conscience is often called into question, and I find that both hard to swallow and paradoxical. I *am* in favour of the equality of all the equality strands, though – I'm for parity, not paradox!