

## Transcript

### Sacred and secular

*Revd Robin Gibbons*

#### **Robin Gibbons:**

My name is Dr Robin Gibbons, and I'm an Oxford academic. I'm part of Regent's Park. I belong to the Centre for Christianity and Culture, but I'm part of a program called Religious Diversity Freedom and Society. But I have another hat which is Father Robin Gibbons, which is a priest of the Greek Catholic Malachite Church. That's an oriental church in communion with Rome mainly from the Middle East, and I look after many of the parishioners in the United Kingdom.

#### **Interviewer:**

So could you just explain whether you think there are any limits to the protection the law can offer to religious groups?

#### **Robin Gibbons:**

There are limits the law can offer in terms of protection to religious groups when I look at my own community, particularly, in the sense that they are a very disenfranchised group. They're immigrants, the second generation are possibly better equipped but the recent immigrants, especially from Syria, Palestine, wherever it may be, often find it very difficult linguistically to start connecting, and secondly, do not know how to get hold of agencies to help them.

And they always look to the church. The church is the first port of call because it is the thing that gives them a family unit. It's a home to them. There's a common language. Even though we might not speak the same language, there's an understanding about faith. So they find, I think, enormous difficulty in trying to insert into society, especially one which has quite a secular component.

And this is a shock to them. They find it a tremendous shock that being religious people, there's not the same compassion, understanding, and concern. And for them religion is life. It's not separated. It's not private. It is a total life agency. So I think, for them, the big problem is they look at a society expecting to find faith in people reaching out to them, expecting to find faith in people in government and at other agencies reaching out to help them, and they don't get it.

So they look, therefore, to people like myself as their parish priest to take them into engagement. And I begin to find difficulties myself because of being a priest in a particular minority Catholic tradition, which is not understood. And people are very bad about trying to find out who you are. So I would say lots of difficulties for the people. And I would think that there are many issues that will come up.

And I can actually explain certain issues that will give you concrete examples, if that would be helpful. One of which is the area that one can look at in terms of, say, landlords. You come to a country. You're looking for somewhere to live. You're a faith person. You go to an Islamic community, and there's a landlord there being established.

Fine for a while because they happen to come from one part of Syria, and they come from another Arab country. That tension comes in, and then little blocks start appearing in terms of not helping them. And we have to go to the local Imam to try and get a way in to dialogue. That's not a great thing. It does rub off. We also have a very problematic issue with a lot of our families are converts from Islam.

And that is something that is very difficult because they can't openly talk about it. People wonder why and you get people saying, well, what a good idea. And you have to say, just be very quiet because the families abroad are going to suffer. So that there is another issue where gossip and interference and well-meaning care for these people can cause concern. But it's also in job application because they also suffer from prejudice.

And they're Christians. They're Christians from very ancient families. They come here expecting the church to help them. The Catholic church is a large agency, but because we are not all the same great block, there are difficulties even for me trying to get through to the archbishops or bishops of particular dioceses and say, look, because these children need schooling. And they will say, well, Catholics go to mass. And I say, not in our tradition.

Catholics do this, that, and the other, and I have to say, not in our tradition. So you have this-- there's a prejudice where they feel it all the time, I think. There's a real prejudice. And being Arab, they also feel they're caught in between two stones because religious society would say, oh, you're Arab, aren't you Muslim? Why aren't you Christian? How can you possibly be a Christian? And I have to say these people are longer in a sense. Christianity's been longer in their culture than it has in ours. There are more things that I could talk about. Marriage issues, passport issues. It goes on and on and on.

**Interviewer:**

Just talk about how it might be possible to empower these groups, these minorities.

**Robin Gibbons:**

Trying to empower the minority groups, especially minority oriental Christians in my case, is I think through dialogue, first of all. There has to be knowledge-- knowledge of these communities. That's what freedom of religion is about in a sense-- acknowledging difference and acknowledging religious communities who haven't been in this country for very long but are now here. It's also actively engaging with people in government or in religious organizations at certain levels and people like myself being a nuisance or using academic route to try and speak for them.