
Christian faith should not be privatised, says academic

Christopher Lamb

COUNTRIES SHOULD not be forced to remove Christianity from the public sphere under the guise of protecting the rights of those who want “freedom from religion”, according to a leading human-rights academic.

Delivering the thirty-third Corbishley Lecture in the House of Commons last week, Professor Joseph Weiler – who spoke at the European Court of Human Rights in favour of the Italian law requiring crucifixes in classrooms during the case brought against the country’s Government by Soile Lautsi – said it does not violate human rights to retain public displays of Christianity.

He said it is not clear why “freedom from religion” in public places is singled out as there is no “freedom from communism, fascism, vegetarianism ... or any other world view” required.

“We accept freedom of religion and freedom from religion, but why is freedom from religion singled out? This has not received a sufficient answer,” Professor Weiler, who is Jewish, said.

Referring to the Lautsi case he said “the state cannot be neutral”, and that if a crucifix

is removed from a classroom wall it is as much a statement as keeping a crucifix on the wall.

In France, where there is a strict separation of Church and State, the state requires schools to have “*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*” emblazoned on the building. “That is not neutral,” he said.

He said it is wrong to assume that in European countries there is “the State on the one hand and the Church on the other”. As so many European countries’ identity is bound up with Christianity, it does not make sense to remove symbols of faith from the public sphere. He pointed to Ireland and Germany where God is mentioned in the countries’ constitutions and Sweden where the monarch is required by law to be an Evangelical Lutheran.

While he stressed it would clearly be a breach of human rights if countries started requiring politicians to be of a certain faith, Christian public symbolism – such as singing the national anthem, “God Save the Queen” and the cross of St George – does not breach people’s rights. “We need some British common sense,” he concluded. “We need to accommodate people of faith and those with a secular world view. Someone has to give ground to the other.”