



## Thought For The Day

### Transcript

Julian Baggini 16<sup>th</sup> February 2007

Isaiah Berlin divided thinkers up into either hedgehogs or foxes, depending on whether they knew one thing or many. I'd like to propose another mammalian distinction, one of belief systems rather than individuals, between squirrels and pandas.

To some squirrels are adorable little critters; to others, they are rats with bushy tails who should be wiped out. But whatever you think of them, they thrive and propagate in the wild, without artificial assistance. Pandas, in contrast, are doomed to die out without special protection and nurturing. From where I'm standing, both religion and atheism look squirrel-like to me. Provoking affection and scorn in equal measure, both are to be found everywhere human life flourishes. But some people who claim to be friends of religion seem to want to treat it as though it were a panda, and afford it special protection. Sometimes it is placed in relatively pokey sanctuaries, like a ring-fenced period of time in the television or radio schedules; or a small prayer room. On other occasions the protected zone can be more extensive, such as when it means reserving seats in the second chamber of parliament for representatives of religions, or allowing denominational and single-faith schools. If I were religious I'd be concerned that my faith were being treated as though it were a species of belief so unable to cope in the modern, harsh world that it needed its own special conservation zones to stop it going extinct.

It may be objected that a scared space is needed, not because religion is weak and vulnerable, but because society is now overwhelmingly secular. But this is a peculiar argument. Our supposedly secular society is not an atheist one. It is simply neutral as regards matters of fundamental belief, so religion is no more in need of a sanctuary from the secular world as any other form of belief, including atheism.

For those who care about religion, there is also a worry that segregation sends out a signal that it stands apart from the business of everyday life. By separating faith schools from other schools, faith programmes from other broadcasts, faith groups from other voluntary organisations, doesn't it give ammunition to critics who maintain that religion has nothing to do with the everyday life of ordinary people?

The challenge to religion's various claims to special status is therefore not essentially anti-religious at all. If religion is real, relevant and vibrant, then let it enter the mainstream on all fours with other species of belief and show itself fit. Only if it were impotent and maladapted, like the hapless Panda, would it need special, protected spaces.