

17 February 2012

Make 2012 the year you joined the NSS. It's certainly going to be a year when we need your support more than ever to build on the advances we are making. Go to <http://www.secularism.org.uk/join-and-renew.html>

Quotes of the Week

"What this ruling demonstrates is that disestablishment might be possible from the ground up, unpicking the cat's cradle connecting church and state from below. And who would have expected all this to begin in Bideford?"

(Giles Fraser, *Guardian*)

"I shouldn't be surprised that Eric Pickles has waded into the row. Given that he no longer appears to check basic facts before mouthing off, I tend to the view that if I'm taking a contrary stance to his, I'm on the right side of common sense."

(Mike Valladares' blog "Creeping St Peter")

"It's precisely because of the predominance of secularism in the UK that has allowed the likes of Warsi to hold the office she does. To throw religion back in the face of secularism is to deny the tolerance that is the point of secularism. She needs to rethink."

(Comment posted on BBC thread)

"There is a suspicion in Britain that when politicians invoke religion they are saying you cannot be a proper Christian unless you agree with me. British people don't react to that in the way Americans do."

(Alistair Campbell, *Financial Times*)

"Top-down and institutional religion is in decline. Trying to restore or maintain the cultural and political dominance of religious institutions in what is now a mixed-belief 'spiritual and secular' society is a backward-looking approach."

(Simon Barrow, *Ekklesia*)

Essays of the week

[Benign secularism suits the British state well](#)

(Michael Fry, *Scotsman*)

[The faithful can't be trusted to have a political voice](#)

(Ian Dunt, *Politics.co.uk*)

[If religion is marginal, I'm the pope](#)

(Mark Steel, *Independent*)

Bideford Council will appeal – contributions welcome.

Bideford Council reportedly decided last night to appeal against the High Court's decision that prayers during Council meetings were unlawful.

Keith Porteous Wood commented: "We were expecting this. The Society is consulting its lawyers as to the best course of action."

The Bideford case has prompted a great deal of support from the public and some hefty donations, for which we are most grateful, but we are still quite some way short of the anticipated cost of a hearing in the Court of Appeal. Bideford council's costs are being indemnified by the Christian Institute, but the NSS has to fund itself.

Please donate to help us keep this ruling intact. You can do it securely online at <http://www.secularism.org.uk/donate.html> or by post to NSS (Appeal), 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

The great debate begins

By Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society

We've been trying for a long time to get a national debate going about the place of religion in British society. It took our court case in Bideford to really ignite it.

The initial reaction has been — as we predicted last week — hysterical, misinformed, biased, unbalanced and in some instances downright dishonest. It's been frustrating to see the concept of secularism misrepresented as something sinister and threatening – sometimes through simple ignorance, but more often [deliberately](#) by people who see their privileges threatened.

But as the week has worn on, we have seen a more considered response beginning to emerge. A reaction to the reaction, you might say.

Lady Warsi's speech at the Vatican increased the volume of rhetoric that had followed our High Court victory on Council prayers at Bideford. But the Queen's intervention at Lambeth Palace — apparently a sort of coded and oblique nod in the direction of Lady Warsi — did not set the sirens howling in quite the same way. (I wrote about this on the [Huffington Post blog](#))

We are gathering together many of the articles that give a more balanced view of the secularism debate in our "Media Round-up" feature at the [NSS website](#). If you haven't already explored this reaction, I would certainly recommend you take some time to read the thoughts that are emerging on what secularism means, why secularisation is not the same thing and what both mean for British society.

Unfortunately, the extremity of negative media reaction when there is even a small questioning of religious privilege makes rational debate very difficult. All attempts to talk sensibly about the place of religion in a rapidly changing society result in an enormous chorus of bishops and religious pressure groups claiming "persecution" and "sidelining" and victimisation by "militant secularism".

In the *Times* on Thursday, Ruth Gledhill wrote a commentary in which she claims there is a war between religion and "new atheism". She said that the Church had become "militant" in reaction to the "atheist wars". She seems to be aiming her comments at Richard Dawkins who she said had "succeeded in uniting the faiths" against him.

We should focus on the background fear to this hysteria: the religious establishment is realising that it is fighting a rearguard action. Gledhill says that if the Church had been left alone it would probably have died of its own accord. Now it has arisen "like a lion".

Unfortunately for the Church, even a lion can succumb if it has no food.

In the *Spectator* this week, Lord Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, actually [suggested](#) that Christians should be prepared to die for their faith in the "war against secularism". Such extremism from the former Church of England primate reveals the underlying panic.

The religious press is predictably flooded with a mixture of seething anger and triumphalism. For Baroness Warsi and the Queen each to attest to the importance that religion is to them is presumably a transparent attempt to give the impression that it is important to everyone else.

Richard Dawkins' [comprehensive poll](#) put paid to that hope. As we know from our lived experience, for a substantial majority of people in this country religion has no importance at all.

So it isn't really "militant secularism" that is threatening the Church (indeed, secularism probably represents its only hope of survival). It is a combination of the almost total indifference to its existence among the people of this country and sometimes revulsion at the callous disregard for other people's hopes and dreams: women shall not be part of the hierarchy; loving couples shall not be recognised if they are of the same sex; women shall have no control over their own reproduction if they are Catholic – and if it suits the church to cover up the crimes of its representatives, then a pious justification can be made to do it.

Secularism is simply a way of accepting the reality of modern Britain. The opinion poll from the Richard Dawkins Foundation showed widespread apathy to religion and a majority desire for it not to be involved in the making of public policy – even among many of those who ticked the "Christian" box in the latest Census.

This reality cannot be resisted for ever, and when the Queen makes the unconvincing case for the continuation of the establishment of the Church of England, we should remind her that her own son and heir doesn't agree with her. Prince Charles has vowed to change the Coronation Oath so that he will not promise to be defender of "the faith" but defender of (all) faith. So, the days of the monarchy's special relationship with Anglicanism are surely numbered.

Of course, we at the National Secular Society will continue to campaign for the Coronation Oath not to commit the monarch to any religious allegiance. That is because there is a substantial and growing minority of non-believers in this country, and they will not take kindly to being made second class citizens in the nation's constitutional life.

Unfortunately, it will be some time before the wider arguments about monarchy and a written constitution receive any serious consideration in politics. But when they reach the agenda, we will be there to lead the debate.

Hardline evangelicals seek funding for free school

A controversial evangelical church has announced plans to open a free school in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Jesmond Parish Church will seek Government funding to open a 700-pupil school with a 'Christian ethos' that will be, according to its website, "accepting and respecting students whatever their background, whether of any faith or none".

The church however has a close relationship with the fundamentalist [Christian Institute](#) whose national headquarters are also in Newcastle. Reverend David Holloway, minister of Jesmond Parish Church, is also a Director of the Christian Institute. Both organisations take a strong stance against homosexual practice.

Pat Beesley, a local resident who has contacted his local councillor over the proposals, said "the organisation is known to be overtly homophobic and to take a fundamentalist approach to Christianity. It is appalling that taxpayers' money should go towards funding a school whose aim will be to instil such retrograde values into its students."

Rev Holloway maintains that the Church must be clear on theological absolutes and is well known to gay rights campaigners for his obsessive intolerance of homosexuality on grounds that it is incompatible with the Bible's teachings.

He is also an opponent of Darwin's theory of evolution. In 2002 he [told](#) the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme "what Genesis teaches and mainstream Christians believe is that God caused the world, the world did not cause God."

"There are a range of creationist views, not just one", he added, "but all are united in saying no to atheistic doctrinaire macro-evolutionism, which is the standard fare in many schools."

In a recent [article](#) attacking so called 'militant' secularism, Holloway said: "We need overtly Christian head-teachers and teachers in State Schools working for a new liberalism and trying to initiate children into a heritage of Christian sentiments, beliefs, imaginings, understandings and activities in a truly liberal way."

Jonathan Pryke, Executive Minister of Jesmond Parish Church and a trustee of the Jesmond Trust, said "We've had a vision for Christian education for a long time and the coalition Government want more choice in education." Mr Pryke said the Trust is yet to secure funding for the project, but confirmed it had made an application to the Department for Education for funding that is likely to run into the millions.

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Manager at the National Secular society, said: "[Research](#) already suggests that bullying of gay pupils rises significantly in faith schools. A free school with a 'Christian ethos' as extreme as that of the Jesmond Parish Church could take this to a whole new level. We sincerely hope the Government will refuse to hand over public money to groups with such an extreme religio-political agenda, and would certainly expect them to do so. However, at a time when the Government has positioned itself as guardians of Christianity, such action cannot be taken for granted."

Earlier this year, the Government amended the model funding agreement (which provides the framework within which free schools operate) to ensure views contrary to established scientific and/or historical evidence are not taught in science lessons.

Christian hotel owners fined for refusing to let a gay couple stay

The Christian owners of a private hotel have lost their appeal against a £3,600 fine imposed on them for refusing to allow a gay couple to occupy a double room at Chymorvah House in Marazion, Cornwall, in 2008. The court of appeal unanimously ruled that Peter and Hazelmary Bull acted unlawfully when they cancelled the booking.

The Bulls' appeal was funded by the Christian Institute and they were represented by James Dingemans QC who also represented Bideford in the NSS's [council prayers case](#).

Lady Justice Rafferty said during her judgement: "As I have made plain, I do not consider that the appellants face any difficulty in manifesting their religious beliefs. They are merely prohibited from so doing in the commercial context they have chosen."

At the initial hearing, the Bulls claimed to have a long-standing policy of banning all unmarried couples from sharing a bed – both heterosexual and gay. But the NSS [has evidence](#) that this policy was not applied to one of its own Council members: Dr Ray Newton stayed in a double room at the hotel with his female partner in 2006, and we have seen the evidence from his credit card statement.

As NSS Executive Director [Keith Porteous Wood commented](#) during the original court case, “The argument that this was a private home is undercut by the fact it has a large sign outside proclaiming it to be a hotel”.

After the ruling, John Wadham, the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s legal director, said: “We believe that this case will help people to better understand the law around freedom of religion. When offering a service, people cannot use their beliefs — religious or otherwise — to discriminate against others”. For further coverage of the case, see our articles [here](#) and [here](#).

NSS supports Freedom of Expression Rally

Several members of the NSS Council and several members of staff attended the One Law for All Free Speech rally outside parliament last week. Speaking for the NSS was Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood.

Keith pointed to the decades of neglect in academic institutions in failing to stand up to threats to freedom of expression. He warned about the conflation of race and religion that continues to be exploited by those trying to silence critics by equating any criticism of Islam with so-called Islamophobia and branding it, and critics, as racist.

Keith called on all in academe to recognise the crucial importance of freedom of expression as the bedrock of democracy and a free society and to fight much harder to preserve it. Keith is also concerned about the commitment of the police and CPS to tackle these issues and has experience of them even seeking to prosecute television journalists bravely trying to expose hate speech. His full speech is [here](#) (pdf).

Muslims more successful at enforcing their religion from generation to generation

An academic study by Cardiff University shows that the proportion of adult Muslims actively practising the faith they were brought up in as children was 77%. That compares with 29% of Christians and 65% of other religions.

The study also found that 98% of Muslim children surveyed said they had the religion their parents were brought up in, compared with 62% of Christians and 89% of other religions.

The team analysed data from the Home Office’s 2003 Citizenship Survey data, using 13,988 replies from adults and 1,278 from young people aged 11 to 15.

This higher passing on of religion from generation to generation is, the researchers say, because of a higher involvement in religious organisations. The researchers write: “It is well known that there is considerable supplementary education for Muslim children such as the formal learning of the Qur’an in Arabic. The apparently much higher rates of intergenerational transmission in Muslims and members of other non-Christian non-Muslim religions are certainly worthy of further exploration and may in fact pose a challenge to blanket judgements about the decline of British religion.

“These higher rates might suggest support for the theory that for minority ethnic populations, religion can be an important resource in bolstering a sense of cultural distinctiveness.” Children are sent to madrassas and mosques to be heavily indoctrinated into Islam.

Co-author of the study, Professor Jonathan Scourfield, added: “Muslim children tend to lead busy lives, often attending religious education classes outside school three or more times each week on top of any other commitments they have.

“They typically learn to read the Qur’an in Arabic. They also learn a great deal about their faith from parents and other family members. Religion can have an especially important role for minority communities in keeping together the bonds between families from the same ethnic background.”

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: “When one is raised to believe that a particular religion is your whole identity and this idea is heavily reinforced in childhood by constant indoctrination in mosques and madrassas as well as at home by parents who have been similarly brainwashed, then there is little wonder that most Muslims cannot think outside a religious box.”

Mr Sanderson said that the Christian churches try to use the same techniques and it is why they are so anxious to take control of education.

“Unfortunately for them,” he said, “our society is free and able to explore other avenues and be open to other influences. Muslim societies are very conservative and can deal very severely with anyone who dissents from the central message. When alternatives are assiduously suppressed, there is no wonder that one world view predominates so strongly among Muslims.”

The research paper, entitled ‘Intergenerational transmission of Islam in England and Wales: evidence from the Citizenship Survey’ and Sociology is published by the British Sociological Association.

See also: [Muslim free school proposed for Brighton and Hove](#)

Polish Airline bans display of religious symbols by cabin crews

Conservative MPs in Poland have complained to the national airline LOT that banning staff wearing the Roman Catholic cross on flights is “discriminatory” and “unconstitutional”.

The Polish national airline LOT is under severe pressure from the Catholic Church after it announced that it will ban the display of religious symbols at work by its flight attendants. A statement on the airline’s web site says that “staff are not allowed to wear jewellery in a conspicuous place which shows a religious symbol.”

Conservative MPs Anna Sobecka and Jolanta Szczypińska, are arguing that the ban is unconstitutional and “discriminates against Catholics”.

“Such actions threaten fundamental rights guaranteed by art. 31 of the Polish Constitution, which says that everyone is obliged to respect the freedoms and rights of others,” the MPs write in a letter addressed to the management board of LOT Polish airlines.

Former minister of transport and Law and Justice MP Jerzy Polaczek, told the right-wing *Gazeta Polska* daily: “This scandalous decision [...] is an interference in the freedom of religion”.

But spokesman for LOT airlines, Leszek Chorzewski, said that the ban includes all religious symbols, and not just the cross. “The rules apply to all symbols, including, for example, the Star of David,” he said. He added that the airline carries many thousands of passengers of different faiths each year, and that LOT wants to avoid offence and “unexpected reactions”.

Secularist of the Year: hurry – places filling quickly.

The nominations are in, the decision has been made and the winner will be revealed at our prestigious lunchtime event on Saturday 17 March in central London. Whoever wins the £5,000 Irwin Prize will join a growing list of worthy recipients.

This year the prize will be presented by Nick Cohen, author and journalist, whose new book in defence of free expression (ironically entitled *You Can’t Read this Book*) has had glowing reviews.

If you'd like to join us for this convivial event in glamorous surroundings, tickets are now on sale. A welcome cocktail, a three course meal with tea or coffee and all the entertainment are included in the price of £45 (£15 for students with identification). You can book on-line at www.secularism.org.uk/tickets or by post to NSS (SoY), 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Events

The State, Religion and Education. Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, presented by the Nottingham Secular Society, Friday 24th February, 2012. 7:30pm for 7.45pm prompt start. A rare opportunity to hear one of the UK and Europe's foremost Secular campaigners, at The Nottingham Mechanics, 3, North Sherwood Street, NOTTINGHAM. NG1 4EZ. Members £1. Supporters/visitors £3.

Marlene Dietrich – the world's most glamorous atheist. Terry Sanderson reprises his popular show looking at the life and times of Marlene Dietrich, using generous clips from her movie career, then accessing rare archive newsreel he pays a moving tribute her medal-winning war work as an anti-Nazi during WWII. The show culminates with a screening in full of her fabulous one-woman show recorded in Sweden in 1963 and featuring Burt Bacharach and his orchestra. The evening is presented as a fundraiser for the NSS. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL, Tuesday 28 February 2012, 7.30pm. Tickets £10 from www.secularism.org.uk/tickets.

Defence of human rights at work and elsewhere. Talk by Chris Purnell, barrister and chairman of South Place Ethical Society. Thursday 8th March from 3pm to 5pm at the H.G.Wells Centre, St. Mark's Way (5 minutes walk from Bromley South Station).

NSS speaks out

The High Court decision on council prayers generated an intense national debate that resulted in, we believe, the highest ever media exposure for the NSS. Keith Porteous Wood and President Terry Sanderson picked up the bulk of the opportunities on TV and radio, ably assisted by Campaigns Manager Stephen Evans, Council members Peter Vlachos, Norman Bonney and Ray Newton. Also speaking for us was Dominic Wirdnam of Bristol and Alan Rogers in Wales – and, of course, our honorary associate Evan Harris.

So numerous were the radio and TV appearances, scores of them – including on prestige news shows like *News at Ten*, *PM programme*, *BBC Breakfast TV* – that there simply isn't enough space to list them all here. You can however read some of the newspaper reaction (which included several front page stories) by accessing our Media Round-up feature on the NSS website www.secularism.org.uk.

Keith Porteous Wood will be taking part in a half hour discussion on *All Things Considered* on BBC Radio Wales on Sunday at 08:30.

Letters to Newslines

Please send your letters for publication to letters@secularism.org.uk. We want to publish as many letters as possible, so please keep them brief – **no more than 250 words**. We reserve the right to edit. Opinions expressed in letters are not necessarily those of the NSS. You can also join in live debates on our Facebook page.

From Garry Otton:

Harry Greenway, a former Tory MP and ex-chairman of the National Prayer Breakfast, said: "I trust this ruling will be quickly reversed. If people do not want to attend prayers of this nature, they can stay away instead of meddling and busyboding with other people's beliefs. If they did away with daily prayers in the House of Commons ... there would be a revolution."

The first time anyone 'meddled' or 'busybodied' themselves with the business of religionists by refusing to pray and take a Christian oath in the House of Commons there wasn't a revolution.

Religionist MPs simply refused to let Victorian MP, Charles Bradlaugh take the Parliamentary seat he won for Northampton four times, had him arrested, imprisoned him; then beat him up outside Parliament for trying to get in.

Ed: We are proud of Charles Bradlaugh, who founded the NSS in 1866. The fracas above took place in the 1880s and culminated in him being responsible for The Oaths Act 1888. We heartily recommend the fascinating account of this brilliant man Dare to Stand Alone, the Story of Charles Bradlaugh http://www.amazon.co.uk/Dare-Stand-Alone-Charles-Bradlaugh/dp/0956474306/ref=sr_1_sc_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1329465457&sr=8-1-spell

From Pat Edwards:

I fear that our success in the Council Prayers high court ruling may be rather short-lived and I do hope that the NSS will pursue this issue further. The society was right, in my view, to pursue the discrimination and human rights contentions, giving third place to the legality contention, citing the Local Government Act 1972 S111. It is a simple task to change the latter, and indeed Minister Eric Pickles may now ensure that the New Localism bill, which replaces S111 with a general power of competence for any council activity that is not unlawful, will allow prayers back on the council agenda. Common sense says there should be an exclusion in the Bill for religious activity which I hope the NSS will pursue. In addition, the society should consider appealing against the ruling on the other two contentions.

Congratulations to the campaign team!

Ed. These are highly complex matters and the battle is not yet over!

From Rob Alexander:

“Ministers last night encouraged councils to openly defy a High Court ruling banning public prayers during meetings.” – *Telegraph*, 11 Feb 2012.

Ministers very evidently have no respect for the rule of law, and are determined to ignore the rights of individuals not to kow-tow to religious demands. It is hard to imagine how much lower they could sink in fawning to the religious fanatics in our society.

Very well done to all involved in initiating the judicial review and successfully arguing the case before Mr Justice Ouseley. Let's all resolve to do what we can to maintain the pressure.

From Sheila Kinsella:

Congratulations on the matter of the elimination of prayers from Council Agendas. In Bath we have a little further to go. Every autumn there is an event in The Guildhall entitled 'The Mayor's Call to Prayer' described as a 'community event'. Every new post holder religious or not (mostly not) goes along with this without question. It is really hideous. Our Seat of Government has also hired itself out for 'Alpha Course' sessions, and sold tickets in the Tourist Information Office. I strongly objected and as far as I know this has ceased.

The Vatican visit is scandalous. It is not even as if this scurrilous, regressive institution is bribing them with massive industrial investment on Merseyside, or the Northeast. Are they aware that for The Vatican, to regain control of 'The Dowry of Mary' as Britain is called in Catholic circles, is a long term goal. The historical Protestant Reformation is a mere blip, a temporary interruption to their Christian European Empire, to be reversed ASAP! When I was a child we said prayers in school to this end.

The experiences of the atheist organist are really important, because whereas C of E Parishes and Sunday Schools used to be quite innocuous, teaching kindness and sharing, they are now highly evangelical and riddled with doctrinal issues of salvation. The same used to be said of C of E Schools. Few who attended them ever came out as practising Anglicans, and to be fair the Church never intended that they should, they were just part of the national fabric. This has now changed, with fundamentalist Governors and the strong input of Christian outside resources elbowing into the

curriculum area of Personal and Social Education. Most dangerous are the Christian global corporations such as Oasis headed up as Steve Chalke who having snatched growing numbers of 'academy' contracts also have ambitions to run hospitals too. If the coalition has its way, we may soon find ourselves choosing between Catholic care, Methodist care, Anglican care, Jewish or Muslim care.

From Sharon (name and address supplied):

I'm sure that the NSS will be having its fair share of vilification following the Bideford ruling. But take no notice of them – I just want to say "Thank you"!

I have been a community councillor for over 10 years and still remember vividly attending my first meeting. I was absolutely gobsmacked when everyone stood up and recited the Lord's prayer at the beginning of the meeting. I really felt I had walked into a parallel "Vicar of Dibley" type universe!

I was and indeed am well used to both attending and chairing meetings in both my professional life and as part of a volunteer role that I fulfil. I have never witnessed anyone praying at any other meeting and have never understood why a meeting of community councillors charged with fulfilling civic business should have "Prayers" as No. 1 on the agenda.

I had absolutely no idea what to do about the praying. It felt rude and rather embarrassing to stay sitting when others stood and prayed. It felt really uncomfortable to stand with them and pretend to pray so for many years now I have just always turned up late.

I have absolutely no problem with councillors praying together if they so wish but I firmly believe that this should be done before the start of the agenda/business and that praying should not be on the agenda. I sincerely hope that your campaign will be successful.

From Arthur Summerfield:

I listened and watched BBC coverage of the Bideford result throughout last Friday. Many people were allowed to give their views. But apart from an interview with Clive Bone himself, all items were from those opposing the ruling. We had various traditionalist West Country Councillors, the Bishop of Exeter, and ultimately Eric Pickles. The *Today* programme this morning gave us George Carey, and *Any Questions* delivered Ann Widdecombe. No-one from the atheist persuasion or the NSS was heard.

I would be interested to know whether any of the non-believing community were invited to participate. Surely requests for inclusion were made? Were any such requests rejected, and if so on what grounds? Is the BBC yet again blatantly showing its pro-religion bias?

Ed We circulated our press releases widely, but even for any programme not receiving one, we were the principal party bringing the case and are hardly difficult to contact. We had many complaints such as yours and are in discussions about the best way forward.

From Enda Farrell:

It is good to celebrate the High Court's ruling that Bideford Council acted unlawfully by allowing prayers to be said before Council meetings. In reality it will be a small celebration, because all that has been achieved is the creation of a level playing field. A playing field that should have been levelled a very long time ago.

This uneven playing field has caused so much hurt and suffering, humiliation and abuse, because it was maintained and developed by the very people who today condemn the High Court's ruling because they rightly fear that their unfair, undemocratic, unjustifiable, privilege and influence in our society is coming to an end.

That little bump of privilege, enjoyed for so long by those who felt more equal than others has been flattened, for now. But like a ball of trapped gas it is likely to pop up unexpectedly and without warning and become even more irritating and painful especially if you have unwisely eaten some pickles.

The often heard apoplectic rant, from those living in their ivory towers and directed at us inferior uppity secularists who don't know our place and question the privilege that they have so generously conferred on themselves, arrived in the form of the voice of Lord Carey (Saturday Feb 11 2012) on Radio 4: he had me crying with laughter all the way down the M6, I had to pull into a service station and weep with joy. It was wonderful to hear him plugging his 'book' while trying to justify why the cultural privilege of religion and religionists should be maintained and justifying why his irrational god laws are above the law of the land. Without this privilege people like Lord Carey and other witch doctors would not be able to hob-nob with their respective Royalty and political leaders with the same amount of pomp, gravitas and influence.

By the way, when Lord Carey encouraged Councils to 'continue praying' at Council meetings was he breaking the law by encouraging others to break the law?

From Bill Green:

Further to your recent observation that the [BBC gives Carey an unchallenged platform to spout nonsense](#) I would add a further observation that shows when it comes to religion the BBC either by intention or by design shows how utterly partisan it is.

If you look at the following article <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-16980025> there are almost 1200 comments. A quick skim of them shows that many if not the majority are in favour of the Court's decision. The editor has gone through them marking various comments as 'Picks'. The picks are both for and against the court decision. Many of the ones picked in favour of the decision have lots of pluses from commentators who agree.

However, and this is the point, the ones that appear on the front page as the editors picks are ALL against the Courts decision and interestingly ALL have negative marks against them. Why are some, or even one, if not an equal number for and against also displayed?

The CofE and the religious are an active lobbying group who get more than their fair share of contact with those in power and unduly influence every aspect of life in Britain disproportionately to their worshipping attendees. If this influence was from any other group in society it would lead to arrests and corruption charges. Dodgy handshakes, quiet words in ears, secret meetings all through access in Churches across the land.

This is decidedly unfair and not very British. In fact completely contrary to what the Archbishop is claiming.

From Adam Fowler:

You may have already seen this, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-16995239> "But he [Mr Carey] also said there was "a deliberate attempt by groups like the National Secular Society and others, who are campaigning to get rid of Christianity as a public faith".

Also I heard on Radio 4 that David Cameron is making a show of being outraged at the high court victory. Can I please ask that the NSS remembers that there are Conservative party members like myself who are Atheist and members of the NSS, and who have considered running as a Conservative Councillor who welcome the victory.

There are a great many secular Conservatives in this country, many of whom are also Christians. Can we please point out to people like Mr Carey that secularism is not synonymous with the destruction of religion, just the removal of its various privileges?

Thanks and keep up the good work! May I suggest prayers in school as the next legal challenge (or even better Padres in the cadet forces).

From John Dowdle:

There is talk about allowing “prayers” at Council meetings in a future Localism Act. There is a very simple answer to all of this: hold the “prayers” after the Council meeting has finished. If some people want to spend their time in this way, they can do so without having to inconvenience others who do not wish to do so.

Perhaps now is the time to suggest that a similar procedure should apply in the case of the UK Houses of Parliament. MPs and Peers who do not join in with the opening prayers ritual are disadvantaged in terms of being able to claim seating in the House. Going through an empty ritual before official House proceedings advantages and favours those Members who present themselves as wishing to participate in the Prayers ritual. MPs and Peers who enter their chambers after Prayers have concluded find themselves disadvantaged in terms of the seats remaining available or — even — stair steps they can sit on. It is evident that non-religious MPs and Peers are being discriminated against by this antiquated and outdated ritual which takes place each day before parliamentary proceedings commence.

The empty Prayers ritual at the commencement of proceedings should be dropped in its entirety and time allowed at the end of each parliamentary day for those who wish to remain behind to make such ritualistic utterances together.

As a former local councillor myself, I found the “reflection” time useful for me in that it allowed me time to study those papers which were served late at the Full Council meeting, which ensured I was more fully briefed for the meeting that followed. However, I stood down in 1999 and with email these days it is possible to copy-in all councillors on late papers prior to a Full Council meeting, so the previous “reflection” period is no longer as useful as it was. Therefore, there should be no time-wasting before meetings in future. If people want to spend time on reflecting, let them do it after the meeting has finished – not before the meeting has started. Some of us have better uses for our time.

Incidentally, quite what people are expected to “reflect” upon was never made clear to me. All the councillors I ever knew stood for election in order to engage in public service and to achieve social justice for all in one form or another. We all had ideological preferences but on the question of public service, we were all fully united. After being elected, we all agreed to serve as councillors under the terms of local government Acts of Parliament, which set far higher ethical standards than were ever set for — or achieved by — Members of Parliament.

I sometimes think that the real battle in our society is not just between religion and secularism but — also — between religion and democracy. The insistence that religious interference should come first before democratic considerations at Council meetings should make people think. Is it not obvious that this represents an attempt to elevate irrational religion over, above or before rational democracy — at the least — and that these bogus claims that councillors need some sort of “spiritual” guidance represents a clear affront to councillors’ higher ethical standards?

Every council in the land needs to reject the insulting assumption that untrained and unelected religionists should be able to tell locally elected representatives what to think and what to do. The only people qualified to do that are the councillors’ electors – no one else.

From Monty Dinsdale:

Entering the living room on Sunday morning, I spotted the face of Keith Porteous Wood on the TV screen (BBC rolling news channel). I could not spot, however, the remote control (my wife had wandered off with it) to un-mute the sound. No matter, the subject could only have been one thing

and the thin, angular chap seated next to Keith would clearly not be of the same view. Sound was unnecessary in the circumstances – the look of ‘familiarity-with-the-argument’ mixed with incredulity on Keith’s face was priceless. Bless you, Keith.

From Ian Smith:

Terry Sanderson’s ‘attempt at balancing’ the predictable ‘torrent of abuse, exaggeration, misrepresentation and hysteria from conservative sources’ following the Bideford judgement, was timely, precise and pertinent.

But this incident will surely pale beside the declaration of war implicit in the Ratzinger-Warsi alliance. At first sight an unlikely duo: a female Muslim politician and the Christian world’s top male celibate; yet — given a moment’s reflection — and their compatibility and collusion become clear. The ultimate goal of most religions, and essentially that of Islam and Christianity, is the rule of the theocratic state. European Christianity enjoyed this de facto role in past centuries, and — to its chagrin — has progressively lost it since the spread of rational enlightenment.

In our own day the power and ambition of Islam in this regard have become only too evident. The contemporary spread of this latter ‘faith’ into Europe, and specifically the UK, has sparked and rekindled the embers — long lain dormant — of its native Christianity. ‘We have an ally in religion’, cry the Christians; Islam has put religion back on the media map, and if they can make a noise, so can we. ‘We have useful idiots’, cry the Muslims; and who more useful than the top Theocrat himself!

And, best of all, we all have a common enemy: “militant, aggressive, arrogant secularism!” So let’s sharpen our swords together and do battle, and nobody will notice that we have our own specific agendas ... until God’s trap snaps shut.

From Ray Ward:

I think the Muslim OFSTED inspector who said he wouldn’t be shaking hands with women (*Newsline*, 10 Feb.) may have had Muslim women’s feelings rather than his own in mind. When I lived in Saudi Arabia I found some older women would not shake hands with a man but younger ones would. Of course, if it was own sensibilities at work that would be wrong.

I note also Terry Sanderson’s statement that the assertion that grace before meals may be banned as a result of the council prayers ruling is untrue. Terry is quite right of course, but it raises another issue. I attend three (it used to be four) annual lunches or dinners at which grace is said, and I wish I had the nerve to remain seated when others stand, but I don’t. Yes, I could raise the matter with the organisations involved and ask for the practice to cease, but the other attenders are good friends and I don’t want to risk unpopularity. Any advice?

From Garry Otton:

Today, the morning news on BBC Radio 4 was interrupted by *Thought for the Day* where a cleric accused the National Secular Society of losing the spirit of ‘live and let live’. I’m appalled. Is it not enough we have a disproportionate number of religionists in the media hammering home the lie that religion is being side-lined without our state broadcaster funding a special religious department, calling on former leaders like Lord Carey to put their case on a programme the following day, and devoting a one-sided programme to challenge a High Court ruling that delivered justice to an atheist?

From John Wainwright:

Congratulations to all at the NSS who worked so hard to bring about the Bideford victory – and of course to Clive Bone for bringing the case in the first place! As if that wasn’t enough good news to brighten up a Friday, we were later entertained by the sight of Eric Pickles doing his comedy routine about Britain being a Christian country, about how every last man, woman and child blesses queen

and country in their prayers before bedtime, so what could possibly be wrong with a few more in a council meeting?

I'm sure I'm not alone in thinking it odd that a Tory minister of all people did not rejoice at Mr Justice Ouseley's judgement. Imagine how much councillors' time and taxpayers' money will be saved if this ruling is applied across the country, how many thousands of hours will not be wasted with heads bowed in prayer.

Bideford is not alone in having to fight to keep religion out of politics. In my blogpost (<http://atomies.org/2012/02/11/humanism/never-cut-what-you-can-untie>) I link to a YouTube clip which shows staunch US secularist Mitch Kahle protesting vocally against Pastor Wayne Cordeiro's unconstitutional government-sponsored prayer in Honolulu. Kahle had previously pursued less disruptive means of protest, and had even been manhandled out of a public meeting by citizens outraged that an atheist should be seeking to uphold the US Constitution.

From Jeff Clark:

Baroness Wasi, Conservative co-chairwoman recently stated that religion is being "sidelined, marginalised and downgraded in the public sphere." The Muslim peer said Europe needed to become "more confident and more comfortable in its Christianity." She will introduce this issue in a speech at the Vatican this week.

Amazing from someone adhering to a culture that from the seventh century onwards spread itself mainly through invasion and violence across much of Asia, Africa and Europe. It still continues to insist upon its own cultural and religious superiority whilst so many Islamic countries are busy tearing themselves apart, as for so long did the Christians, in frenzies of religious discord. Guidance from Allah ... anybody?

As for visiting the Pope – will the Baroness be pouring out her grievances surrounded by pottery statues of saints and the alleged virgin? Anathema, are they not, to the religious teachings of her own clergy? I'm sure the Pope, as representing with his One True Religion one of history's greatest impediments to cultural and scientific progress, will be gladdened to receive a little sympathy from the competition, especially if she drops down on one knee out of deference to Him With a Direct Line to Heaven.

On what basis do these arrogant people, Christian or Muslim, imagine they hold any kind of moral sanction? They have little enough support in history no matter how loudly they shout or threaten, which is what, in their time of growing insecurity they appear to be doing.

I have heard no secularist advocating the suppression of religious belief. In fact atheists are generally more tolerant than religious people are with non-believers and with each other. What many of us object to is other people's religious opinions being foisted onto society, mainly through the media with Christianity. This is an age when we ought to celebrate the growth of real world understanding through science and secular education.

The Baroness ought to be high profile on the media condemning the extremist members of her own religious enclave, the hate preachers and addle-headed jihadis who are the real threat to civilised society. Oh, and at whose expense is she travelling to Rome? Not the British public's, I hope!

From Richard Seaton:

Poor old Baroness Warsi; I do feel sorry for her, what with all these horrid aggressive secularists saying nasty things about religionists. And what have they ever done? Just a spot of mass murder, inquisitorial torture (from the IT dept.), hanging, drawing and quartering, burning at the stake, beheading, denying university places, sacking of dons and professors, extraction of tithes, prohibition of birth-control... The list is endless, but all for the noble cause of saving souls. But these

secularists have actually gone so far as using free speech! The pen is indeed mightier than the sword.

From Alan Rogers:

It has just occurred to me that the Great Council Prayers Fuss may be related to a “form of territorial marking”.

The proponents of Prayers during Council business surely cannot believe that the Almighty is interested in street lighting or supermarket planning applications or that [she/he/it] will provide useful advice on these matters. What they are doing is “marking the territory” of Local Government as belonging to their group – fortunately by using a more hygienic method than that employed by other mammals.

It would explain why their outrage is out of all proportion to the consequences of the ruling.

It may also be the reason for the uncharacteristic distaste by religious leaders for charitable funding in the case of hospital chaplaincy. Requiring the tax-payer to provide the pay and expenses of chaplains is a territorial marker for religion in the health service.

From Norman Bonney:

At a reception on 15 February in Lambeth Palace marking the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee the monarch gave royal recognition to Christianity and nine ‘historic faith communities’ and inspected some ‘sacred’ objects of each ‘faith’.

Why some religions are favoured over others remains a mystery. Why should the Baha’i faith with 5,000 adherents recorded in the 2001 census, Jains with 15,000 and Zoroastrians with 4,000 get recognition but Spiritualists with 32,000 and Pagans with 31,000 did not?

Are some religions regarded by the monarch and the Archbishop of Canterbury as being more virtuous and worthy of official recognition by the state church and the monarchy?

Is it not time for all religions to be placed on an equal and free basis and for the state to cease giving official recognition or official role to any religion?

From John Hunt:

W(h)ither the Church of England? Should the C of E archbishops now amend their beliefs, to reflect those of their dwindling flock? Should the Queen also adjust hers, if she is to remain “Supreme Governor of the Church of England”? If the answer to these questions is “no”: then now is surely the time for the C of E to be firmly fully disestablished, and cast adrift, with their faithful adherents, to float or to founder ... however their Lord may please.

From Dave Routledge:

Secularism has certainly been in the news this week. It’s at times like this that the NSS must be extra careful to be representative of its stance, when readers click through to see our side of the story, in particular as an organisation with a presumably very high majority atheist membership. [One article](#) in the *Guardian* referred to the Christian Institute and the NSS as having issued “diametrically opposed responses”.

I don’t think this portrays us well. I was disappointed that the NSS’s report on the Bideford case made no mention of the parts of the case we did not win (such as the violation of human rights question), and I am interested to read some opinion on those aspects. If we indulge in selective reporting, we embark upon party politics, which I feel we should try to avoid if we are to avoid labels such as being the inverse of the Christian Institute. That said, great news on the victory and the impact it has had in the media.

Dave: We wanted to accentuate what we had won on in our report – we linked to the judgment itself which explained (in 27 pages) the whole story, and we only needed to win on one ground to have the practice ruled unlawful. The fact that someone in Comment is Free said we had diametrically opposed opinions to the Christian Institute is not a cause for concern. It's whether our comments were reasonable and truthful. They were. We have been very careful to try to ensure that we are true to our principles in our statements and public appearances. Unfortunately, we have been widely misrepresented by the vested interests that are upset at the Bideford judgment.

From John Dowdle:

In response to the letter from Eric Willoughby in *Newsline* 10 February 2012, concerning a Rabbi who refused to listen to a mixed choir, the simple answer is – find another Rabbi. They are not all the same; the one you picked sounds like a bit of an orthodox cracker.

You should approach a local Reform Synagogue and ask their Rabbi — who could be a woman — to address your meeting. I am sure the Reform Rabbi will be pleased to accommodate your requirements. They are usually supportive of inter-faith events.

From Roger Dinsdale:

The only crumb of comfort that I can find in relation to the Baroness's lecture is that it comes from one who is both Tory and Muslim. Its impact will be lessened thanks to the British public's distrust of the former and its understandable deep distrust of anything connected with Islam. A conspiracy theorist might feel that in attempting to reduce the British public's indifference and antipathy toward one religion, her real objective is to make us more forgiving of another. Fortunately, the British are not enamoured of the idea of submission.

From Will Perry:

I just wondered how much it cost the British tax payer to send Warsi and her Pioustapo on their little love-in Roman holiday with Ratzinger? And I just wondered what the tax payer might have got out of it? I suppose it was nice to have the Baroness out of the country for a few days but other than that....

From Paul Braterman:

Anglican atheist Richard Seaton may be half joking, but fundamentalist entryism into the Church of England is anything but a joke. When, as the result of external events, a moribund organisation suddenly acquires a major asset, it becomes a target for takeover. CofE is such an organisation, successive governments have given them the asset of the "faith school" network, and the result is, predictably, an ongoing campaign by biblical literalist zealots to infiltrate their materials into these schools, regularly concealing their creationist nature.

Teaching Biblical creationism (or its relative, Intelligent Design) as a valid explanation of reality, either in the science classroom or elsewhere, in any publicly funded school in England, is now against official Government policy, but the reality will depend on enforcement, and the British Centre for Science Education would be very interested to learn of examples.

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