

# A New Year when secularism must stand up for itself or be overwhelmed by religious power-seeking

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The signs have been there for some considerable time – religion around the world is reviving, and it is not the benign, let's-be-good-to-each-other kind of religion that the propagandists would have us believe.

It is the old-time, ambitious, politicised, militant and controlling religion. The kind that wants to dictate what you are doing at every minute of every day.

In Britain, the statistics seem to show that interest in organised religion is in continuing decline. This, by those who hold the reins of power, appears to be a signal to help spark its revival.

And so we have politicians telling us that we must return to religious values, bring religion more into the public arena and involve the churches and mosques more and more in our everyday lives.

Mr Cameron's [recent speech](#) has paved the way for a new confidence, particularly among Christians, who are now assuming that they can return to their glory days when the whole of society was under their control. Let us not forget that it is only a few generations ago that the Anglican Church held this country in an iron grip. If you were not an Anglican, many doors were closed to you. You could not become a member of Parliament, you could not go to university and, at one period, if you did not go to church on Sunday [you could be fined](#).

Now the Church of England, a fatally declining institution by any measure, has set its sights on [taking over even more of the education system](#), perhaps even all of it eventually. We are receiving almost daily complaints from parents whose children have been subjected to heavy-duty religious proselytising in their school (most of which are community schools). A whole array of evangelistic groups are worming their way into schools, without parental knowledge or consent, to foist all kinds of absurd ideas onto children, who are, of course, a captive audience.

Over Christmas and New Year, we have seen the establishment assuring us that they are still firmly in charge. The [Queen's Christmas message](#) was one of the most overtly religious yet, with her talk of 'Jesus as the saviour' and the 'messages of the angels'. The Archbishop of Canterbury tried to latch on to the summer riots as a means of assuring us that society is disintegrating and unless we listen to God we're all on our way to hell in a handcart.

The riots that happened last year have provided much fodder for the religious opportunists. The disturbances were [used as evidence](#) by many who think we need a "spiritual" dimension to prop up their otherwise unconvincing message.

Inconveniently for such arguments, Government papers released in from 1982 showed that similar riots had happened then, in the midst of the reign of Margaret Thatcher, and described as the most serious civil disturbances ever seen in peacetime Britain. Even then they had despaired of finding a solution and no doubt the Archbishop at the time was on hand to tell us that unless we went back

to church we'd all be dog meat within a generation.

In fact, the riots in Tottenham and elsewhere last year are not unique. They are part of a long British tradition.

No, Armageddon has not arrived, whatever the [Pope or the bishops try to tell us](#).

Such expressions of frustration break out at regular intervals – and have done for centuries. (See [here](#) and [here](#) for example) and quite often in the past the churches have had a hand in the perpetuating the iniquities that were being protested about.

Mr Cameron's speech about bringing "Christian values" back to the centre of British life was eagerly embraced by those who long once more for control. In an article in the *Daily Telegraph*, the right-wing former bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali, wrote "Much of what Mr Cameron said is music to my ears." Well, it would be. ([Read the whole article](#)). Nazir Ali, like so many other conservatives, longs to drag us back to some ghastly, non-existent "Golden Age" when Christianity ruled the world.

As is usual over Christmas, the newspapers were full of religious propaganda. All balance is tossed out of the window by the editors and commentators. From the *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph* we expect it, but even the *Guardian* starts a constant bark of religious apology. In its Christmas editorial, the paper said: "In the new century's age of uncertainty, the Christian tradition must not be allowed to become the preserve either of fundamentalists or of the right. But that requires progressives who are also atheists to turn down the volume and acknowledge the contribution of Christian thinking. Peace on earth, goodwill to all."

The *Guardian* often publishes these kinds of articles that seek to make a case for the value of Christianity and the case danger of non-belief. (See [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#).) But they do not sit well with the readers. When comments are invited, the below the line sections are full of angry rebuttals. Why does the *Guardian* continue to run these features when they so obviously infuriate so many of its readers?

The upshot of all this may be nothing more than an outburst of right-wing press crowing about the renewed power its hateful philosophy has attained. Or it might be a significant sign that authoritarianism and a reduction of civil liberties will shortly follow.

## Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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