

Council prayers ruling starts national debate

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Media reaction to the judgement on council prayers last week has inevitably been mixed while the public reaction has been strongly supportive of the National Secular Society.

As we predicted, certain newspapers were hostile and at times hysterical. The *Mail* and the *Telegraph* were just about apoplectic and their right-wing columnists went to town on the abuse (See our [Media Round-Up](#)). The NSS was portrayed as "fanatical", "pompous", "despots" and any other insulting epithet you can think of.

But the hostility doesn't seem to be shared by the consumers of that media. It appears our success at the High Court has started a national conversation about secularism – and that can only be a good thing. When there is a comment facility available under these attacks, the popular opinion is overwhelmingly in our favour.

The usual gang of Christian propagandists were, of course, given the lion's share of commercial media space. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey seemed ubiquitous with his familiar cries of persecution. Naturally he perceived our judicial review as an outright attack on the Christian faith, as did the more traditionalist Christians that his response has misled.

But so extreme were his claims that he ended up sounding like some kind of tyrannical theocrat who thinks only Christians are entitled to rights and all lesser mortals must fall into line.

Even the *Independent* wasn't very sympathetic in its reporting, which led one of its readers to write of his disappointment in today's [letter's column](#). Not only was the reporting cursory and one-sided, it wasn't very informative.

The BBC, which has a duty to provide balance, provoked a mass of complaints to the NSS about the all too predictable bias in its coverage.

The Daily Mail gave its front page over to claiming that this was the end of Christianity in Britain and followed this up with a non-story about prayers not being [removed from parliament](#). The *Guardian* editorialised that this could represent the beginning of [disestablishment from the bottom up](#).

Possibly the most disturbing aspect of the reaction is that not a single MP or peer came out to support the judgment. Instead, they appeared content to allow the likes of Eric Pickles and Nadine Dorries to represent the views of our elected representatives.

Support did however come from a surprising source – Times Newspapers.

Because the *Times* and *Sunday Times* are now behind a paywall, we can't link to the stories, but I'm sure they won't mind us bringing these two fine pieces to your attention.

Mr Justice Ouseley has set the cat among the pigeons. He did not find the human rights of Clive Bone, an atheist and former councillor in Bideford, Devon, had been infringed

by having to sit through prayers before the start of council meetings. But he did find local authorities have no powers under the Local Government Act 1972 to hold prayers.

For 40 years, it seems, councils that do so have been breaking the law. The National Secular Society, which brought the case, is cock-a-hoop. The government and the religious establishment are in a spin. Eric Pickles, the communities secretary, has promised to ensure that "public authorities, be it parliament or a parish council, should have the right to say prayers before meetings if they wish". Religious leaders, meanwhile, are gloom-laden.

Lord Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, said the High Court ruling represented "a marginalisation of Christianity". Simon Calvert of the Christian Institute, which backed the council in the proceedings, said: "We are talking about something that has gone on for centuries in a constitutionally Christian country; this outlaws it at a stroke and is another example of the courts siding with an aggressively secularist agenda."

Even other religions were uneasy about the ruling, with Mohammed Shafiq, chief executive of the Ramadhan Foundation, an Islamic group, describing it as "an attack on all faiths".

They should all calm down. Does the saying of prayers have any part to play in the political process, particularly these days? We are a mix of all faiths and none. Mouthing a few words before the formal council business begins is not an act of religious observance. At most it is going through the motions.

The same is true of parliament. The National Secular Society says England and Wales are the only countries in the world where prayers are said before parliament. Does that make our parliamentarians any better or any more moral than those in the rest of the world? You would be hard pressed to prove it. Nor are many people's religious beliefs strengthened by the dose of well-meaning but frequently patronising musings that are delivered in Thought for the Day each morning on Radio 4's Today programme.

It is curious that such a firmly secular country as the United States should be so religious, a lesson that church people here might ponder. Religion has its place in Britain, despite our growing secularity. Some people have strong religious beliefs, many have soft ones, some have none at all. Politics should reflect that. The judge was right. There should not be prayers before council meetings. There should not be prayers before parliament, either.

Then today, *The Times* published this supportive piece from Oliver Kamm:

Christianity, says Lord Carey of Clifton, is under threat. The former Archbishop of Canterbury complained at the weekend of "a deliberate attempt ... to get rid of Christianity as a public faith". Eric Pickles, the Communities Secretary, declares that "Christianity plays an important part in the culture, heritage and fabric of our nation". David Lammy, the Labour MP, claims that aggressive secularism is taking over the UK.

You might infer that Christians in Britain are persecuted. Yet these interventions were sparked by nothing more draconian than a High Court ruling last week that a local authority lacked statutory powers to hold prayers during council meetings. The National

Secular Society, which brought the case, deserves credit for this small blow for constitutionalism and clear thinking about the relation between Church and State.

Lord Carey's complaint hinges on a sly elision of a crucial distinction. No one is objecting to Christianity's status as a public faith: the issue is whether it should be a civic faith. In a free society, it can't be. What binds us is common citizenship under the rule of law, not what any of us happen to believe about a Jewish apocalyptic preacher in first-century Palestine.

The role of government is to defend religious liberty — the freedom of assembly, conscience and worship — while being indifferent to the content of people's beliefs. As Thomas Paine put it in Common Sense: "As to religion, I hold it to be the indispensable duty of all government, to protect all conscientious professors thereof, and I know of no other business which government hath to do therewith."

If municipal politicians find inspiration in prayer, they are at liberty to pray. But it should be in their own time and not interfere with their public duties. Contrary to the claim of an excitable Conservative MP, after the court ruling, that "secularism is a creed, a belief in its own right", it is merely an insistence that there be no religious test for public office. That is an established principle of American constitutionalism, enshrined in Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. It is also a noble part of Britain's history, exemplified in the repeal in 1828 of the Test and Corporation Acts, which had barred non-Anglicans from office.

Mr Pickles's assertions about the historical role of Christianity are a monumental non sequitur: there is no secularist campaign to bar Christians from participating in the nation's affairs. Those who wear a clerical collar do not have to remove it to share the liberties of fellow citizens; but they have no right to a special say. If Mr Pickles wishes to see how other societies do things differently, Iran might profitably be his first port of call. In a free society, there cannot be a civic faith. That is the issue"

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