

NSS rebukes Eric Pickles for claims about “aggressive secularists”

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The National Secular Society has strongly criticised Communities Secretary Eric Pickles, for warning of "violent extremists" and "aggressive secularists" in a speech at Temple Church in London.

The Secretary of State said: "We live in an age of confusion and fear about religion. Violence and conflicts are erupting around the world driven by men who claim to have a monopoly on faith and on piety. Many people are concluding religion is a problem, a relic of a past, [that] it would be much better if it didn't exist."

Mr Pickles also said that "Faith should no longer be treated as a personal hobby which should be for the few."

But Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, pointed out that affiliation to religion has been dropping in Britain for generations. He said that only a minority are affiliated to a religion and that [many view their religion](#) as a personal matter which should be separated from politics.

Mr Sanderson rejected the implication that religion should be for the many, and called it "wholly inappropriate" for a Secretary of State to be proselytising in this way.

Mr Sanderson also criticised the Secretary of State's equating "violent extremism" with "aggressive secularism".

Mr Sanderson said: "Secularism supports religious freedom, respecting people's rights to practise their faith, or change, renounce it, or to have no faith. Secularism protects freedom of conscience. So, Mr Pickles dismissal of 'violent extremists' and 'aggressive secularists' as if they were in any way equivalent demonstrates either a worrying misunderstanding for a Minister of State for matters at the heart of his portfolio or, more likely, a calculated and baseless slur on those who do not share his enthusiasm for the Government's promotion of religion."

Mr Sanderson added: "When Eric Pickles says 'faith should no longer be treated as a personal hobby which should be for the few' he sounds like a proto-theocrat, determined to impose his own views and values, even on to those who don't share them. He is abusing his position in government by pushing his religious enthusiasm into policy-making when research quite clearly shows that the majority of the country don't want it."

Calling for more "religious literacy", Mr Pickles also said a "proper understanding" of religious faith was the best way to stand up to bigotry. Mr Sanderson said that "coming from Mr Pickles, the call for 'religious literacy' sounds more like code for presenting a biased and entirely deferential view of religion."

In keeping with the Government's 'Big Society' agenda, the Communities Secretary described faith groups as a "tremendous force for good" and lauded their role in "serving and supporting the

downtrodden, the marginalised in society, and bringing our different communities together."

Mr Sanderson responded: "Mr Pickles seems to be suggesting that the Government should sponsor religion, as indeed his Department is [doing with a £400,000 giveaway](#) to 'strengthen faith institutions'. He seems to be hankering for a return to Victorian times where the poor were entirely reliant on religious organisations for basic welfare."

A parliamentary bill, backed by Eric Pickles, to give a wide variety of local government bodies [powers to include prayers](#) or "other religious observance" in their official meeting is currently being considered by the House of Lords.

Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has hit out against what he calls "vociferous secularism" in an interview with Premier Christian Radio on Tuesday 3 March 2015. Appearing to confuse atheism and secularism, he said he had a "complex attitude towards faith" and added that he was "always a bit sceptical of anyone who acts with raging certainty about anything."

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