

Here's hoping the European Court can bring an end to this campaign of distortion over religious discrimination

Posted: Tue, 4th Sep 2012 by [Terry Sanderson](#)

In providing one of the few "dissenting voices" in the media discussion of the cases of supposed religious discrimination being heard in the European Court of Human Rights, the most astonishing thing I've noticed has been the success of the propaganda campaign conducted by Christian activists and the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*.

I've just done a round of interviews with radio stations all over the country from Cornwall to Cumbria and almost all of them started the discussion with vox pops from the local shopping centre. It was repeatedly stated by those being asked that "people should be able to wear what they want" and "people should be allowed to wear a religious symbol at work if they want to." Even Robert Piggott, the BBC's religious affairs correspondent, [wrote](#): "It seems likely that, whatever is decided in Strasbourg, Christians will soon be able to wear crosses at work..." giving the distinct impression that they aren't able to at the moment.

The belief is widely shared that there is some sort of generalised "ban" on the wearing of crosses and crucifixes at work while Muslims and Sikhs have *carte blanche* to do whatever they want and wear whatever they want. Even though people know from their own experience that this is not true, they still proclaim it as though it were.

Over the last few years, as the repeated challenges to the equality law from Christian activists have escalated and made their unsuccessful way through the legal system, the propagandists at the Christian Legal Centre and the Christian Institute have found willing allies in the right-wing press to spread their distortions and sometimes outright lies about these cases. The *Mail* and the *Telegraph* have been happy to tell only one side of the story – and in most instances even that has been extremely partial.

It continues even today, as the *Mail* tells the same tired version of events – the one that leaves out anything that might disturb their carefully constructed myth of persecution it has created. It once more gives a platform to the increasingly extreme Lord Carey to display his rather sad paranoia about imaginary attacks on the Christian faith in Britain.

But it works. One of the comments under the story says: "So, who is it that is offended by the display of a crucifix? I am not and I dare say the vast majority of British citizens feel the same."

But this was never about the "display of a crucifix"; it was about wearing jewellery in an inappropriate situation in the workplace. Such a simple concept has been turned into an all-out attack on Christianity by somebody – not sure who.

The cases will be heard in the court today and hopefully a decision about whether the courts in this country correctly interpreted the law will be made soon. Hopefully the court will give full cognisance to all the facts, not just the ones provided by people who want to destroy the equality laws that have brought fairness and justice to vulnerable minorities.

If the claimants lose, the Prime Minister has said that he will change the law to "make it legal" to wear a cross at work. In saying that, Mr Cameron seems as ill-informed as the shopping centre vox poppers. There is no law that bans the wearing of crosses at work.

If he means that he will change the law so that religious symbols can be worn in any circumstances, whether they pose a health and safety risk in the workplace or not, then he will open a can of worms that he might well come to regret.

If, as we hope, these cases are thrown out, we hope that it will draw a line under the foolish legal challenges that have so often brought contempt from judges and tribunals alike.

Regrettably, if they are lost, then the cry of "persecution" will grow ever louder.

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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