

Baroness Warsi needs to be challenged on her theocratic ambitions

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We think it is important to track what the Government is doing in our name, and so we are reproducing below a statement by Baroness Warsi that was published in *The Tablet* this week.

You will remember that Baroness Warsi is the rather elaborately titled "Senior Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Minister for Faith and Communities."

You will also remember that she is not an elected Government Minister. There is absolutely no evidence that a post of "Minister for Faith" is wanted or necessary. On the contrary, recent research showed that 71% of Britons do not want religion and politics to mix and [they don't want religious leaders involved in policy-making](#).

All this talk of Britain being a Christian nation is a fantasy employed by Baroness Warsi and other pious politicians to push forward their own religious agendas.

Warsi says that she thinks it is important for all religions to respect each other and for atheists to respect religions. That's fair enough, but then she goes on to make the familiar claim that religion is under attack and that there are "increasing movements to drive faith from the public square". As usual no convincing evidence is brought forward to support this.

We know that the Government has been at loggerheads with religious bodies on a number of issues in recent years, and we suspect that Baroness Warsi's "Minister for Faith" role has been invented to appease them. She has already had meetings with the Pope, the Archbishops of Westminster and Canterbury and has signed a pact with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation assuring them that that Britain will co-operate on issues of "religious freedom" (a concept that has not been defined, but takes on a sinister hue in relation to the OIC).

Although the Baroness's job may merely be to flatter "faith leaders" with the impression that they are being listened to, we fear such an enthusiast for religious power in politics may still manage to cause irreparable damage before the post is quietly abandoned.

It is always dangerous for governments to become entangled with religions, especially if Baroness Warsi makes extravagant promises to them which are then reneged on in Parliament. The religious leaders will eventually realise that they've been taken for a ride, and their hostility will increase.

It is also ridiculous to invite selected "faith representatives" to Downing Street when such people have constantly been shown not to truly represent the constituencies they claim as their own. They should stop such jamborees and try to get a better cross-section of opinion from people who regard themselves as "of faith". Few of them are the social conservatives that their leaders might have us think.

Where we support Baroness Warsi is in the urgent need to protect religious minorities that are being persecuted by states around the world. (But that does not include Britain— or just about anywhere in Europe).

She manages, in the statement below, to find one country that persecutes Muslims (The Muslim Rohingyas in Burma who are severely mistreated by the Buddhist regime) but she fails to mention that the overwhelming amount of persecution of Christians comes in the main from her own religion, Islam, and in her country of origin, Pakistan.

We hope she will not conveniently try to overlook what I am sure is a painful truth for her – the widespread persecution of Christian minorities in places like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Philippines is by Muslims.

We will be keeping a close eye on this, particularly given her anxiety to align the UK with the OIC.

Here is what Baroness Warsi wrote in *The Tablet*:

Throughout my political career, one of my most important focuses has been to argue that faith should be given a seat at the table in public life. So it felt like divine providence last month when I was appointed Minister for Faith and Communities – an appointment which, quite literally, gives faith a seat at the Cabinet table.

This important role enables me to continue to put faith firmly on the agenda – something I made clear two years ago when I spoke to the Church of England bishops, pledging that our Government, unlike the last, would "do God".

For me "doing God" is simple: it means listening to, valuing and making the most of faith communities at every level; it means acknowledging that Britain is a country with a Christian heritage and a place where faith is an enormous force for good; and it means giving faith not a privileged position, but that of an equal informer of the public debate.

Over the last two years I have stuck to this pledge, most notably when I led the largest UK ministerial delegation to the Holy See for a private audience with the Holy Father. It was there that I made a speech – the first ever by a non-Vatican minister – at the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, calling upon Europe to strengthen its Christian heritage.

I believe the Coalition Government has begun to honour this pledge too. We've given communities the power to open their own Free Schools – and a third of those are faith-based. We've shown that social action and regeneration can be led by faith groups – as scores of "Near Neighbours" projects are doing, supported by the Church Urban Fund and government grants.

We are holding receptions at Downing Street for every major religious festival – and alongside Hannukah, Vaisakhi and Eid we are celebrating the holiest of Christian festivals, Easter. We are ensuring every school has a copy of the King James Bible – not just to mark its 400th anniversary but to give children the chance to discover our religious heritage. And we changed the law to uphold the long-established practice of councils being able to hold prayers before their meetings if they wish. All these policies – and, as I said, this is just the start – amount to one fact: that this Government is confident in supporting faith.

The Prime Minister's decision to appoint a Minister for Faith and Communities is another demonstration of this Government's commitment to faith. And there couldn't be a more crucial time to take on that role. First, we live in an age when our world is more

religious than ever; yet there are increasing movements to drive faith from the public square. Second, anti-faith discrimination is taking place every single day.

This is a bigotry that can only be defeated if those of all faiths and none unite. This means Christians arguing against anti-Muslim hatred; it means Muslims speaking about against the persecution of Catholics; it means atheists arguing that discrimination against any faith is wrong – just as discrimination against those who don't have a faith is wrong too.

As I have said before, an attack on one faith is an attack on all faiths. President Obama made this point at the United Nations last week, when he said that "to be credible, those who condemn that slander [of Islam] must also condemn the hate we see when the image of Jesus Christ is desecrated, churches are destroyed, or the Holocaust is denied."

Third, we are living in uncertain and difficult times, when our nations need all hands to the pump to restore our economies, our societies and our politics. When confronting these issues, faith can offer many interesting ideas.

So when we tackle social breakdown or when we look at the failures in our financial industries, we can be inspired by the remedies of Catholic Social Teaching, or by the principles of Islamic finance. In fact, last month the Archbishop of Westminster spelt out the use of Catholic teachings in restoring faith in business when he addressed a conference of business leaders.

Fourth, questions about freedom of religion have come to the fore at home and abroad. One particular question – about how we reconcile freedom of speech and freedom of religion – has once again been brought into sharp focus due to the gratuitously offensive film *Innocence of Muslims*, and the unjustifiable violence that followed its release.

As the Minister in the Foreign Office responsible for human rights, I have made freedom of religion a priority. Last week I spoke out about the issue at the United Nations General Assembly, making clear that the persecution of people purely for their faith – whether it's Christians in Nigeria or Rohingyas in Burma – is one of the biggest affronts to human rights. I believe my governmental role provides a platform from which to speak out on and tackle this head-on.

These are just some of the issues I have discussed during my conversations with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of Westminster since taking up my role, and these are the issues which make this such an important time to be Minister for Faith and Communities.

I look forward to continuing to confront these issues as I give faith a strong, loud and proud voice at the Cabinet table.

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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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