

# Debate in Parliament on "Christianophobia"

## *Westminster Hall*

***Wednesday 5 December 2007***

**Starting at: Column 255WH**

**NB This is a very condensed extract not necessarily in sequence.**

**Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con):** I have never met a single Muslim, Jew, Sikh or Buddhist, or person of any other faith, who has told me that they object to Christians celebrating Christmas. That they do object is a false, secular-driven proposition, and a divisive one. Indeed, the Muslim Council of Britain said:

“We see no reason for any Muslim to be upset or offended for the celebration of Christmas or any other festival of any faith”. ....

It is also wrong when Christianophobia occurs on university campuses, when Christian groups try to access local government grants and funding or seek to rent public buildings, and in decisions relating to adoption and fostering services. Local, regional or national fundholders and decision makers who are Christianophobic need to stop breaking the spirit of anti-discrimination laws and look beyond Christian labels to see the wider benefits that hundreds of faith groups bring to local communities up and down the nation. In the majority of Britain’s villages, towns and cities, religious faith remains a force for good. ....

My right hon. Friend, as always, makes an excellent point, on which I will touch later. Sometimes the problem arises from a misrepresentation of the Christian faith, or a misunderstanding of what other faith communities perceive Christmas to be. As far as I can see, there is no offence in the minds of people of other faiths and of no faith, unless they are perhaps zealots, humanists and secularists in relation to this country celebrating and commemorating Christian traditions such as Christmas and Easter. What is offensive to people of other faiths is when secularists, society’s liberals and the politically correct brigade use the names of other faith groups as a bogus cover from which to launch attacks on Britain’s Christian traditions and festivals. Not only are those assaults divisive, but they undermine this country’s hard fought for freedoms—important freedoms, such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion. The Government should not allow themselves or their agencies to be intimidated in such a way.

Let me give the Minister more examples from both the private sector and the public sector. In the retail sector, many shoppers find it increasingly difficult to purchase greetings cards that refer to Jesus. My constituent, Mrs. Patricia Smyth of Wellington, Shropshire, has e-mailed me in the last few days to say that, while shopping for her grandchildren, she found that

“there are plenty of Santas and snowmen but nothing to do with the real meaning of Christmas.”

I like Santas and snowmen as well, but I think that we also have to have more about what Christmas is about. Advent calendars are also extremely hard to find. I hope that the British Retail Consortium ensures that its members do not inadvertently fall into the trap of political correctness, but meet the needs and wants of its diverse—including Christian—customer base. Christ has been and always will be at the very heart of Christmas. Without wishing to be irreverent, taking religion out of Christmas is like serving the Christmas turkey without the stuffing. ...

The lack of Government or public consensus on such issues should not be an excuse or the ground for anti-Christian discrimination. Turning to secularists, it is wrong of the anti-Christian lobby, whether atheistic, humanist or secularist, not to afford the level of tolerance to the Christian faith that they rightly demand for their own world view and beliefs or lack of belief.

If the Government and their institutions continue to marginalise the Church, to try to remove it from public life and the public square, and to fail to acknowledge the Christian traditions that have weaved the very fabric of our nation and its heritage, a faith that espouses love and hope may be hijacked by extremist parties that espouse nothing more than hate and despair. According to an e-mail that I received, this week the British National party in Staffordshire despatched a Christmas card—I have not seen it—which portrays the Holy Family on the front cover and inside are the words “Heritage, Tradition and Culture”. Are the Government prepared to stand by and surrender the nation’s Christian heritage and traditions to parties of hate and division? In a cross-party consensus, we cannot allow that to happen.

I call upon the Government to ensure that, henceforth, laws against discrimination on grounds of religious belief will be applied equally to people of all faiths and none, and that those people who profess a Christian faith will not be the exception to the law and will not be marginalised and intentionally hurt. It is time for the dragon of political correctness to be slain, and I invite the Government to take the first body blow in the name of freedom of speech and freedom of religion. I can, however, provide an alternative for the Minister. If the Christian Church is now seen by the Government as a minority, then the Government should declare it so, and then afford Christians full minority rights.

The creative industries also need to be consistent on how they treat religion—in print, online and in the broadcast media. So do the television companies and regulators. Regulators need to ensure that they apply equally the rules and criteria on faith issues in programming. I ask the creative industries to listen carefully to my next comment: the fear of violence from a particular faith group should not be the ground for hand selecting or targeting other faith groups who may choose to protest peacefully.

I hope that the Government will confirm that Government Departments and agencies will recognise and celebrate Christmas. The Government must avoid pandering to a secular minority. I also hope the Minister will put it on the record that Christianity remains a central part of this nation’s heritage. To say the opposite is to polarise communities rather than bring them together. I hope the Minister will also make clear that public bodies and institutions should not discriminate against Christian groups and organisations.

**Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** I agree; unfortunately, it seems that the apologies are all wanted in one direction. That example was one illustration from Northern Ireland of the authorities’ apparent unwillingness to listen to the legitimate protests of Christians who feel that their faith is being put under pressure and attack. Another example that has been given is the public money that went to “Jerry Springer—The Opera” because of falling ticket sales.

In Northern Ireland, one magazine, which claimed to be an arts magazine, went round various churches in Belfast. It attended the church service that I would go to on a Sunday, where committed Christians bring people who are excluded from society because of their disabilities to church on a Sunday. They will take them to their homes beforehand for a meal. Many of those people are mentally disabled and many are physically disabled. In the interest of art, that magazine mocked those attending the church, using terms such as “imbeciles” and “the lame”, and expected to receive public money. When I opposed that money, I received some amazing hate mail, including some from people living as far away as London, saying that that was censorship of the worst kind. That is despite the fact, of course, that if Christians had said such things about other groups, there would have been a massive outcry.

Some local councils, Government Departments and schools have tried to suppress references to the festival that we will celebrate in a few weeks’ time: Christmas. The “Christ” in Christmas appears to cause offence. Other religions have not said that it is offensive. However, we live in an increasingly aggressively secular society in which some wish to make Christianity a private matter and to ensure that it is not manifested publicly, despite the fact that this remains a predominately Christian country. If those people get away with that, this country will be the poorer for it.

We have heard already about the contribution that the public face of Christianity has made to shaping this nation and to ensuring social justice. About six months ago, there was a huge protest by Christians outside Parliament. They feel that the Government increasingly lend their ears to those in the secular community who wish to promote secularism aggressively and introduce laws that will make Britain a more secular nation and erode Christian traditions. The Minister will deny it, but that is increasingly the perception of many from the Christian tradition. Laws and public policy tend to be directed towards secularism, and the country will find itself poorer for that. The laws that go through Parliament will reflect that increasing secularisation and, perhaps, a straying away from some of the guidelines laid down by Christian tradition. ...

It is a great pity to see the Labour party become more secular. In its early days, many in the party were led to undertake massive social reform by their Methodist tradition, faith and beliefs. As the party has become more secular and listened to the secular tradition, bad and regressive law has been made, ranging from the 24-hour drinking law to the gambling law. Those laws hurt the vulnerable in society. That is an indication that there is little willingness in the Government and their party to listen to the warning that Christianity would give. The poor and vulnerable should be protected, rather than exposed to such things.

**Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP):** Does my hon. Friend hope that the son of the manse will sit back and make changes?

**Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con):** Christianophobia therefore exists to some degree at the margins, although this is not the only country to face the problem. My second question, however, is whether that matters to the Christian faith. In itself, it does not. I say that because the Christian faith has faced much more serious attacks than the odd rant from secular or humanist groups in British society. ...

Secularists would point out, if there were any here, that the House of Commons and the House of Lords begin their sittings each day with prayer; that at the conclusion of the Queen's Speech the Queen calls for the "blessing of Almighty God" on the efforts of Parliament; that 26 bishops still sit in the House of Lords; that there is religious worship—predominantly Christian—in schools; and that that is all evidence of Christian heritage remaining strong in modern society.....

That Christianity has a pre-eminent position in British life in comparison to other religions is not wrong. It is not a case of equality. Of course, the practice of all religions should be free, fair and equal, but that Christianity is pre-eminent is not through any attack on equality; it is an acknowledgment of its role in creating the tolerant, free and democratic society that we all enjoy. If we lose that, will it damage the Church and affect the faith of millions in Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour? No, it will not. The nation, however, would lose far more in terms of what the Christian faith can contribute to the life of the nation, to its civic society, its voluntary groups, or anything else. The Church does not need contemporary Britain, but does contemporary Britain need the Church? You bet it does.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Parmjit Dhandu):**

..... I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for raising these issues on many occasions. He made some interesting points. From conversations that I have had, I believe that the Christian faith is alive and well. Certainly those of the Catholic faith say that their numbers have swelled in recent years, not least due to Polish migration to this country. I welcome what the hon. Gentleman said about Muslim groups and their comments, including those of the Muslim Council of Britain, about Christian issues and how we should all be celebrating events.

The hon. Gentleman briefly mentioned adoption. I disagree with him slightly. I talked about adoption policy when I was an Education Minister. I strongly believe that, while respecting all faiths, it is important to respect the rights of gay people to adopt. I think that that was what he was alluding to, but I will not go down that path because it is a policy area for another debate.

A couple of hon. Members mentioned “Jerry Springer—The Opera” and the problems and controversy that it caused. As much as anything else, I wonder whether that controversy was more down to the fact that it was just not a very good play.

**[Intervention recorded to show context for Minister’s remarks] Mark Pritchard:** For the record, I was not alluding to the issue that the Minister suggested. I want to make it explicit that I was talking about some Christians feeling that, in some circumstances, they are discriminated against by some local authorities with regard to the adoption and fostering of children.

**Mr. Dhanda:** That is a fair point. I know that there is an issue relating to faith-based adoption companies at a local level.

..... The hon. Gentleman also spoke about the local contribution of faiths, particularly the Christian faith. The Government very much support faith-based regeneration. He talked about the Make Poverty History and drop the debt campaigns. Members of Parliament have seen those faith-based campaigns making a huge difference over the past few years. They show the Christian faith at its very best, delivering on the ground to make a difference not only in this country, but worldwide.

Many view the UK as an increasingly secular society. However, we must remember that the Christian Churches have had an immense and historic influence in shaping our society, and that they make significant contributions in a wide range of areas, including community development, education, social inclusion and heritage. I fully recognise the central, historical and cultural significance of Christianity in our country’s story. We should all be aware of that and celebrate the fact. The UK has a strong tradition of respect for others, justice, the right to freedom, the right to belief, and a strong sense of right and wrong. The Christian tradition has had a significant impact on the way in which those freedoms and traditions have been shaped, and that continues today through its role in contributing to and shaping Government policy.

As I said, I work closely with faith-based organisations. Later this month, we will be launching our inter-faith strategy, which is about strengthening the role of faith in all localities and communities. The Christian faith will be a key player. I make that commitment to the House and to all faiths in our land.

In the short time left, may I conclude where I started? I wish everybody a very merry Christmas.