

# Blasphemy law returns with a vengeance

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### Religiously aggravated sentences more draconian than blasphemy

The National Secular Society said today that the blasphemy laws had been reintroduced by the back door after a Manchester man was [convicted](#) at Liverpool Crown Court on Wednesday of causing “religiously aggravated intentional harassment, alarm or distress”.

Harry Taylor left anti-religious cartoons and other material he had cut from newspapers and magazines in the prayer room of John Lennon airport in Liverpool. He did this as an act of provocation because he says he regards himself as a militant atheist.

He is now on bail awaiting sentencing – religiously aggravated offences carry a potential seven-year prison term.

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: “This is a disgraceful verdict, but an inevitable one under this pernicious law. It seems incredible in the 21st century that you might be sent to prison because someone is ‘offended’ by your views on their religion. The blasphemy law was abolished three years ago, but it lives on under the guise of religiously aggravated offences and is several times more dangerous.”

Mr Sanderson said that Harry Taylor had shown the NSS the pictures that had caused the chaplain at the airport to say in court that she had been “insulted, deeply offended and alarmed” when she found the bits of paper in the prayer room.

“The cuttings were all from publications that could be bought from any mainstream newsagent: cartoons from Private Eye and scraps of paper cut from various newspapers that were mildly anti-religious in nature. There was nothing obscene or threatening about them. I can see how a religious person could be offended, but not “alarmed”. Offending someone should not justify a prison sentence, far less one of seven years. The chaplain could simply have thrown the material in the bin.”

This verdict will open the floodgates for religious zealots to secure prosecutions over the most trivial matters. Expressing atheist views should be no more against the law than expressing Christian or Islamic views and freedom of expression should be cherished, not penalised harshly as this law does. The maximum sentence for religiously aggravated offences is draconian.”

Mr Sanderson commented: “Mr Taylor struck me as slightly eccentric and he acted in a provocative way, challenging the necessity for the prayer room. He didn’t cause any damage and he didn’t harm anything, nor was he threatening or abusive. Yet he might still end up behind bars because some Christian has decided they are offended. In a multicultural society, none of us should have the legal right not to be offended. This law needs to be re-examined urgently.”