

Council prayer case will bring much abuse on to the head of the NSS

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As we contemplate the implications of the High Court decision that the saying of prayers as part of local council business is illegal, the National Secular Society is bracing for an absolute torrent of abuse, exaggeration, misrepresentation and hysteria from conservative sources.

There will be a repeat of the usual accusations that we have destroyed Christianity in Britain, trampled religious freedom, taken away the right to pray, discriminated against believers, hijacked the judicial system etc., etc. Already James Dingemans QC, who acted for Bideford Council, has said: "The Coronation Oath would need to be abolished; the council's involvement in services of remembrance would be prevented; and chaplains would not be able to serve in HM Armed Forces."

So, in anticipation of all this predictable stuff — which will flood the *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph* — here are a few attempts at balancing the reaction.

1. Nobody will be stopped from praying. The only restriction will be on *when* they pray. Councillors who want to can still get together before the meeting and make their invocations. Otherwise, councils are secular institutions engaged in civic business, they are not churches, and prayers cannot be part of their official agenda.
2. This is a ruling about a breach of the Local Government Act. It applies therefore only to local government. Silly claims that the Coronation Oath will be illegal and prayers in Parliament will have to cease — and even that councillors will be banned from attending Remembrance Day Services — and even, as was claimed by one prominent evangelical Christian at the Oxford Union yesterday, that the saying of grace before meals will be outlawed — are all untrue.
3. Religious liberty is in no way compromised by this ruling. Everyone in this country is free to practise a religion in any way they want to — within the law. As this judgment shows, praying as part of council business is *not* within the law. Of course, if councillors want to pray during their duties, they can do it silently and who could stop them? Surely if a prayer is to an omnipotent God, it would be just as effective inside the head as one that is spoken? The problem comes from the way the phrase "religious freedom" has been redefined by the churches to mean not only that they are free to worship according to their lights, but that they are entitled to privilege and to impose their beliefs on others.
4. Studies show that huge numbers of people in this country have no religion, don't want any religion and, increasingly, are hostile to religion. Why — as a condition of serving their community — should they be forced to participate in an activity that goes against their conscience?
5. Members of other religions are also increasingly participating in our local democracies. We can no longer insist that only Christian prayers are said and, as we have seen in Portsmouth, attempts at multi-faith prayers can result in believers of other religions walking out because they don't want to participate. This could be catastrophic for community relations and is completely avoidable if prayers are said voluntarily away from the council chamber.

None of this will stop the Christian Institute and the Christian Concern people making outlandish claims about their religion being brutally murdered by heartless secularists.

But these same people will have to accept that not everyone is a Christian, not everyone wants to be a Christian and their selfish demands for Christianity to have special privileges sound more and more arrogant.

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Terry Sanderson is 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. You can follow Terry on Twitter [@TerrySanderson4](#)

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