

The spectre of militant secularism

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At the weekend, I was honoured to award the [Secularist of the Year prize](#) to Peter Tatchell on behalf of the National Secular Society. From the stage, I looked across the restaurant where the celebratory lunch was held and saw only intelligent, polite people (if by that stage of the proceedings, intelligent, polite and slightly tipsy people). I had to break the news to them that according to respectable society they were fanatics; the moral equivalents of religious bigots. On the one hand, conventional commentators held, there were Islamist militants who slaughtered without compunction, Jewish Orthodox militants who persecuted freethinking women, Hindu nationalist militants who drove artists out of India, African Christians who murdered homosexuals, Protestant militants who attacked Catholic homes in Belfast, and Catholic militants who responded in kind.

On the other hand, there were 'militant secularists', who... well, what? No one can say.

'Militant secularist' has become the 'neo-con' of the 2010s: a know-nothing label that signifies extremism, without explaining where the extremism lies. Radio 4 broadcasters prove that their bias is not always squishy liberal by allowing the religious to denounce the supposed militancy of their critics, without allowing the critics to reply. Like the small-c conservative columnists in the broadsheets, they forget to tell you what is 'militant' about 'militant secularism' because if they did, they would expose their own fatuity.

Militant secularism or atheism has a specific meaning. From the Jacobins through to the communists, militants murdered priests or sent them to camps, and destroyed churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. Militant secularism still exists in communist China and North Korea. I and every other British secularist I know oppose it because we believe in freedom of religion and freedom from religion.

A reasonable principle to hold? Not according to polite society. The request for 'freedom from religion' causes it to forget what few manners it possesses.

In [this morning's Telegraph](#) the Bishop of Oxford says the Church of England wants the taxpayer to pay for at least 200 new primary and secondary schools to combat the influence of secularism. Notice that the bishop does not say that he wants to combat secularism by proselytising his religion, winning converts and engaging in the free arguments of a democratic society. He must know that that game is up. The Economist [reports](#) that the number of regular worshippers in the Church of England will have fallen to 680,000 by 2020, down from about 800,000 now and just under 1 million a decade ago. This is a pathetic position to be in for a church which wants to maintain unelected bishops in the House of Lords and keep Elizabeth II as a queen/priest — head of state and head of the state church. Knowing it is losing the battle of ideas among adults, the church wants to indoctrinate children.

If it were the moderate Anglican church of my youth, I would object less. But, the Economist continues, as mainstream Anglicanism withers, the evangelicals are taking over. Its new generation of clerics 'make it clear they wish to work in large evangelical churches, ripe for American-style mission, rather than in slums or charming villages where social views are relaxed and doctrinal purity is not prized'.

Secularists want to separate church and state, as the not noticeably militant French and Americans do. We oppose the division of children on sectarian lines, which often mean racial lines as well. We despair of a supposedly PC liberal establishment that will ignore the subjugation of women, when subjugation is conducted in the name of a god or gods. Anne-Marie Waters, one of the leaders of the campaign against Sharia law, put it well last week when [she mocked](#) middle-class women, who said in effect:

"We are feminists. We are incredibly right-on. We read the Guardian. We disapprove of women's breasts getting a public airing and we strongly object to the fact that boards of directors are not 50% female. We will go absolutely ballistic if anyone dare understate how vile domestic violence is, or attempt in any way to justify it. We are feminists you see. Oh, but only when it comes to white women — did we mention that?"

Does that mean that a spectre is haunting Britain — the spectre of militant secularism?

If you still believe it does, I can attempt to persuade you to change your mind with one prediction. If you turn on the news tonight and hear of a bomber slaughtering civilians anywhere from Nigeria to the London Underground, I can reassure you of one point: the bombers will not be readers of Richard Dawkins.

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