

Religious people should recognise that secularism benefits them, too

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The outcry against not having prayers during council meetings is presented as some huge attack against Christianity. But this misses the point. Even Baroness Warsi, Minister without Portfolio, waded in and lectured the Pope and his cardinals that they had to do more and referred to those advocating secularism as being 'radical' and that they were allowing 'aggressive secularism by stealth'.

Had they sat through many council meetings, especially budget ones which I have for over 22 years, the problem would be clearly seen. And it is the hypocrisy of prayer versus politics which cannot be overstated.

That to me is the objection, not because prayers are religious. To be preached at at the start of council meetings about 'working for the good of your city', that you should 'seek religious guidance', 'decisions to be made in the interests of every one', 'responsible decisions', 'no politics should take part in decision making' – these are just a few quotes from memory.

After which it's then down to elected councillors to make decisions many of them very unpleasant and not what most got elected to do. For me it meant personally that prayers and politics did not go together. How can, for example, closing elderly persons' homes, making hundreds of people redundant, cutting Adult Care, increasing Adult charges, imposing Personal Budgets or cutting road safety work be working for the 'good of your city'?

In Leicester, where I live, there is no tradition of having prayers at the start of council meetings, contrary to certain headlines. It only started in 1997 and in my year as Lord Mayor 2005/6 there were no prayers said at my request. No one questioned that or even commented on it. So what's different today?

Take for example a recent [Panorama programme](#) showing US Republican candidates at a hustings meeting, all 'God-fearing people'. When asked the question, did they condone a terminally ill person being refused medical treatment because they could not afford the bill, all refused to answer: not one would say such would be morally wrong.

Indeed, the audience cheers when the moderator asks "So we should just let him die?"

History has shown where some politicians seeking guidance from God takes them. Look back at the President of the Confederate States of America Jefferson Davis's stand on defending slavery 'because in the good book it says be kind to slaves', or in more recent times Tony Blair waging war in Iraq. It is frightening. The list of examples in history is endless.

I do not believe that religion is under attack. Indeed I believe the only guarantee of religious freedom anywhere in the world is in a secular society. Where there is no secularism religious groups fight for dominance. The separation of the state and religion is not a new idea. The Labour Party is actually a secular organisation.

I will leave a thought with readers. In the future it's possible that the drive for more faith and religious schools will actually lead to a growth of sectarianism in politics as future generations are empowered by their independence.

The UK is a diverse society; a secular political system allows us all to develop equally in peace and fairness. There is no stealth or aggressive or radical behaviour here. Those practising religion should show tolerance and more understanding and recognise the benefits that go with living in a secular society.

(Mary Draycott joined the Labour Party in 1976; she was elected to Leicestershire County Council in 1989-96 and Leicester City Council 1991-2011. She was appointed Lord Mayor of Leicester 2005/6.)

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