

NSS President's Seasonal Message

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As we prepare for the holiday, it's a good time to reflect on the year past, and to assess our triumphs and failures, and to look forward to the year to come.

We've had a positive avalanche of statistics this year trying to fathom the extent of religious belief and adherence in Britain and around the world.

The interest was sparked, of course, by the increasing prominence of religious voices in public debate and the rise in aggressive religious demands. Sometimes these demands are simply made through the proper democratic channels of debate, sometimes they are made with threats, menaces, bombs and bullets.

The upheaval in the Middle East which started out so optimistically now has a dark shadow of Islamist tyranny hanging over it. One dictatorship, it seems, has been changed for another in Egypt. In Syria, the battle to depose a despot is rapidly turning into a war for religious dominance.

Christians and other minority religions live in fear of the fight against Assad coming to an end. They know it is at that point that their own persecution will begin.

And if religion can drive people insane, it seems to have made the whole of Pakistan in to one great asylum. The Islamist terrorists who are coming to dominate the country commit one grotesque outrage after another. Blasphemy law claims victim after victim – and an alarming number of them are Christians. This gives the impression that blasphemy law is just another weapon with which to beat religious minorities.

Malala Yousafzai, a young girl who simply wanted an education, was shot in the head by Islamists who are determined that women will remain illiterate and chained to their homes as slaves and vassals. I am proud that Britain offered her fine medical treatment and a safe haven.

Now we hear that five women who worked to eradicate polio among the poor and wretched in Pakistan have been murdered by the same kind of religious maniacs who justify their rampage with Koranic verses.

This is certainly true in Saudi Arabia, a theocratic dictatorship of such brutality, that all organised dissent was eradicated years ago. Its international ambitions, though, manifest themselves in the financing of mosques and religious institutions that provide cover for dangerous extremists all over the world. A small light in this nightmare came earlier this year when one brave young woman refused to be bullied into conformity when the notorious religious police objected to the way she was dressed. The young woman berated the policemen and recorded the confrontation on her phone. It was soon up on Youtube, but nothing has been heard of her since.

The American presidential election this year taught conservative religious leaders a long-overdue lesson – that their message of hate and intolerance is losing its power. The Catholic Church in particular grew arrogant and over-politicised, presenting a direct challenge to the President's plans for a national health insurance plan. They threw their might behind a campaign to defeat Obama, but their might turned out not to be as mighty as they thought.

And the Republicans' domination by the Protestant religious right also took a knock in the same election.

Nearer to home we have, for the first time in generations, a serious questioning of the Church of England's role in our constitution. After it failed to legalise women bishops and it challenged the Government's plans to legalise same-sex marriage, questions were asked in parliament about the legitimacy of its establishment as the state religion.

Poll after poll showed that religious adherence in this country is dropping like a stone. The Church, in its own defence, constantly waved the results of the 2001 census in our face, telling us that 72% of Britons are Christians.

But that weapon was taken out of their hands when the 2011 census showed that this figure had fallen to 59%. And even that was questionable given the leading wording of the census question.

The number of people who say they have no religion rose to 25%, far outstripping all the minority religious groups put together. And yet still we see an inordinate amount of attention heaped on the "faith leaders".

We even now have a "Minister for Faith" in the shape of Baroness Warsi. It is a position which allows her to continue to peddle the fiction that Britain is a religious country and that she is going to champion the interests of the "faith communities" as important voices in public policy-making. This is in complete denial of the facts.

She was particularly miffed when the NSS succeeded in winning a High Court action declaring prayers as part of council meetings to be illegal. It was a victory that put the question of secularism right at the top of the political agenda for a while. Even the Queen was moved to defend the Church's establishment in the face of our attack.

But then the pious Communities Minister, Eric Pickles, came up with what he regarded as a solution to the "secularism problem" when he unilaterally declared that the court's judgment was null and void because he had brought in the Localism Act.

Again, it was an entirely untested claim and, according to legal opinion we sought, did not give local authorities the powers to reinstate prayers on to their agendas as Mr Pickles stated. But he succeeded in muddying the waters, which was his aim.

The Prime Minister, David Cameron, seems an unlikely ally in the fight for social progress, but I suspect he has one eye on what happened in America and realises that the wind is not blowing in favour of traditional Conservatism (although his backbenchers huff and puff enough to cause a cyclone). He is a pragmatic politician who is not driven by an unquestioning attachment to theological considerations. He also sees that the Church of England and the Catholic Church have made a catastrophic mistake of swinging to the right, when the nation is headed in the other direction. Both have overstated their case and will pay the price in further losses of adherents.

Our constant campaigning against religious privilege and against Establishment has certainly put the Church of England on the back foot. When the census results were announced, and the NSS was widely quoted in the media questioning the continuation of the established church in the face of such a massive rejection, Church House went on the attack.

Maybe in an effort to distract attention from the glaring truth of the statistics, it tried to undermine the NSS's contribution to the debate by issuing a sneering press release directly attacking us. But such tactics are a sure indication that the Church of England now sees the NSS as a real threat.

But let us assure them that our threat is not to the Anglican Church (which is doing quite a good job of destroying itself, anyway), but to the idea of any church being established by law.

If the CofE relinquished its privileged status, it might find that it would be free to revive itself in a free market of faith. After all, the USA forbids the establishment of any religion and religion is far more vigorous there than it is here.

As it is, with the present flight from religion in Britain, it is sure and certain that the Church of England will be dead in a couple of generations, anyway.

As you can see from this – which is only the tip of a very big and constantly shifting iceberg – the topic of secularism is on the rise. We need to be on the front line of the debate, we need to be a force to be reckoned with. And we can only be that if we can show much more support.

It is important that, if you support our principles, you join us. We know that tens of thousands of people read our weekly [Newsline](#) and tens of thousands more regularly visit our website. If only those people would commit to their principles and join the NSS, we really would be a force to be reckoned with.

If you are already a member, then please [renew your annual subscription](#) — due in January — now (please note, if you joined after September 2012, your subscription is valid through the coming year, and if you have a standing order then you can ignore this request.).

We look forward to an eventful and successful 2013. And we hope you'll be with us to fight the best of all fights – for freedom and equality for all.

Season's greetings to all

Terry Sanderson, President, National Secular Society

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was 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.

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