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Editorial by Terry Sanderson

**Every person in Britain who values the secular nature of our society will be alarmed and, indeed, frightened, by a publication this week from the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR). Entitled *Faith in the Nation*, it is a collection of essays by “senior faith leaders” which begins with a foreword by the Prime Minister Gordon Brown.**

Mr Brown, like most of the other contributors, invokes the census figures as his starting point, which enables him to assert: “One message comes across clearly and consistently: that religious belief will continue to be an important component of our shared British identity as it evolves, and that British society can and does draw strength from its diverse faith communities.” This is the first of many lies and dissemblings in this book.

The British people do not gain their values from religion. Last week we reported the latest Eurobarometer poll which showed that Europeans rank religion last in their list of personal values. Only 7% thought it personally important to them. When asked what values the EU represented, the citizens of Europe placed Religion last at 3%. When asked what made them happy, only 9% cited religion.

This increasingly disseminated idea that religion is really important to the populace is an outright lie. The churches remain mostly empty, attendances continue to fall, poll after poll shows that people do not support the churches and, in fact, live their lives in complete defiance of church teachings.

None of this stops the editors of this dangerously misleading volume from concluding: “The growth of religion in Britain and across the globe is in stark contrast to most of the predictions made in the 1960s by sociologists, the majority of whom foresaw the inexorable decline of religion. The opposite has happened: there has been a sharp rise in religious affiliations, practices and beliefs.”

There has been no such thing. Not in Britain, anyway. And not in Europe. And once you get past the propaganda, the only ideological or religious group growing in the USA is [non-believers](#).

And it is telling that not one of the secularists who are constantly under fire throughout the book is asked for an opinion. This is a book that seeks to “start a debate” but has only one point of view.

Among those “senior faith leaders” contributing is Dr John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York. He starts off with the usual meaningless waffle: “The Church of England must once again be a beacon by which the people of England can orientate themselves in an unknown ocean.”

Leaving such inflated drivel aside, he then goes on to make the extraordinary claim that the Church of England is not an irrelevant anachronism (which it quite obviously is) and should be promoted to become some kind of giant social service centre that would serve believer and non-believer alike. “The Church of England should be open for use by people of any religion or none, like a hospital.” But why should a Church be providing services that should rightly be completely secular? Believers can work within a secular welfare framework, just as well as they can within a

religious one.

Sentamu rather unsurprisingly continues: “There is little doubt in my mind that a place exists for an established Church serving our nation. From church schools to funerals, from interfaith work to state occasions, from speaking out for the marginalised to ministering to the sick, the Church plays a vital daily role in the operation of our nation.” Oh really? What exactly is “vital” about anything the Church does? All the things he mentions are being done very well by others outside of religion.

Sentamu’s vested interest infuses everything that he writes, and causes him to say things that are not only untrue but, on objective examination, ludicrous.

Then comes Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. His contribution to *Faith in the Nation* explores the undoubted tension between religion and secularism in this country. He says it has resulted in the worst possible outcome – a “liberal society” which is devoid of morality. Once more the Cardinal wheels out his favourite enemies: “aggressive atheists” and “militant secularists”.

He has the grace to admit that religious absolutism often leads to injustice: “There is no denying that too absolutist an approach to ethical problems leads to intolerance. But as the ongoing debate about faith schools has demonstrated, the intolerance of liberal sceptics can be as repressive as the intolerance of religious believers.”

Notice the nice little segue in which he rather unsubtly transfers the bigotry of the Catholic Church on to the shoulders of secularists? There are perfectly good and justifiable reasons to oppose faith schools. There is no comparison between the secularist desire for an inclusive education system and a Catholic wish to deny other people their human rights because of the claimed “religious conscience” of nasty and dogmatic old men.

And look at this little bit of dissembling: “The vocal minority who argue that religion has no role in modern British society portray Catholic teaching on the family as prejudiced and intolerant to those pursuing alternatives. Catholic teaching is clear that all unjust discrimination is wrong, but this teaching cannot accept the relativistic acceptance that all approaches are equivalent. British society champions tolerance and freedom, but that freedom is dependent on responsibility.”

So, unjust discrimination is wrong, unless, that is, it is practised by Catholics. Then it becomes “defending the family” or “standing up for traditional values”. This kind of double-speak infuses the whole book.

What the Cardinal and the Archbishop fail to mention is that Christians are [voting with their feet](#). They can’t abide the authoritarianism that Murphy O’Connor represents. Mass attendance is in freefall, Catholics disregard Church teaching on contraception, abortion, homosexuality, stem cell research and all the other things that obsess Ratzinger in Rome. If the Catholic Church chooses to set itself against the will of the people, then it will have to accept that those people will simply walk away.

Murphy O’Connor says “Catholics are not alone in watching with dismay as the liberal society shows signs of degenerating into the libertine society.” Is this the same man who stayed silent when he discovered that one of his priests was a serial child abuser? The one who allowed that same priest to move from parish to parish where he continued to abuse children – even though the Cardinal knew all about it? [Read the story here](#), and then wonder, as I do, why the BBC so suddenly dropped its investigation.

We need no lessons in morality from a man like Murphy O’Connor. If libertinism is rampant in

society, then its most sordid face can be found within the Catholic Church.

But even so, the *Times* tells us: “Government advisers and MPs have woken up to the faith implications of immigration. They have accepted that the decline of religious belief predicted by secularists and many church leaders at the end of the 20th century has not happened. Religion has become more significant than ever in recent history.”

I repeat: the secular, inclusive nature of our society has never been in such peril. And these lies go unchallenged in the media and by those who still labour under the impression that powerful religion is a desirable thing.

[Printed versions of this booklet are available here](#)

See also:

[Faith cannot be denied a voice](#)

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