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Reacting to the first speech by the Pope in the grounds of Holyrood House, Edinburgh, Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said:

“The Pope is hardly off the plane before he launches his first attack on secularism (or the ‘new aggressive form of secularism’) as a threat to the power that he feels should be his alone to wield. Despite the declines in mass attendance in most of Europe, the Pope is working hard behind the scenes to increase his Church’s power over democratic institutions, especially the EU.

But the British people have embraced a secular identity of their own free will, perhaps as a reaction to the ultra-conservatism of this recent papacy and the extremism that has been manifested by some forms of Islam.

The secular identity of the British people is not something to criticise, but to celebrate. We have rejected dogmatic religion devoid of compassion. In its place we have embraced and included gay people and given them the right to full equality, given women the right to control their own fertility, given scientists a free hand to seek cures for horrific diseases by the use of stem-cell research.

Mass attendance has declined by a half in the last twenty years – showing that Catholics too are voting with their feet. The vast majority disregard the Pope’s dogma. Recent polls show just 5% of Catholics reject contraception in all circumstances.

Britain – one of the most irreligious nations in the world – was commended by the United Nations as being one of the largest donors to the relief appeals for people affected by the floods in Pakistan. Each year Comic Relief increases its total. This is from a nation that in the main lives outside religion. Secular Britain is a compassionate nation that takes care of its sick and disadvantaged.

The Pope is entirely wrong. His attacks on the secular nature of Britain are entirely self-serving, and he should cease them immediately or go home to Vatican City where he can implement his inhumane teachings for those who want to observe them. The rest of us will simply do our best by our own lights.

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