

Quotes of the Week

"The Catholic church has done more than Richard Dawkins, Ian Paisley, humanist societies and Marxist materialists put together to discredit the whole idea of organised religion, and there will be many who feel that it deserves our heartfelt thanks for its endeavours."

(Terry Eagleton, Red Pepper)

"The monopolies have broken down. Claims by male religious leaders to represent religious communities are more tenuous than before."

(Professor Linda Woodhead)

Essays of the Week

[Beyond church and state – secularism and religion are not mutually exclusive](#)

(Mike Marqusee, Red Pepper)

[Christians, gays and bullying](#)

(The Economist)

Michael Gove to investigate Catholic schools' anti-gay petition

The Department for Education has announced that it will investigate complaints that rules were breached when Catholic schools were asked to encourage their pupils to sign a national petition against gay marriage.

Last week the Catholic Education Service (CES), responsible for the handling of hundreds of state funded schools, confirmed it had written to more than 359 Catholic secondary schools in England and Wales and asked them to draw attention to an anti-marriage equality letter written by senior archbishops, which spoke of the "duty" to preserve "the true meaning of marriage."

The investigation was welcomed by the National Secular Society which last week wrote to the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, and his Welsh counterpart Leighton Andrews, requesting that they take immediate action.

A spokesman for the Department for Education has since announced it is looking into complaints that the request violated regulations concerning impartiality.

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "Schools have a responsibility under law to ensure children are insulated from political activity and campaigning in the classroom. While faith schools, rightly, have the freedom to teach about sexual relations and marriage in the context of their own religion, that should not extend to political campaigning. Officials are looking into this as ministers are anxious to establish the full facts of this case and will be meeting representatives of the CES shortly." The Welsh Government has also announced its own investigation.

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Manager at the National Secular Society, said: "We believe the activities encouraged by the CES go beyond the statement of religious doctrine into the promotion of partisan political activism in schools, and are therefore a breach of [sections 406-7](#) of the Education Act 1996 which prohibit the political indoctrination of schoolchildren and require political views to be presented in a balanced way.

"It is also likely that the schools which have acted on the request from the CES will have inadvertently harassed or victimised pupils and potentially incited prejudice against gay people. Such behaviour from state funded schools is completely unacceptable and is likely to be in breach of equality legislation."

The CES, which acts for Catholic bishops, denied breaking any laws. A spokesperson for the CES said "The Catholic church's view on the importance of marriage is a religious view, not a political one."

You can hear David Wolfe QC discussing this issue on the [BBC Radio 4 Sunday Programme](#) podcast (35m35s).

Latest 'persecuted Christian' case dismissed by employment tribunal

The latest Christian to claim victimisation in the workplace has had his claim for religious discrimination dismissed by an employment tribunal in Birmingham.

Dr David Drew was dismissed for "gross misconduct and insubordination" in December 2010 after refusing to accept the conclusions of a report into his relationship with Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust.

The doctor was first suspended in 2009 for six weeks following a complaint by a senior nurse that he was undermining her, but which was subsequently dismissed.

A grievance by Dr Drew about his suspension was dealt with by an independent review panel. He was told to accept the recommendations of the panel's report in full. One of the recommendations included refraining from making reference to religion in professional communications.

The [Daily Mail](#) and the [Telegraph](#) picked up the story in March 2012 when Dr Drew told an employment tribunal that he was unfairly dismissed on the grounds of his religious beliefs. The *Daily Mail* ran with the headline "Christian doctor 'sacked for emailing a PRAYER to hospital colleagues to raise their spirits'".

However, when Sue James, current chief executive of Derby's hospitals was called to give evidence, she revealed that Dr Drew produced a "toxic environment" at the hospital by constantly raising complaints against his co-workers. Mrs James said: "For two and a half years we had a relationship that wasn't working."

Dr Drew emailed a prayer to colleagues to try to "motivate his department". But Mrs James told the employment tribunal that Dr Drew's religious references were "highly marginal" in the investigation. She told the hearing: "It was about the verbosity and length of his emails. He deconstructed every sentence and sent it to so many people."

Mrs James said she was soon being sent numerous emails from Dr Drew complaining about the report's findings. She said: "I was the chief executive running the hospital and David was taking up one day of my personal time a week. We needed to move forward."

In reaching its unanimous decision, the employment tribunal this week said it had found no evidence that Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust or the members of an independent panel that investigated Dr Drew were influenced, even subconsciously, by a prejudice against Christians. The tribunal said there was no need for Dr Drew to refer to himself as a Christian or to make religious references in professional communication if they are considered inappropriate and if they hinder proper communication.

In dismissing the claim the judgement concluded:

"The panel dismissing the claimant were entitled to conclude that the implementation of that report without reservation was key to the future of the Paediatric Department and that the claimant's continued failure to accept and adopt the recommendations had potentially harmful consequences for the Department. Furthermore, the claimant had admitted clear breaches of confidentiality in choosing to widen the distribution of certain conclusions in the report contrary to his express agreement not to do so."

Despite claiming for unfair dismissal on the grounds of religious discrimination, Dr Drew also says he was dismissed for whistle-blowing over child protection. In a witness statement to the tribunal, Dr Drew said problems began in 2008 when he complained about hospital practices. He cited two occasions when children had allegedly been sexually assaulted on the ward and another where a child had died after a consultant let him go home.

However, despite Dr Drew referring to himself as a whistleblower (his Twitter account is @NHSwhistleblower) his claim for unfair dismissal was not brought under the Public Interest Disclosure Act which protects whistleblowers from detrimental treatment by their employer.

In dismissing Dr Drew's appeal to amend his claim in December 2011, the employment judge concluded:

"I find it difficult to understand why, if public interest disclosure played such a significant role in the claimant's mind in the alleged detriments and his subsequent dismissal, that through a process of years and multiple opportunities no attempt was made at an earlier stage to apply to amend the claim."

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Manager at the National Secular Society, said: "The most disturbing aspect of Dr Drew's case is that it is precisely the kind of nonsense that senior politicians including the Prime Minister are referring to when they claim Christianity is being marginalised in the UK and call for a Christian "fightback" against secularism.

"Yet again we find that when claims of discrimination against Christians in the workplace are properly scrutinised, they fall flat on their face.

"The Christian propaganda machine, so enthusiastically assisted by certain sections of the British media, is attempting to gain special privileges in all areas of life for those who declare themselves to be Christian. It is time their false narrative of Christian persecution in Britain was exposed as the pernicious pack of lies that it is."

Community and church school amalgamation plans criticised by the NSS

The National Secular Society has challenged a London council over its failure to consult properly about proposals to close a community school in order to amalgamate it with a Church school.

The Village Infants community school in Dagenham has been earmarked for closure with plans to amalgamate it with the William Ford Church of England Junior School. The council's plans are being opposed by the overwhelming majority of parents, staff and Governors at the school.

Earlier this month, Barking and Dagenham council sent out a letter to parents and staff at the community school seeking views on the proposal but failed to mention that the new school would be a Voluntary Aided (VA) church school.

The omission is significant as VA schools can set their own admissions criteria and discriminate against pupils on religious grounds if oversubscribed. VA schools are also permitted to discriminate against teachers who do not share the faith of the school when considering appointments and promotions.

Department for Education guidance of school closures states that those bringing forward proposals should “provide sufficient information for those being consulted to form a considered view on the matters on which they are being consulted”. The National Secular Society has criticised the Council for not giving local people the full facts.

Stephen Evans from the National Secular Society said: “Not informing parents and staff of the full implications of becoming a VA school before seeking their views reveals a flawed process.

“In an area already short of primary school places, it is regrettable that the council sees fit to hand over such a successful and well-loved community school to the Church, who prioritise children of churchgoers over local children.”

A teacher at the school commented: “Why risk merging the schools where the admissions criteria could exclude local children from school places? Barking and Dagenham is at crisis point and do not have enough school places for local children. Why then create a school that could potentially be filled with children from other Boroughs?”

The Church school has historically taken all children from Village Infants, but if the two schools amalgamate the link status will be lost and admission of local children will no longer be able to be taken for granted.

Heather Douglas, the head teacher at Village Infants, said; “I worry that vulnerable families will be excluded from their local school and the effect that this could have socially within the local community”.

Parent Shailey Proctor, who has one child at Village Infants and one at William Ford, told the *Barking & Dagenham Post*. “Our family does not go to church and if I was applying at the new school my child may not get a spot.”

Nicola Tilley, parent of a Village Infant child and a dinner lady, said: “There's a risk that families from a religious background but not from the area will get places instead of local families.

Eleven out of 14 teachers from the infant school have voted against the plans in a union ballot. Dominic Byrne, borough NUT divisional secretary, said: “The teachers and the governors believe that religious affiliation will mean there will be admissions criteria, disadvantaging local children. They are also not happy that they would work at a faith school”.

A council spokesperson said the merger plans are in the informal consultation stage and said all parents had been consulted. The formal consultation is likely to begin at the end of May or beginning of June.

Councils abandon prayers following NSS High Court victory

A survey by *The Sunday Telegraph* has found that 40 councils have recently decided to drop, or “water down” the practice of saying prayers, with more considering doing so.

According to the *Telegraph*, just 21 authorities said they planned to continue their arrangement of “formal” prayers without any changes. Other councils not making changes already hold “informal” prayers before meetings have officially started.

One council in Gloucestershire, unable to completely let go of its ritual, has removed all references to “God” and “Jesus Christ” from a prayer traditionally read out at its meetings.

Rev Ross Moughtin is a former chaplain to West Lancashire council where prayers will no longer be included in the formal business. Speaking to the Christian Institute, he said: “The national picture is

sad. I would support prayers in council meetings. It helps people to recognise that council meetings are more than simply business meetings – that they have a spiritual dimension.”

NSS Campaigns Manager Stephen Evans said: “If individual councillors wish to seek spiritual guidance before meetings their freedom to do so remains intact. Removing prayers from the formal business simply means prayers are no longer imposed on unwilling participants.

“However much the Government wants to believe it, this is not a Christian country. There is therefore simply no justification for Christians, or any other religious group, to assert their supremacy over other religious groups or over non-religious people by making prayers an integral part of the formal civic business.

“The absence of prayers doesn’t impose atheism on anyone; it simply creates a neutral space and removes an unnecessary barrier to local democracy being equally welcoming to all sections of society.”

However, Andrea Minichiello Williams, CEO of Christian Concern and a director of the Christian Legal Centre was less impressed. Responding to news that councils are abandoning prayers she said: “These changes highlight the rise of a totalitarian and bitter kind of secularism that seeks to remove all traces of Christianity from public discourse. The claim that secularism is the more neutral option is a myth.

“Secularists are determined to uproot our Christian foundations whilst simultaneously advocating the false notion that atheism provides the correct principles upon which society — and its values — should be based.

“Atheism however is by no means neutral. It is deeply rooted in the rejection of God and the objective standards of morality that He lays for the benefit of all mankind.

“As a nation we need to be determined not to forego the values based on the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, which have shaped our country for centuries and made it the thriving and flourishing nation that it is today.

“I urge all other councils not to give in to the pressure to conform, but to be vocal and visible for the Lord Jesus by continuing to keep prayers on their agenda.”

Responding to Ms Williams, NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood said: “she is blatantly and deliberately misrepresenting secularism for her own evangelical ends. The Bideford court order remains in force and she and others are shamelessly inciting councils to break the law.

“The courts have similarly seen through these unprincipled religious tactics – that is why we won the court case and why they have ultimately lost every employment case they have brought.”

We’re all in this together – aren’t we?

By Anne Marie Waters

As previously [reported](#) by the NSS, the NHS spent around £29M on hospital chaplains in 2009/2010. The National Secular Society argues that churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples should fund these chaplains off their own backs and I couldn't agree more, especially in times of austerity because as we keep hearing – we are all in this together. Aren't we?

I work very closely with campaign groups who are determined to stop and roll back the privatisation and 'profitisation' of the NHS. Since the Government introduced its Health and Social Care Bill (now 'Act'), many people have been fighting hard for the ideal of universal healthcare and to ensure that the poorest people in our country cannot be left to suffer or die for lack of money – this is morally

reprehensible. You would think therefore that the guardians of morality, compassion, and charity would be jumping up and down volunteering to help. They're not.

The NHS provides the most important service in this country, and the most compassionate. It asks no questions, makes no judgments, but provides excellent world-class medical care to anyone who needs it, when they need it. It is the jewel in the crown of the British public sector. I spent many years working in the NHS and I saw definite room for improvement (as anywhere,) but it is a well-oiled and economically sound system, and it desperately needs protecting. If you want to understand why, you only need to look to the United States where the dollar dictates care and millions of Americans go without – many die in the world's richest country because the insurance companies they pay their premiums to have found ways not to cough up. In fact, some American doctors are paid bonuses if they can invent new and ingenious ways not to treat the sick. We are facing this in Britain as healthcare costs soar and the private sector rides in pretending to be the solution while ensuring that it is profit, not care, which is the primary concern of NHS practitioners.

While universal healthcare edges closer to oblivion, there is a more immediate problem – the £20bn in savings the NHS has been told to make since the Coalition came to power. The [Guardian reported](#) in October last year that the effect of these savings is hitting patients hard and fast and some services have been forced to close. Many patients have to go without painkillers (yes, painkillers) and hospitals are sinking further and further in to debt. But still they must find £29M a year to pay for hospital chaplains to visit and comfort the sick.

To clarify; the cash-strapped NHS is paying chaplains — predominantly from the Church of England — to bring comfort to the sick and dying in hospital.

It is rumoured that the value of the assets of the Church of England is around the £6bn mark. Add to this its annual intake of around £750M and you've got a fairly well-funded organisation. They can probably spare a few quid (£29M or thereabouts) to care for the sick and the dying. I have no doubt whatsoever that the Church of England does a lot of good, but we don't need them to help in the delivery of healthcare and given their supposed ethos of charity and compassion, I do not see why they can't find the money to fund their own chaplains. We shouldn't even have to ask them, they should insist upon it. Meanwhile, a certain Archbishop of Canterbury must decide which of his two palaces to sleep in at night (after a long day promoting sharia, an Archbishop needs a good rest).

Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop's main residence, is an ancient castle on the south of the river Thames and costs around £650,000 every year to run. Other bishops don't have it too shabbily either – senior clergy are living in luxury. This happens across the religions – anyone who has ever been to the Vatican might suspect that Il Papa does not have the famous words about camels fitting through eyes of needles faster than rich people getting in to heaven, at the forefront of his mind.

In this age of austerity, it seems to me that the only people "in it together" are the poor, while the rich are somewhere else. I don't think the Church of England can realistically throw around millions on a whim and I certainly support the right of sick people to seek comfort from their religion, but what I struggle to understand is why the Church of England, and others, are not falling over themselves to help the NHS provide its hugely important and compassionate services. In other words, why are they not "in it" with the NHS? I am not asking for the keys to the safe, but the very least it could do is pay for its own chaplains.

On a final note, if you're thinking £29M is just a drop in the ocean, think again; it would pay for 1,000 nurses. That's 1,000 nurses not on the dole, 1,000 families not destroyed by unemployment, and a 1,000 extra vital staff for this precious institution.

Its high-time that the rich religions started putting their money where their mouths are and cut back on their own riches to help the poor – especially in difficult economic times. It is, after all, the reason they say they exist.

Portuguese Catholics jumping ship

A poll of 4,000 adults commissioned by the Portuguese bishops' conference showed that the number of Catholics in the country has fallen 7 per cent in 12 years, while the number of Protestants has increased ninefold and the number of people saying they have no religion has risen to almost one in seven.

Today the typical Portuguese Catholic is a woman who is over 45 and lives in the rural north of the country, according to the survey.

Eighty per cent of Portuguese self-identify as Catholic, down from 87 per cent in a similar survey in 1999. Of those self-identified Catholics, 56 per cent are women and 44 per cent are men, and nearly half of them said they attend Mass, though not necessarily every Sunday.

Some 90 per cent of those living in the most northerly quarter of the country self-identified as Catholic. Fifty-six per cent of Catholic respondents were 45 or older.

The number of Protestants has leapt from 0.3 per cent in 1999 to 2.8 per cent today. A number of Evangelical churches have opened in poorer urban areas and are popular with Brazilian immigrants.

The number of people who said they have no religion has risen from 8 per cent to 14 per cent. Of those 14 per cent, 60 per cent are men and 40 per cent are women.

There is also a new classification, "Believers who do not adhere to a specific religion", and they make up 5 per cent of respondents.

The battle against gay marriage causes deep divisions in politics and religion

By Tessa Kendall

The Pope's representative in Britain has urged Roman Catholic leaders to form a united front with their Muslim and Jewish counterparts in his Church's latest attempt to prevent gay marriage.

The Catholic Church's position is causing ever-deeper rifts among its followers and in the Tory party. The most senior Catholic in the British Government, Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith, has confirmed that he supports gay marriage. However, another senior Catholic, Tory Chief Whip, Patrick McLoughlin, has privately told Tory backbenchers that current proposals will "not come to a vote," and that they will be "kicked into the long grass" according to the [Mail on Sunday](#).

It is not just in the UK that this schism is appearing. [A survey](#) by the Pew Research Centre has found that opposition to gay marriage in America is shrinking, even among Catholics.

The Catholic campaign in Scotland has been [particularly venomous](#). The Catholic Education Commission there has said that Scottish Government proposals will make it impossible for teachers in denominational schools to teach according to church doctrines. Michael McGrath, director of the Scottish Catholic Education Service said: "This understanding of the sanctity of marriage is divinely ordained in Church doctrine and underpins the teaching of marriage in Catholic schools across the world."

Following a letter from the Scottish Catholic Church to 100,000 Scottish Catholics, Scotland for Marriage is now planning to leaflet every house in Glasgow (some 300,000 homes) and is gathering a petition.

Signatories include Britain's most senior Roman Catholic, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, and the former SNP leader Gordon Wilson. The group, backed by organisations including the Catholic Bishops'

Conference of Scotland, the Christian Institute, the Evangelical Alliance and Destiny Churches, said it also planned to use mobile advertising vans to put across its opposition to same-sex weddings.

Also in Scotland, the Council of Glasgow Imams recently agreed a joint resolution describing same-sex marriage as an "attack" on their faith and fundamental beliefs.

On the other side of the Scottish battle lines, the United Reformed Church, the Quakers, Buddhists and the Pagan Federation among others have started the Faith in Marriage campaign. They will hand over an open letter to MSPs at Holyrood demanding the right to conduct same-sex marriages.

[Rev Scott McKenna](#), Church of Scotland minister for Mayfield Salisbury Parish in Edinburgh, said: "In opposing equality, churches reinforce homophobia in society and that can lead to pain, low self-respect and, in some cases, violence. In the end this is about people who are on the receiving end of prejudice and are suffering because of that. The cycle needs to be broken."

It is also becoming increasingly clear that the Catholic Church does not represent its followers in the UK. When it sent a letter to all priests to read out at mass, many parishioners walked out and some priests refused to read it. When the Catholic Education Service sent a letter to Catholic schools asking pupils to sign a petition against gay marriage, some pupils objected to this possible breach of equality law and inappropriate promotion of political views, [as we reported](#). *Catholic Voices* has now accused the NSS of being 'sinister and illogical' in our challenge to the Catholic Education Service. [A statement on their website](#) said that the NSS 'have to argue that (a) the argument in favour of gay marriage is an argument in favour of equality; (b) those who oppose gay marriage are therefore against equality; (c) because schools are committed in law to upholding equality, therefore schools speaking against gay marriage are breaking the law. The logic falls at the first hurdle, because: there is no right to same-sex marriage, and therefore no discrimination'.

They don't seem to understand what equalities are about. Women once had no right to vote so according to *Catholic Voices'* argument, they were not discriminated against. Equality means giving a right to a group that is denied it for no good reason.

As cheerleaders for the Catholic Church we would expect *Catholic Voices* to support attempts to inculcate young people with political Catholicism, but it is for the Secretary of State to decide whether that is appropriate in state funded schools – and according to the law, it is not.

As well as dividing believers and politicians, the battle has other casualties – free speech for one. A Christian who was demoted for his views on gay marriage tried to use human rights as a defence in his legal case against his employer but District Judge Charles Khan at Manchester County Court disallowed this argument. Adrian Smith, a housing manager at Trafford Housing Trust, commented on Facebook that gay marriage would be 'an equality too far'.

Smith's legal case against his employer's breach of contract can continue but the judge's ruling means that he cannot rely on the human rights argument. The Trust disciplined him because it was worried about its reputation in relation to its public function of providing social housing but gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell has offered to appear as a witness in his defence.

In the media

Dr Antony Lempert of the Secular Medical Forum will be appearing on *The Big Questions* on BBC1 on Sunday 6 May discussing 'Is religion good for children?'

Emmy Award nominated screenwriter Hugh Costello has written *What the Bishops Knew* for BBC Radio 4. It explores a fictional accusation of child abuse by a Catholic priest in Ireland and how this was covered up for decades by the Church hierarchy to protect its reputation. [Listen on iPlayer here](#).

Letters to Newslines

Please send your letters for publication to letters@secularism.org.uk. We want to publish as many letters as possible, so please keep them brief – **no more than 250 words**. We reserve the right to edit. Opinions expressed in letters are not necessarily those of the NSS. You can also join in live debates on our [Facebook page](#).

From John Dowdle:

Terry Sanderson raises a very intriguing point about the proposed reform to representation in the House of Lords when he states — in connection with bishops — 'They only come from English dioceses, yet this is a UK Parliament...'

Personally, I see no need at all for a second legislative chamber, particularly when something like 50% or more of the legislation affecting the UK now comes from Europe. This also points up a need to stop ramming poorly thought-out legislation at speed through the House of Commons. After all, this current government has absolutely no electoral mandate whatsoever for its various changes to UK law.

Terry Sanderson's point — I believe — points up the fact that while traditionalists might argue for the presence of English bishops in an English Parliament, how many would argue for enshrined religious representation in the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly? Would they also argue for London bishops in bodies like the Greater London Assembly, I wonder?

If, instead, the traditionalists advance the argument that bishops belong in a UK Parliament, then (logically or illogically, perhaps?) this can also mean that there should be bishops too from the churches of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The Church of Ireland is a protestant church which is described as being 'A province of the Anglican Communion' and 'is one church embracing Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.'

Oh! Does that mean that Church of Ireland bishops sitting in a second legislative chamber could potentially come from the Republic of Eire? How might this affect their oath of loyalty? Could a bishop from Ireland swear allegiance to a UK monarch and her heirs?

The more you think about religious representation, the more absurd it becomes. The simplest solution is to have none at all in any legislature.

Like other interest groups, they can lobby governments on legislative matters but giving them law-making votes is completely ridiculous.

From Jack Lavety:

With reference to John Dowdle's letter (*Newslines* 27 April 2012), he states that in Ancient Roman times, "... the excessive barbarities of the past are being largely superseded by a more civilised future."

I would dispute that statement using our own country's current behaviour and also going back just a few years (WW2, Vietnam, Korea, etc) where modern warfare can create death and disability at a rate that would be regarded as 'miraculous' in the past. But then, we have military Pastors, so it's all right then?

From Rodney King:

In reply to last week's letter from Patricia Ticker which questioned the accuracy as to the source of cathedral building materials that I gave in my letter of the 14th April, I was referring only to Canterbury when stating that the stone came from France, in fact Caen in Normandy.

From Christopher Allen:

I am in my final year at a Catholic High School before heading to University in October. It is through attending this school that I have grown, seemingly, more and more irreligious by the day. I began as an agnostic, but the dogma and the irrationality of both the school and religion on the whole soon became clear to me. It baffles me that a concept that relies on falsehoods and magic should continue to hold so much influence across the world and continue to bring death and unspeakable anguish to millions of people. It is of crucial import that religion be removed from our important institutions as soon as possible, before irreversible calamities cripple our civilization.

From Christopher Turner:

We regularly see readers eagerly debating the appropriateness of religious symbols/rituals present in secular contexts, but I wonder how they react to this example. Churches are favourite venues for performances of classical music, which benefit particularly from the acoustic but also in indefinable ways which may have a lot to do with buried feelings. These feelings may have a lot in common with the religious impulse, such as a shared sense of history and a culture of respect for finer things: besides, churches are frequently beautiful places and a good place to create and listen to beautiful sounds, on top of which they're often the only place deep in the country of a suitable size.

I attended a well organised and successful concert recently, which the vicar introduced with some humorous words of welcome, but then she surprised me by asking us to join her in a Christian prayer. As a rationalist I instantly felt awkward and my good mood was (briefly) spoilt. I wasn't asked to say or do anything but it was still a surprise, because it was so unusual these days. There was nothing even religious about the choice of music, so why did she think it was appropriate? You have to be reasonable — no one would ask for the religious symbols to be covered up (impossible in the case of the stained-glass windows) — but it was a secular occasion and I felt it should have been conducted in an inclusive manner. Her attitude might be 'My gaff, my rules', but if that's fair, then perhaps it should be stated on the adverts that the vicar would open with a prayer, and then we'd all know where we stood.

From Kevin Eady:

Some Christians seem to think they should be allowed to wear crucifixes at work despite any health and safety regulations. Does this apply to all religious symbols? If it does, why not political symbols as well (hammer and sickle, swastikas etc)? But if only religious symbols are allowed, I would presume that they would not take offence if employees were to wear crucifixes upside down. After all, Satanism is as valid a religious belief system as any other.

From Graeme Hunter:

I read your exchange with Godfrey Bloom MEP in relation to the Cornish B&B case in *Newsline* with horror. It really is extraordinary that an elected representative to the EP would openly engage in such a bizarre manner. Anyone who thinks that invoking the legacy of the "British Empire" in 2012 in a discussion about life in the EU is clearly not living in the real world. Anyone who also does this and states that places "where the influence of the British Empire have decisively and lastingly touched" are "great places to live" did not live in either Queensland or South Africa in the 1970s and 80s. If they had, and they were anything other than white, male and heterosexual, then they would know that the legacy of the British Empire has been no guarantor of human rights.

The ignorance of basic human rights in the name of religion cannot be excused. A business which offers a public service and yet excludes people from it contrary to the law and based on the tenets of a work of fiction must expect to be sanctioned. Mr Bloom's dismissal of "the law" as a bland front for "government diktat" is alarming in itself, but the sheer unhinged ramblings of the 4-point response are deeply scary. Voters please be aware that, and this is not exclusive to UKIP, behind every right-wing xenophobe there is a religious nutter waiting to remove your basic rights in the name of religious privilege, whether or not you are, as Godfrey so succinctly puts it: "Christians of evangelical stamp, or even Assemblies of God Pentecostal evangelical stamp only, or Plymouth Brethren only". By the way, what does all that mean?

I urge you all to resist the current resurgence of religious privilege which is asserting itself in the corridors of power across Europe and elsewhere and to elect representatives who espouse the same rights for all, irrespective of their affiliations or fetishes, whatever they may be.

From Michael Igoe:

The reply from Mr Bloom MP (*Newsline* 25th) cites the Greek drama Antigone in defence of his argument. I used to be a Classics lecturer and am very familiar with the play. Antigone's electrifying speech refers to two laws, one under man and another under gods, the eternal and moral – rather more than a 'glimmering' of morality. Nature, though, doesn't have laws in the same sense: it has physical and similar principles, nothing to do with morality, such as gravity. I wonder how Mr Bloom, too, can justify what amounts to Christian moralising by the thinking of a society five centuries before Christ, if, as he claims, our traditions are based on Judaeo-Christianity. Another gift from the Classical world is logic, of which I see little sign here.

From David Dalby:

I see Godfrey Bloom came up with a typically weird response to the NSS email. Is this the same Godfrey Bloom who turns up on radio now and then to tell us racially offensive terms are perfectly acceptable and he can see no reason not to use them? Not much of one for democracy and good will is he?

From Ian Harris:

I have just thought of a wonderful new name for Religious Education. Lore Enforcement!

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