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Teacher suspended in prayer row

BBC (20.12.2009) / HRWF (21.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Christian supply teacher has been suspended from her job teaching ill children at home after offering to pray for a sick pupil.

Olive Jones, 54, from Weston-super-Mare, said the girl had been too poorly for a lesson. The teacher then decided to speak about her belief in miracles.

But the girl's mother said they were not believers and made a complaint.

Mrs Jones, who did not have a formal contract, was told by Oak Hill Short Stay School she would be suspended.

Mrs Jones, who is originally from Llanteg in Pembrokeshire, visited the child at her home on 25 November and said she was told of the decision just hours after the incident.

The part-time maths teacher had worked for the Oak Hill Short Stay School and Tuition Service North in Nailsea, near Bristol, for almost five years.

She said: "If I had done something criminal, I believe the reaction would have been the same.

"It is like a black mark against my name and character when it comes to getting a reference for another job, just because I shared my testimony, as if I committed a criminal act.

"I simply wanted to encourage them to be open to prayer but if they did not want to then I would never force it down their throat."

She said she had been called to her manager's office and told that sharing her faith with a child could be deemed to be bullying.

Mrs Jones added: "I was in complete shock, I was trembling.

"I am amazed that a country with such a strong Christian tradition has become a country where it is hard to speak about your faith."

'Their loss'

Nick Yates, of North Somerset Council, said: "Olive Jones has worked as a supply teacher, working with the North Somerset Tuition Service.

"A complaint has been made by a parent regarding Olive. This complaint is being investigated.

"To complete the investigation we need to speak to Olive and we have offered her a number of dates so this can happen.

"At the moment we are waiting for her to let us know which date is convenient for her."

In February a community nurse, Caroline Petrie, also from Weston-super-Mare and a friend of Olive Jones, was suspended from her job for offering to pray for a patient.

She was later reinstated by the health trust.

Speaking about her friend's case, Mrs Petrie said: "All Olive wants to do is help, she sometimes cries over those children and calls me to pray with her over the phone for them.

"This is a total shock, she is an amazing maths teacher so it really is their loss."

Mrs Jones, who has been a teacher for more than 20 years, trained at Aberystwyth University in Wales.

Our human rights culture has now become a tyranny

The Supreme Court this week effectively made the Jewish religion illegal, argues

Charles Moore

Daily Telegraph (18.12.2009) / HRWF (19.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Strange things happen in the English law, but I have seldom read a stranger opening to a judgment than the following, handed down this week by Lord Philips of Worth Matravers, the President of the Supreme Court.

"The seventh chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy records the following instructions given by Moses to the people of Israel, after delivering the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai," Lord Philips began. Then he plunged into how God, having smitten the enemies of Israel - Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites - in a manner highly satisfactory to the Jews, now demanded that His people observe proper marriage customs in return.

How did a question which involved only God and the Jews, and which was decided roughly 3,500 years ago, come before Lord Philips and his eight fellow jurists sitting in 21st-century London?

The answer is that sacred text of modern times, the Race Relations Act of 1976. The Jewish Free School (JFS), a very successful secondary school in Brent, is run along Orthodox Jewish lines. A dispute arose about the admission of a boy known as M. M's mother became Jewish by conversion, but only after giving birth to M. According to Orthodox rules (see that chapter of Deuteronomy), Jewishness passes through the female line. M, therefore, was not Jewish, and so did not have the right of admission to the JFS.

The Supreme Court, however, decided by a majority of five to four that the decision to exclude M [was in contravention of section one of the Race Relations Act](#). He was excluded on racial grounds, it held.

This is a rather big decision. Lord Rodger, one of the dissenting judges, said that it "leads to such extraordinary results, and produces such manifest discrimination against Jewish schools in comparison with other faith schools, that one cannot help feeling that something has gone wrong".

Actually, it goes wider than that. The court is effectively saying that a religion's way of defining its own membership, practised over 3,500 years, is illegal. This is an acute problem for Jews, who are at great pains to maintain their own rules while respecting the law of the land. It will also be used by anti-Jewish groups, which are growing in strength, to bolster their argument that Judaism is racist and that the state of Israel is the equivalent of apartheid South Africa. So the Race Relations Act, set up to help minorities, ends up punishing them.

I would argue that the judgment goes wider still. It is part of a current idea of equality and of human rights which, in the name of freedom, is beginning to look like tyranny.

When you set out general principles about equal treatment for all, regardless of race, religion, sex, age etc, people will tend to agree with them. It is a liberal principle that all are equal before the law, and a Christian principle that all are equal in the sight of God.

But when you frame endless laws according to these universal principles, you run into difficulties. It may be "discriminatory" for a Jewish/Catholic/Muslim school to prefer to employ Jewish/Catholic/Muslim teachers, but isn't it also reasonable? Isn't it fair and natural that a religious school should be free to prefer to admit children from the relevant faith, in order to maintain the ethos which is so important to its success as a school? By what morality are such things wrong?

The human rights culture which now dominates our law believes in its own morality. It sets itself above the varied experience of civilisation, and above the idea of independent nations. It decides that rights can be codified for everyone and can be applied everywhere. It is not a coincidence that our highest court has just changed its name from the House of Lords to the Supreme Court: it considers itself supreme indeed. This "human-rights" morality is much more coercive than it purports to be.

One controversial example is homosexuality. All the main faiths put heterosexual married love above homosexual acts, yet our human rights culture makes it illegal to do this. Catholic agencies are forbidden to handle children for adoption unless they will bestow them on gay couples as readily as married ones.

Another example relates to terrorism. Common sense would suggest that a nation which decides that a foreigner is trying to foment violence in this country should be free to expel him. But universal human rights, as now interpreted, forbid this if the suspect might be tortured in his home country.

A third relates to charity. Until 2006, it had been accepted from time immemorial that the advancement of religion or education was a charitable purpose. Under the Charities Act of 2006, however, this assumption was removed. All charities now have to prove that they serve a "public benefit", and the Charity Commission decides what that benefit is, according to criteria which it calls "modern". These are hard to understand, but they appear to involve social engineering. Woe betide the charity which provides fee-paying education.

Even a self-described "hairy Lefty" has noticed that something is amiss. In his interview with this paper a week ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, said: "The trouble with a lot of government initiatives about faith is that they assume it is a problem." There is now a strong secularist agenda working its way through our public authorities. There is even a group of militant secularists, preposterously called "Brights", who want to drive religion out of the public sphere. Already you can see it in rows about a nurse who prays with a patient, or about sex education, or even about what to call Christmas. Government ministers flatter individual religious leaders - indeed, many Jews feel that the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, who was given a peerage by Gordon Brown, has become too much of a No 10 favourite to defend his community properly. But it is this Government which has exalted secular human rights over all belief systems, and made laws to enforce them. And Ed Balls, the Schools Secretary, has led a culture war against faith schools, especially Jewish ones, for their policy on admissions.

I am not pretending that these questions are easy. You need, for example, to resist Islamist attempts to advance the cause of sharia as a way of creating a parallel legal order (oppressive of women) in this country. But if you really do see religion as the problem in society, you are pulling out the threads which have until now held our culture together. You are undermining the largest single motive for providing schooling, nursing, child care and help for the old and poor. You are turning this country into a colder place, where it is "always winter, but never Christmas".

The mosque in St Mark's Road, Millfield

By Ross Robertson

The Times (17.09.2009) / HRWF (18.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -AN Islamic community must find a new place of worship after a controversial mosque was shown the red card.

Sunderland's Pakistani community set up the mosque at St Mark's Road, Millfield, without planning permission and have spent almost four years fighting to keep it open.

But neighbours raised concerns about noise at prayer times and claimed the street was not suitable for the extra traffic generated by worshippers.

Planners from Sunderland Council agreed and the mosque, which also includes a social and education centre, was originally turned down for retrospective planning permission in January 2006.

The worshippers took their case to the national planning inspector, but the appeal was dismissed.

The council began enforcement action against the unauthorised use of the building, a former Asian food store.

Users of the mosque appealed against the enforcement action, but lost in 2008 and the community was told it must move out by March this year.

However, a fresh planning application was submitted in a bid to overcome the problems, which left protesters furious.

Mosque leaders said they had taken over a property in Chester Road as an extension to the centre and its rear yard provided three parking places to help ease traffic problems.

But planners were still not happy with the parking situation, and recommended councillors reject the application once more.

Speaking at a planning committee meeting, objector Marjorie Matthews appealed to councillors to rubber-stamp the recommendation.

"This has been dragging on since 2006 – how much longer is it going to go on?"

"It has been turned down three times and its taxpayers that are having to pay for all these appeals."

Mrs Matthews said residents were disturbed by noise from a speaker system set up in the mosque.

But a spokesman from the mosque said the small speaker system was no louder than a television, and only used so those using the rooms in the Chester Road building could take part in services.

He added: "The car parking issue keeps coming up time and time again but we feel it is not an issue as the surrounding streets are mostly empty anyway."

Councillor Graeme Miller asked representatives from the mosque why they could not use the large, established place of worship on Chester Road.

They said that like Christianity and Judaism, Islam had a large number of different denominations and those using the mosque on Chester Road had different beliefs and customs.

But councillors again ruled the St Mark's Road site was not suitable for a place of worship of any kind, and unanimously refused planning permission.

The council said it was now in a position to take enforcement action if the mosque did not cease operating.

Non-Muslims turning to Sharia courts to resolve civil disputes

By Fiona Hamilton

The Times (21.07.2009) / HRWF (22.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Increasing numbers of non-Muslims are turning to Sharia courts to resolve commercial disputes and other civil matters, The Times has learnt.

The Muslim Arbitration Tribunal (MAT) said that 5 per cent of its cases involved non-Muslims who were using the courts because they were less cumbersome and more informal than the English legal system.

Freed Chedie, a spokesman for Sheikh Faiz-ul-Aqtab Siqqiqi, a barrister who set up the tribunal, said: "We put weight on oral agreements, whereas the British courts do not."

In a case last month a non-Muslim Briton took his Muslim business partner to the tribunal to sort out a dispute over the profits in their car fleet company. "The non-Muslim claimed that there had been an oral agreement between the pair," said Mr Chedie. "The tribunal found that because of certain things the Muslim man did, that agreement had existed. The non-Muslim was awarded £48,000."

He said that the tribunal had adjudicated on at least 20 cases involving non-Muslims so far this year. The rulings of the tribunal are legally binding, provided that both parties agree to that condition at the beginning of any hearing.

Anti-Sharia campaigners, who claim that the Islamic system is radical and biased against women, expressed alarm at the news. Denis MacEoin, who wrote a recent report for the think-tank Civitas examining the spread of Sharia in Britain, said that MAT's claims about non-Muslim clients "raises all sorts of questions".

He added: "You really need to ask why. What advantages could that possibly have for them going to an Islamic court? Any [Sharia] court is going to be implementing aspects of a law that runs contrary to British law, because of the way it treats women for example."

Inayat Bunglawala, a spokesman for the Muslim Council of Britain, said that organisations should be free to conduct arbitration under Sharia, provided that it did not infringe British law and was a voluntary process.

Baroness Warsi, the Shadow Minister for Community Cohesion and Social Action, who is Muslim, said that there were many forums for arbitration and alternative dispute resolution in Britain. "There is no problem with that, as long as it is always subject to English law," she said.

The Times has also learnt that the MAT is planning to triple the number of its courts by setting up in ten new British cities by the end of the year. It will expand its network further by acting as an advisory body to dozens of other Islamic courts, with the intention of achieving national consensus over rulings and procedures.

Although Sharia courts have been operating in the civil jurisdiction since the early 1980s, they have been doing so only in the shadows and in an ad-hoc fashion. The Civitas report estimated that there were 85 Sharia councils in Britain.

As such, if the MAT was successful in bringing a number of the existing councils into line with its own courts, it would in effect create Britain's largest national co-operative of tribunals.

Mr Chedie said that the plan would legitimise Sharia because all the courts under its umbrella would be "consistent in their rulings". The MAT, which has legal legitimacy under the Arbitration Act 1996, already operates in London, Birmingham, Bradford, Manchester and Nuneaton, Warwickshire. At its annual conference in October it will decide its ten new locations, which are likely to include Leeds, Luton, Blackburn, Stoke and Glasgow.

The tribunal is inviting 24 Sharia councils to attend the conference so that it can train them on procedures and rulings in an attempt to achieve national consistency. Most Sharia courts deal only with divorce and family disputes but the MAT also rules on commercial matters and mediates over forced marriages and domestic violence.

Mr Chedie said: "We would train most of the imams so that a lady in Glasgow would receive the same form of service as a lady in London. Sharia councils are already falling into line under us. There is hysterical and inherent prejudice against Sharia, but the overwhelming opinion of the judiciary is that English law and Sharia are compatible. It is only people at the right end of the political spectrum who are scaremongering." Mr Chedie argued that the legitimacy of the MAT was further enhanced because non-Muslims had started to use it for arbitration.

Mr MacEoin said he was sceptical that the MAT could achieve unity because there were several different schools of thought when it came to Islamic law. He added that the Muslim community was already deeply divided over ideology.

CoE school pupil banned from wearing crucifix while Sikh pupils allowed to wear bangles

Daily Mail (01.07.2009) / HRWF (02.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A school told a child to remove a Christian cross she was wearing even though it lets Sikh children wear bangles as part of their religion.

Lauren Grimshaw-Brown was told to take off a necklace with a cross on it because of health and safety fears.

But the eight-year-old's furious mother has accused the school of double standards because they allow children following other faiths to wear jewellery on religious grounds.

The mother-of-two says Lauren and brother Callan, five, have always worn crosses at St Peter's CE School in Chorley, Lancashire.

'We're a Christian family and my children wear the necklaces underneath their tops,' she said.

'On Thursday Lauren was told by a teacher to take it off because apparently they're not allowed to wear jewellery.

'I could understand it if it was a fashion accessory or a High School Musical necklace, but it's part of our faith.'

Mrs Grimshaw-Brown complained directly to the headteacher, Helen Wright, who referred the matter to the school's chairman of governors, Father Atherton. He upheld the ban.

Mrs Grimshaw-Brown added: 'I received a letter in my child's reading folder. It said that if she had been a Sikh child she would be allowed to wear bangles because it's part of their religion.'

'I've got absolutely no problem with any other religion wearing bangles or another item of jewellery, but why can't my daughter wear a necklace with a cross? It's a church-led school.'

'The necklace is designed to come apart if it snags. The school has suggested she wear a brooch but surely that's more dangerous because of the pin.'

'Lauren was really upset by this and I feel very let down.'

The letter to Mrs Grimshaw-Brown said: 'The prospectus makes clear that jewellery may not be worn except for earrings and watches.'

'This is because there have been incidents in schools where hooped earrings, bracelets and necklaces have caused injuries to children when caught in outdoor play or physical activity.'

'The prospectus makes it clear that school will allow jewellery where it is a necessary part of the religious faith of the child, i.e. Sikh families must wear bangles as one of the "five Ks", the religious rules for dress.'

Mrs Wright denied there was any discrimination against people following a Christian faith.

'We do want children to be proud of their Christian faith, therefore we would like to encourage them to wear crosses,' she added.

'The best solution in this case for children to be kept safe would be for pupils to wear a brooch - in fact some children already do.'

The shocking picture of a white boy aged 11 being 'converted' to Islam by radical preacher

Daily Mail (29.06.2009) / HRWF (02.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -



This is the shocking picture of a young, white schoolboy being converted to Islam by a cleric linked to a radical Muslim hate preacher.

The bewildered 11-year-old, who gives his name as Sean was filmed repeating Arabic chants and swearing allegiance to Allah.

The boy is prompted throughout by controversial cleric Anjem Choudary, a follower of exiled hate-preacher Omar Bakri Mohammed.

The incident was filmed during a demonstration by Choudary's Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah group in Birmingham city centre earlier this month.

Choudary, 42, was one of the masterminds behind the protests at the homecoming parade of heroic British soldiers in Luton earlier this year.

He praised protesters who branded British troops 'murderers' and later appeared at a press conference flanked by thugs who took part in the demo.

Choudary defended the young boy's 'reversion' to Islam but admitted his parents were not with him and were not consulted.

He said: 'The child was genuinely interested in Islam.'

'The boy told us he wanted to become a Muslim and, of course, some people are intellectually more mature than they are physically. I don't see there is any harm in this.

'He was with his friends, but I didn't see if his parents were there,' he added.

A message on Choudary's website offers advice for those who become Muslim at his Islamic Roadshow.

'Conversion packs are already provided to those who revert to Islam in the Islamic Roadshows,' it says.

'They include a booklet on 'Everything a Muslim must know' and a free DVD with a brief guide on how to pray in Islam.'

Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama'ah, is a splinter group of the controversial Al Muhajiroun sect.

Al-Muhajiroun, which has recruited hundreds of fanatics in the Midlands, fell apart in 2004 just months before Bakri was stopped from coming back to the UK under terror laws.

It has been revealed that the sect is planning to reform.

Bakri has now set his sights set on a return for the extremist group, though the Home Office is understood to be closely monitoring its activities.

Britain has 85 sharia courts: The astonishing spread of the Islamic justice behind closed doors

Mail Online (29.06.2009) / HRWF (01.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - At least 85 Islamic sharia courts are operating in Britain, a study claimed yesterday. The astonishing figure is 17 times higher than previously accepted.

The tribunals, working mainly from mosques, settle financial and family disputes according to religious principles. They lay down judgments which can be given full legal status if approved in national law courts.

However, they operate behind doors that are closed to independent observers and their decisions are likely to be unfair to women and backed by intimidation, a report by independent think-tank Civitas said.

Commentators on the influence of sharia law often count only the five courts in London, Manchester, Bradford, Birmingham and Nuneaton that are run by the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal, a body whose rulings are enforced through the state courts under the 1996 Arbitration Act.

But the study by academic and Islamic specialist Denis MacEoin estimates there are at least 85 working tribunals.

The spread of sharia law has become increasingly controversial since its role was backed last year by Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams and Lord Phillips, the Lord Chief Justice who stepped down last October.

Dr Williams said a recognised role for sharia law seemed 'unavoidable' and Lord Phillips said there was no reason why decisions made on sharia principles should not be recognised by the national courts.

But the Civitas report said the principles on which sharia courts work are indicated by the fatwas - religious decrees - set out on websites run by British mosques.

The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams

Mr MacEoin said: 'Among the rulings we find some that advise illegal actions and others that transgress human rights standards as applied by British courts.'

Examples set out in his study include a ruling that no Muslim woman may marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam and that any children of a woman who does should be taken from her until she marries a Muslim.

Further rulings, according to the report, approve polygamous marriage and enforce a woman's duty to have sex with her husband on his demand.

The report added: 'The fact that so many sharia rulings in Britain relate to cases concerning divorce and custody of children is of particular concern, as women are not equal in sharia law, and sharia contains no specific commitment to the best interests of the child that is fundamental to family law in the UK.'

'Under sharia, a male child belongs to the father after the age of seven, regardless of circumstances.'

It said: 'Sharia courts operating in Britain may be handing down rulings that are inappropriate to this country because they are linked to elements in Islamic law that are seriously out of step with trends in Western legislation.'

The study pointed out that the House of Lords ruled in a child custody case last year that the sharia rules on the matter were 'arbitrary and discriminatory'.

And a 2003 judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg said it was 'difficult to declare one's respect for democracy and human rights while at the same time supporting a regime based on sharia, which clearly diverges from Convention values.'

However last year Justice Minister Bridget Prentice told MPs that 'if, in a family dispute ...the parties to a judgment in a sharia council wish to have this recognised by English authorities, they are at liberty to draft a consent order embodying the terms of the agreement and submit it to an English court.'

'This allows judges to scrutinise it to ensure it complies with English legal tenets.'

Decisions from sharia tribunals can be presented to a family court judge for approval with no more detail than is necessary to complete a two page form. The sharia courts in the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal are recognised as courts under the Arbitration Act. This law, which covers Jewish Beth Din courts, gives legal powers to a tribunal if all parties involved accept its authority.

The Civitas study said the Islamic courts should no longer be recognised under British law.

Its director Dr David Green said: 'The reality is that for many Muslims, sharia courts are in practice part of an institutionalised atmosphere of intimidation, backed by the ultimate sanction of a death threat.'

The Muslim Council in Britain condemned the study for 'stirring up hatred'.

A spokesman said: 'Sharia councils are perfectly legitimate. There is no evidence they are intimidating or discriminatory against women. The system is purely voluntary so if people don't like it they can go elsewhere.'

Patrick Mercer, Tory MP for Newark and chairman of the Commons counter-terrorism sub committee, said: 'We have an established law of the land and a judiciary. Anything that operates outside that system must be viewed with great caution.'

'If crimes are going unreported to police, this will erode the authority of those who have to enforce our law. In a sovereign state there must be one law, and one law only.'

Philip Davies, Tory MP for Shipley, said: 'Everyone should be deeply concerned about the extent of these courts.'

'They do entrench division in society, and do nothing to entrench integration or community cohesion. It leads to a segregated society.'

'There should be one law, and that should be British law. We can't have a situation where people can choose which system of law they follow and which they do not.'

'We can't have a situation where people choose the system of law which they feel gives them the best outcome. Everyone should equal under one law.'

Veteran Tory Lord Tebbit provoked anger among Muslims earlier this month by comparing Islamic sharia courts to gangsters.

He likened the tribunals to the 'system of arbitration of disputes that was run by the Kray brothers'.

Lord Tebbit told the Lords: 'Are you not aware that there is extreme pressure put upon vulnerable women to go through a form of arbitration that results in them being virtually precluded from access to British law?'

Warning that women could be shut out from the protection of the law, he asked Justice Minister Lord Bach: 'That is a difficult matter, I know, but how do you think we can help those who are put in that position?'

The bishops vs the BBC

By Jerome Taylor

The Independent (13.05.2009) / HRWF (14.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two months ago, Mark Thompson, the director general of the BBC, made a short trip from the Beeb's headquarters in Shepherd's Bush to Lambeth Palace for a private meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury. Rowan Williams had a blunt message to deliver: the "Christian voice", the Archbishop suggested, risked being "sidelined" by the BBC and Mr Thompson needed to do something about it.

At the time there was increasing speculation over who would become the corporation's new head of religious programming. With one exception (the appointment of an agnostic, Alan Bookbinder, in 2001) the BBC's head of religion had always professed a Christian faith. But this time executives at the corporation - once famously described as being "hideously white" - were considering a radical departure from their usual tack.

The front runner for the job this time around was Aaqil Ahmed, a 39-year-old Muslim who had carved out a successful career at Channel 4 creating critically acclaimed and often controversial religious programming such as Inside the Mind of the Suicide Bomber and the Bafta-winning Saving Africa's Witch Children.

As someone with a long track record of encouraging interfaith dialogue, Dr Williams would have had no problem with a Muslim commissioner as long as he or she continued to cover the Christian faith adequately.

But some Christian lobby groups and right-wing commentators were incensed. Only the previous year the BBC's flagship religious programme Songs of Praise had been handed over to Tommy Nagra, a Sikh. Now arguably one of the most influential, non-ecclesiastical religious positions in the country looked like it was going to a non-Christian.

Despite an on-going whispering campaign against Ahmed, news leaked out on Monday night that he had finally been given the newly created role of commissioning editor, religion, and head of religion and ethics. His predecessor, the 47-year-old Methodist lay preacher Michael Wakelin, had been made to reapply for his position during a major restructuring of the commissioning department and did not get the job.

In media circles head of religion at the BBC is often referred to as the corporation's most poisoned chalice, one of those positions where it is virtually impossible to please every interested party.

Lambeth Palace declined to comment publicly on the appointment yesterday but Michael Nazir-Ali, the outgoing Bishop of Rochester, who has a long history of warning that Christianity is being marginalised in Britain at the expense of deference to minority faiths, took the opportunity to remind the BBC: "Three-quarters of the people of Britain declare themselves to be Christian. The BBC must take their needs into account. Whatever his personal faith, the new head of religious programming is duty bound, therefore, to provide adequate time and fair representation to the Christian faith and to Christian concerns."

The Right Rev Nigel McCulloch, the Bishop of Manchester, was similarly circumspect. "The Church of England takes a close interest in the way Christianity, and other faiths, are portrayed by the BBC across all its programming," he said. "We are also interested in its specifically religious output, in light of this country's Judeo-Christian heritage."

Friends of Ahmed say they were astonished by the amount of behind-the-scenes opposition to his appointment purely based on his non-Christian faith. "In the run-up to this appointment there was a remarkably unpleasant campaign against Aaqil from some quarters of the press. It was disgusting," said one friend who has previously worked with Ahmed. "His religion has nothing to do with his ability to commission good programmes;

it's a complete red herring. During his time at Channel 4 he helped produce some of the best religious content on television, much of which was about Christianity."

Ahmed himself believes his Muslim faith has allowed him to approach religious content in an innovative way, particularly when it comes to Islam. During an interview with The Independent while he was at Channel 4, he said: "Our output is risk-taking whether it be Christian or Islamic. Being a Muslim doesn't make it easier for me to make programmes [on Islam] but it has enabled me to understand how to tell a story a different way."

Throughout his time at Channel 4, Ahmed regularly commissioned programmes on Christianity as well as tackling the more controversial elements of Islam. If anything, it was other minority faiths such as Hinduism and Sikhism that were noticeably absent during his tenure.

Jeremy Dear, whose company Pioneer Productions filmed Christianity: A History for Channel 4, said Ahmed would reinvigorate religious programming. "I think it's a brilliant appointment," he said. "What Aaqil does best is show viewers how relevant religion is today and not portray it as some sort of historical curio."

Sunny Hundal, editor of the Pickled Politics blog, agreed. "The BBC wanted to give religion a shot in the arm and Aaqil will do that. But it's a pretty tough job because there will always be one religious lobby that feels they are being sidelined at the expense of the other."

Religion on television: Aaqil Ahmed's CV

Christianity: A History – An eight-part history of the Christian faith with each episode presented by public personalities such as Cherie Blair, Michael Portillo and Rageh Omar. Critics said relying on celebrity presenters dumbed down Christianity's historical legacy. Ahmed defended it as innovative and relevant to a modern audience.

The Qur'an – A two-hour special by Antony Thomas on the Muslim holy book which received widespread praise. There were some objections from how Shia (the minority Islamic schism group) were portrayed but considering the potential pitfalls most critics warmly received the film.

Saving Africa's Witch Children – A Bafta award-winning Dispatches documentary looking at how evangelical preachers in Nigeria mix black magic with Christianity and condemn some children as witches.

Priest Idol – A three-part series from 2005 where a Yorkshire vicar used modern marketing techniques to try to fill his increasingly empty pews. Part of a series of "reality religion" shows commissioned by Channel 4 which appeals to younger viewers but which critics say trivialises religion.

Inside the Mind of the Suicide Bomber – A series of interviews from 2003 with wannabe Palestinian suicide bombers who had failed to blow themselves up in Israel.

Law 'will force churches to employ gay staff'

By Matthew Moore

The Telegraph (20.05.2009) / HRWF (26.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Religious groups are to be forced to accept homosexual youth

workers, secretaries and other staff, even if their faith holds same-sex relationships to be sinful.

Christian organisations fear that the tightened legislation, which is due to come into force next year, will undermine the integrity of churches and dilute their moral message.

It comes amid growing concern that Christians are being unfairly targeted by discrimination laws, following a number of high-profile cases of courts finding against believers who stand up for their faith.

Religious leaders had hoped to lobby for exemptions to the Equality Bill but Maria Eagle, the deputy equalities minister, has now indicated that it will cover almost all church employees.

"The circumstances in which religious institutions can practice anything less than full equality are few and far between," she told delegates at the Faith, Homophobia, Transphobia, & Human Rights conference in London.

"While the state would not intervene in narrowly ritual or doctrinal matters within faith groups, these communities cannot claim that everything they run is outside the scope of anti-discrimination law.

"Members of faith groups have a role in making the argument in their own communities for greater LGBT acceptance, but in the meantime the state has a duty to protect people from unfair treatment."

Under existing equalities legislation, any roles deemed to be necessary "for the purposes of an organised religion" are excluded from gay rights protection.

But the Equality Bill, which is currently passing through parliament, for the first time defines this as applying only to those who lead the liturgy or spend the majority of the time teaching doctrine - essentially just ministers, bishops and their equivalents in other faiths.

A spokesman for the Christian Institute, a religious charity, said that many churchgoers had deep concerns about how the bill would be enforced and accused politicians of hypocrisy.

"It would be absurd to pass a law demanding that the Labour Party employ card-carrying Conservative members, but that is effectively what churches are being told to do. We just want the same exceptions as political parties," he said.

"Christians are sick to the back teeth of equality and diversity laws that put them to the back of the queue. We are quite prepared to accept that people will take a different view to use on moral and ethical questions, but that should not mean we have to withdraw from public life."

Recent cases including the nurse suspended for offering to pray for a patient and the British Airways worker sent home for wearing a visible cross have left many believers afraid to go public with their faith at work.

Neil Addison, a Roman Catholic barrister and expert on religious discrimination law, said that the new legislation would leave churches powerless to defend the fabric of their organisation.

"This is a threat to religious identity. What we are losing is the right for organisations to make free choices," he said.

A spokesman for the Church of England said that while it supports the broad objectives of the Bill it "retains some concerns about the practical application of some specific aspects".

The Equality Bill, which was introduced to the Commons by Harriet Harman, the Minister for Women and Equality, will also strengthen laws against gender, age and disability discrimination.

A Government Equalities Office spokesman said: "The Equality Bill will not force a church to accept someone as a priest regardless of their sexual orientation or gender.

"Churches, synagogues, mosques and others will continue to have the freedom to choose who they employ in jobs which promote their religion. But where they provide services to the public they will have to treat everyone fairly."

British Muslims have more faith in UK than Britons, study finds

By Ruth Gledhill

The Times (08.05.2009) / HRWF (11.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - British Muslims identify with Britain far more than the general public and have more confidence in the country's institutions, according to research published today.

The results of the survey, which showed that 77 per cent of British Muslims were loyal to Britain compared with 36 per cent of the general public, challenge a perception that the community is less patriotic than the country at large. It also recorded that the community had more confidence in British courts, elections, financial bodies and the media than the general public. The survey showed that more than eight out of ten thought that their fellow British Muslims were loyal to the country, but only 36 per cent of the general public did.

The report, by Gallup and the Coexist Foundation, a charity dedicated to promoting understanding between Jews, Christians and Muslims, reported that confidence in the military was the only area where British Muslims scored less than the general public. The authors said: "Since 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London, mistrust towards European Muslims has become palpable. Significant segments of European societies openly express doubt that Muslim fellow nationals are loyal citizens.

"The general construct of this premise rests on an oversimplified and erroneous understanding of Islam and terrorism."

The study did highlight the huge gulf between Muslims and non-Muslims on issues such as homosexuality, abortion and sex outside marriage.

According to the report, The Gallup Coexist Index 2009: A Global Study of Interfaith Relations, all British Muslims believe that homosexual acts are not morally acceptable compared with six out of ten of the general public. Muslims in Britain took a tougher line on the issue than those anywhere else in Europe. In France, 35 per cent of Muslims said that homosexual acts were acceptable, and in Germany 19 per cent.

Other findings were: on abortion, 55 per cent of the British public said it was acceptable, compared with 5 per cent of Muslims; on viewing pornography, 35 per cent of the public

thought doing so was acceptable, compared with 1 per cent of Muslims; on sex between an unmarried man and woman, 82 per cent of the public said that it was morally acceptable, compared with 3 per cent of Muslims; on suicide, 32 per cent of the public said it was morally acceptable, compared with 2 per cent of Muslims.

The report said that among all groups surveyed, the most religious were at least as likely to condemn the use of violence for a noble cause. There was no statistical correlation between religious and non-religious respondents when it came to the moral justification for targeting civilians.

Gallup surveyed more than 1,000 members of the public by telephone and carried out more than 500 face-to-face interviews with Muslims living in areas where the Muslim population was more than 5 per cent.

Devout Hindu loses cremation bid

BBC (08.05.2009) / HRWF (11.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A bid by a devout Hindu for the legal right to be cremated on a traditional open-air funeral pyre has been rejected by the High Court in London.

Davender Ghai, 70, was seeking to overturn a decision by Newcastle City Council in 2006 preventing funeral pyres from being held.

The council has said the traditional religious practice is impractical.

On Friday, Mr Justice Cranston ruled that pyres were prohibited by law, and the prohibition was "justified".

Mr Ghai, from Gosforth, Newcastle, the founder of the Anglo-Asian Friendship Society (AAFS), had earlier told a judge that a pyre was essential to a "good death" and the release of his spirit into the afterlife.

The father of three said he wanted to die "with dignity" and not be "bundled in a box".

In February 2006 he was refused a permit for an open-air cremation site in a remote part of Northumberland.

Newcastle City Council said the burning of human remains anywhere outside a crematorium was prohibited under the 1902 Cremation Act, a ruling the Ministry of Justice agreed was correct.

Mr Ghai took his case to the High Court, invoking Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects religious freedom, and Article 8, which covers the right to private and family life.

In a statement to the court he said: "I will not deny my claim is provocative, least of all in a nation as notoriously squeamish towards death as our own.

"However, I honestly do not believe natural cremation grounds would offend public decency - as long as they were discreet, designated sites far from urban and residential areas."

'Sensitive issue'

Mr Justice Cranston said that Justice Secretary Jack Straw, who had resisted Mr Ghai's legal challenge, argued that people might be "upset and offended" by pyres and "find it abhorrent that human remains were being burned in this way".

He said that while it was "a difficult and sensitive issue", the court had to respect the conclusion of elected representatives.

Those in support of pyres would have to change the "present balance of interests" through the political process, rather than the courts, Mr Justice Cranston said.

He ruled that Article 8 did not apply because an open-air pyre would not only affect family and private life but would also have a "public character".

Dying wish

Mr Justice Cranston gave Mr Ghai permission to take his case to the Court of Appeal.

He added: "I don't think there is a real prospect of success, but it seems to me sufficiently a matter of public importance for me to give permission to appeal."

A spokesman for Newcastle City Council said after the ruling: "Newcastle City Council has, and will continue to, consult with different faiths in an attempt to accommodate their funeral requirements.

"This is a lengthy judgement and it will take some time to consider all of its detail."

Mr Ghai, who is currently receiving medical treatment in India, said: "I shall appeal until the very end, in the faith that my dying wish will not go unheard.

"A matter of such magnitude deserves to be heard by the highest courts in our land and I shall not tire until all legal avenues are exhausted."

Stewardess sacked for refusing to wear Islamic robe and walk behind male colleagues

Daily Mail Reporter (27.04.2009) / HRWF (30.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A BMI air stewardess was sacked for refusing to wear a traditional Islamic robe and walk behind male colleagues when travelling to Saudi Arabia.

Lisa Ashton, 37, was told that she had to wear a black robe, known as an abaya, which covers everything but the face, feet and hands, when out in public areas.

She was also instructed by the airline to follow her male colleagues, irrespective of their rank.

But Miss Ashton, who earned £15,000-a-year, refused to fly to Saudi Arabia, claiming the requirements were discriminatory and that she considered the country to be unsafe to travel to because of the risk of terrorist attacks.

'It's not the law that you have to walk behind men in Saudi Arabia, or that you have to wear an abaya, and I'm not going to be treated as a second-class citizen,' she said.

'It's outrageous. I'm a proud Englishwoman and I don't want these restrictions placed on myself.'

Miss Ashton had been working for BMI on long-haul flights for nine years when she was told in the summer of 2005 that she would be expected to work on the airline's new service to Saudi Arabia.

However, at the time the Foreign Office was advising visitors of a 'threat of terrorism' in the country.

Miss Ashton decided against travelling there and was offended by the regulations BMI set out for staff working in the area.

A document BMI sent to its staff read: 'It is expected that female crew members will walk behind their male counterparts in public areas such as airports no matter what rank.'

Miss Ashton was offered a transfer to short-haul flights with a 20 per cent salary cut, which she refused.

For some time she was then allowed to continue flying to her normal destinations of India, the Caribbean and the US, but in June 2007 she was told she was on the rota to fly from London to Saudi Arabia.

When Miss Ashton refused to fly she was dismissed.

An employment tribunal in Manchester earlier this year cleared BMI of sexual discrimination, ruling it was justified in imposing 'rules of a different culture' on staff.

It ruled there was no evidence that women would regard BMI's requirements on wearing an abaya or that walking behind men would 'place them under any disadvantage'.

But Miss Ashton has since consulted human rights organisation Liberty and may now seek a judicial review of the tribunal decision.

It is not the law to wear an abaya in Saudi Arabia, although many western women do, and many Saudi expats say it is a 'myth' that women must walk behind men.

Miss Ashton is now following a music career and said one of her songs - Shame, Shame, Shame - was inspired by her experiences with BMI.

School gets huge bill for banning Sikh bracelet

The Economic Times (20.04.2009) / HRWF (27.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A school in Wales that had banned a Sikh student from wearing a kara (bracelet) has lost a high court battle over the issue and has been asked to pay 2000,000 pounds (\$293,000) in legal costs.

Aberdare Girls School had banned 15-year-old Sarika Watkins-Singh from wearing the bracelet that is one of the five symbols of the Sikh religion. Not only was the ban overturned in court, the school has now been landed with a huge legal bill, the Daily Express reported Monday.

The school is reeling from the bill, which includes an invoice from human rights group Liberty, who brought the case on behalf of the student. The school's own legal fees are 76,000 pounds.

Early last year, Sarika was excluded from school for refusing to stop wearing the bangle, which she stated was fundamental to her religious belief.

The school denied any racial discrimination. But the student spent nine weeks being taught in isolation because the bangle was against the school's uniform policy.

The school was originally given legal help from the local authority, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, but when it refused to back down and instead opted to fight the case in the High Court, the free advice was withdrawn.

Now campaigners say the school should never have taken the battle to the High Court.

Sarika won the case after a three-day hearing last June, in which her exclusion was ruled to be 'unlawful'.

The school, with an annual budget of around 2.2 million pounds, has already paid 60,000 pounds to Liberty but disputes an extra bill of 80,000 pounds.

on Sunday, critics slammed the massive cost of the case as "a waste of taxpayers' money" and claimed pupils will "suffer" as a result.

TaxPayers Alliance spokesman Mark Wallace said: "This case means a headache for the taxpayer who will ultimately be forced to stump up. This just emphasises the need for schools to be given full control of their rules and regimes without the risk of politically correct enforcement. The problem in this case arose because of interference from other parties."

Sarika's case caused controversy last year when it emerged that she had been excluded from school. Last November, it was thought that the school would have to pay 76,000 pounds in legal costs.

Chairman of the Campaign for Real Education, Nick Seaton, said: "This is 200,000 pounds which is likely to come out of the school's budget. It means that the students will suffer."

Hindu elder goes to high court for right to open-air cremation

by Riazat Butt

The Guardian (24.03.2009) / HRWF (27.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - An elderly Hindu man will today ask the high court for the right to have an open-air cremation, claiming that to deny him such a ritual "will enslave his soul in endless earthly entrapment".

Davender Ghai, 70, is challenging Newcastle city council's decision to refuse him an open-air cremation when he dies. He claims that this refusal discriminates against him on the grounds of race and religion, contrary to equality and race relation laws. If successful, say his lawyers, the case could set a precedent for designated natural cremation sites around the country. They also described today's review as "the most controversial religious freedom case in British legal history".

The local authority argues that open-air funeral pyres are outlawed by the 1902 Cremation Act. In 2006, it blocked his attempt to establish Britain's first approved site for burning bodies outdoors. Ghai, however, claims to have tested the law in July 2006, when he lit the funeral pyre of Rajpal Mehat in Northumberland.

In a witness statement to be read out in court today, Ghai says he is asking for equality not exemption.

"Local authorities routinely provide separate Muslim and Jewish burial grounds and out-of-hours registration and immediate or weekend burials. Hindus should cremate before the following sunset, too, and yet we, along with the general public, wait for up to a week.

"No one expects Hindus to marry in a church so why are Hindu funerals shoehorned through chapels of rest designed like Anglican churches?"

The justice secretary, Jack Straw, has intervened in the case, contending that the legislation prohibits an open pyre funeral, that it is not incompatible with Ghai's human rights and that any interference is justified on grounds of public health, public safety, public health and public morals.

According to legal documents seen by the Guardian, he also denies that Ghai has been discriminated against on the grounds of race or religion and that such discrimination would "in any event" be justified.

As a way to appease Ghai, Newcastle council offered mourners the chance to charge the coffin and to remain in the crematory to view the entire process, but Ghai rejected the proposals, saying any compromise would have "devastating effects for him in the afterlife.

Lib Dems back state faith schools

The Lib Dems have voted in favour of allowing state-funded faith schools to continue selecting pupils by faith

BBC (07.03.2009) / HRWF (16.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Lib Dems have voted in favour of allowing state-funded faith schools to continue selecting pupils by faith.

The party has also rejected calls to ban the setting up of new state-funded faith schools in a vote at its spring conference in Harrogate.

But schools which could not demonstrate a commitment to inclusiveness in their intake would face funding cuts under the Lib Dem plans.

The opt-out from equalities legislation for faith school staff would also end.

But there would be an exemption for staff who are responsible for religious instruction.

Pupils who are "old enough to decide for themselves" would also be allowed to opt-out of faith-based school assemblies, under the Lib Dem plans.

Many Lib Dems, including frontbench figures, believe faith-based admissions can be socially divisive.

But others, including deputy leader Vince Cable, argued, during an impassioned debate, that they must be a feature of a tolerant society.

Closing gap

Some party members argued it would not be realistic to ban them, given that they represent a third of schools in the UK.

On Friday, representatives of the Anglican and Catholic churches and Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh faiths signed a letter to the Guardian newspaper saying that banning selection of pupils by faith in religious schools would be "perverse and unjust".

The party leadership is keen to promote its education and family policies at the weekend conference.

Lib Dem members also voted to cut class sizes for infant school children, aged between five and seven.

They want them to be reduced to private school levels of about 15 per class and to plan to spend £2.5bn on closing the gap between children from rich and poor backgrounds.

They also backed scrapping the 600 page national curriculum and replacing it with a slimmed-down minimum curriculum entitlement and setting up an independent Education Standards Authority to restore confidence in standards.

The party's education spokesman David Laws said: "Our plans would slash class sizes in infant schools - where small class sizes matter most - and boost funding for the children who need it most.

"Our Pupil Premium would bring the funding of the most disadvantaged pupils up to private school levels."

The EU equality law that will let 'upset' atheists sue companies that hang up crucifixes

By Jonathan Petre

The Daily Mail (07.03.2009) / HRWF (10.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Organisations which hang crucifixes on walls could be sued if they upset atheists under equality laws proposed by the European Union.

Any group offering a service to the public, including hospitals, charities, businesses and prisons, would be at risk.

Legislation may also allow Christians to bring an action against a hotel if it displayed something they deemed offensive - such as a poster for the 1979 Monty Python film The Life Of Brian.

There are already laws banning harassment in the workplace, but the new Brussels regulations are designed to offer people protection from providers of goods and services.

However, they are so broad that critics say they could lead to a spate of civil cases by anyone claiming their dignity has been violated by the 'hostile environment' of an organisation.

The Church of England says hospices or charities for the homeless could face legal action if people using their services felt degraded by their religious practices or symbols, such as the cross.

The Archbishops' Council even fears that charities could be challenged by atheists if grace is said before meals.

The Law Society says religious believers may also be able to launch a civil action for harassment.

In an official submission to the EU, the society said: 'For instance, in a shop or shared lodging house, there may be a notice board on which is posted material that some of those who see it will find offensive on religious grounds (for instance, a poster for a film, such as *The Life Of Brian*).'

The proposals, which go before EU governments for approval later this year, are part of a new directive outlawing discrimination by businesses on the grounds of sexual orientation, age, disability or belief.

If approved, it will become the latest in a swathe of European-inspired equality laws which critics say stifle freedom of speech and marginalise religion.

The Government tried to introduce a similar law in 2005 but dropped it after a resounding rejection by the House of Lords.

Peers feared it would encourage politically correct officials to stop public expressions of religion, such as carol services or Bibles by hospital bedsides.

Simon Calvert, of the Christian Institute, said the proposed EU directive would 'open a Pandora's box'.

He asked: 'What about Gideon Bibles in hotel bedrooms? Would councils ban nativity scenes from Christmas displays?'

A spokeswoman for the Government Equalities Office, which is responsible for the EU directive, said it was felt that existing UK law was 'adequate'.

Senior Tory demands ban on polygamy

David Sapsted, Foreign Correspondent

The National (22.02.2009) / HRWF (23.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A senior British politician is demanding the government stop Muslim men from taking more than one wife.

Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, the Conservative Party's shadow minister for community cohesion and herself a Muslim, claims that "cultural sensitivity" is preventing the government from taking action at a time when polygamy is on the increase.

Her call has angered many in the Muslim community who argue that the government should not interfere with a practice that is an intrinsic part of their religion. Polygamy is illegal in Britain, but Muslim men get around it by marrying a first wife in a registered, civil law service and then taking a second, third or fourth in an unregistered religious service.

Others travel abroad, usually to the subcontinent, and take other wives there.

Baroness Warsi is calling on the government to legally require all marriages at religious services in the UK to be registered.

She also wants action taken under existing bigamy laws for those entering into polygamous marriages, either at home or abroad.

"There has been a failure on the part of policymakers to respond to this situation," Baroness Warsi told the BBC.

"Some of it has been done in the name of cultural sensitivity and we've just avoided either discussing or dealing with this matter head on.

"There has to be a culture change and that has to be brought about by policymakers taking a very clear stance on this issue, saying that, in this country, one man is allowed to marry one woman."

But Manzoor Moghal, chairman of the Muslim Forum, said Muslims in Britain should be allowed to pursue their religious and cultural practices without interference from the state.

He said that polygamy under Islam represented "the most misunderstood subject in the West" with a great deal of invective unfairly directed at it.

"Polygamy came in when Islam came on the scene," he said.

"Before that, Judaism and Christianity allowed unbridled polygamy to continue.

"They never addressed the subject, with the result that only the first wife had all the rights.

"So Islam brought regulation into this one and all the wives are to be treated equitably. Why would you not allow Muslims to conduct their affairs in their cultural, religious framework, without interference from the state?

"Why should we take them to task for having a second, third and a fourth nikah, which is compatible with their religion?"

However, there are concerns among many British Muslims over the practice, which is said to be on the increase throughout Europe.

Mufti Barkatullah, a member of the UK Sharia Council, said he sees more than 20 cases a year involving women experiencing polygamy-related problems.

"Islamic law is very clear that it has to be done in the context of fairness, justice and fulfilling the duties, and in a situation where there is a dire need," he said.

Mr Barkatullah said the rules for practising polygamy are so strict that it makes it "mission impossible" in the vast majority of cases.

"They end up violating Sharia law – committing gross inequality and injustices with their various spouses, neglecting their duties towards their dependents and committing forgery, hypocrisy and constant lies," he said.

Baroness Haleh Afshar, a prominent Muslim feminist and professor of politics and women's studies at York University, said it was a "sad reality" that polygamy was on the increase in the United Kingdom.

She blamed the rise on the failure to require the registration of every marriage.

"Sadly it is increasing on the part of British-born men who sometimes marry British-born girls", but, more often, someone goes back to the subcontinent and abandons one wife

and takes on a second, she said. Under Baroness Warsi's proposals, it would be a legal requirement to register all religious marriages within four weeks.

"If that was the case," she said, "then those marriages would have to be declared within law and, if those marriages were declared within law, then clearly, if the person has a first legal wife, there could be potential cases of bigamy being brought."

The government, though, seems unwilling to enter such a sensitive area and ministers look certain to oppose any measures introduced in the House of Lords.

In a statement yesterday, the ministry of justice said: "It is government policy to prevent the formation of polygamous households in the United Kingdom.

"Polygamous marriages that have been contracted in overseas countries are legally recognised, although immigration rules prevent a man from bringing more than one wife to settle with him in the UK.

"It is not the role of government to take a position on the rites, beliefs or practices of any particular religious faith, other than where these give rise to conflict with the common law."

There are no official estimates for the number of men involved in polygamous marriages, but Zlakha Ahmed, project manager of a European women's support service based in Rotherham, said the number is growing.

She said she believes it is younger, British-born Muslim men who are the driving force for the increase.

She added that women under pressure to enter into polygamous relationships often do not have anyone to turn to for help.

Half of Catholic adoption agencies won over to new equality law

BBC (05.01.2009) / HRWF (06.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Half of the Catholic adoption agencies that the Church threatened to close if they were required to work with gay couples have now adopted the new equality law following an exemption period.

In total, 11 agencies were given a 21 month 'adjustment' period from the Equality Act in April 2007.

The Act outlaws discrimination in the provision of goods and services on the grounds of sexual orientation. The exemption period ran out on 1 January 2009.

Five of the agencies have now changed their position and will comply with the law,. One is to close and two others are still seeking exemption, BBC News reports.

Compliance with the new regulations by Catholic adoption agencies has been met with strong criticism by some members of the Church. But others have welcomed it.

In October 2008 the Catholic Bishop of Lancaster, Patrick O'Donoghue, threatened to evict adoption agency Catholic Caring Services from church premises for complying with the Equality Act.

His suggestion was greeted with outrage inside and outside the Church.

Some supporters of the new law were initially resistant or critical towards the exemption period allowed by the government. But other equalities campaigners say that the increased compliance is a sign of its success.

It is hoped that the remaining three agencies can be persuaded to come on board with the full equalities agenda.

Christians supporting full equality on theological as well as practical grounds say that the changing public and legal agenda creates the opportunity to challenge discrimination and the culture that supports it within sections of the churches.