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Councils told to stop prayers before meetings

Secularism.org.uk (7.10.2011) / HRWF (17.10.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Ahead of our challenge to Council Prayers in Bideford, two local Councils have been censured for saying prayers before meetings.

Crowborough Town Council and Mayfield Parish Council in East Sussex have received advice from the Sussex Association of Local Councils (SALC), to suggest that any prayers for those who wanted them should be entirely separate and not form part of the formal meetings. This accords with our legal advice.

Mayfield Parish Council voted last week to say a prayer before each meeting and then received the advice from SALC. Before meetings at Crowborough Town Council, councillors stood up to ask God to 'grant them wisdom to make the best decisions', followed by a prayer by the Mayor or Reverend Andrew Cornes.

SALC told them if councillors want to say prayers they should do it outside the council chamber. Jacqui Simes of SALC said: "Prayers are not part of the parish council's duties and cannot be included in the agenda. They should not be part of the parish council meeting. If they do then it should be something completely separate – and not any part of sitting around a table."

Reactions to the advice (reported by pro-Christian newspapers as a "ban") were mixed. The Reverend Cornes said "I've heard from councillors in the past who said they were grateful for the presence of a representative of Christ and his church." The chair of Mayfield Parish Council said "We live in an Anglican society and I felt an Anglican prayer was the right way forward." She now admits they were wrong.

On the other hand, one Mayfield councillor said "I think it's inappropriate. This can offend so many people who may not be of the same faith or may not have a faith." Another said "The law is very clear. If people wish to pray they should not do it at the meeting and it should not be on the agenda for discussion. We live in a multicultural society. We have to look at the population and we have to move with the times."

The NSS' challenge to prayers at Bideford Town Council is at the High Court in London on Friday 2 December.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: "Astoundingly, prayers are conducted in the majority of council meetings. Such prayers — often pushed by a religious clique — are entirely unnecessary, cause needless friction, and are a discourtesy (or worse) to those of other faiths and none. That is why we have taken one Council that refused our request to desist following a complaint by a councillor to a Judicial Review at the High Court. If we are successful, prayers will become unlawful throughout England and Wales.

"The Judicial Review will be very expensive and is likely to go to appeal, whoever wins at this stage.

"We have launched an appeal for £20,000 and invite you to express your support in a tangible way and make a donation via the [Donate page](#) on our website."

High Court appeal for imprisoned Navy conscientious objector

Ekklesia (12.10.2011) / HRWF (17.10.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - A medic in the Royal Navy who was detained at court martial in July this year will appeal his conviction at the High Court on Thursday 13 October 2011.

Michael Lyons was convicted of "wilful disobedience" because he asked not to participate in rifle training in September 2011, since he had applied for conscientious objector status.

He was consequently given 7 months detention, stripped of his rank as Leading Medical Assistant and dismissed from the service.

At Mr Lyons' court martial his lawyer argued that, because he had already applied for discharge as a conscientious objector at the time of the training, the command for him to participate in it was unlawful.

Furthermore, as a medic and non-combatant, Mr Lyons had not been required to handle a weapon since 2005 and is not required to do so under the Geneva Convention.

Shortly after Mr Lyons was convicted, a ground-breaking ruling was made by the European Court of Human Rights which could have significant impact on this and similar cases. The ECHR ruled that states have a duty to respect individuals' right to conscientious objection to military service as part of their obligation to respect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion set out in Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Mr Lyon's wife, Lillian, said of her husband, who is now detained at the Military Corrective Training Centre at Colchester: "I am so proud of my husband, he is the most compassionate, kind, loving and moral man I have ever known. I agree with everything he has done, and I am appalled by the way the Navy have treated him."

ForcesWatch, a network concerned with ethical issues around the armed forces, said the case highlights the lack of respect shown for the human rights of forces personnel.

Emma Sangster, Co-ordinator of ForcesWatch, commented: "There are a number of significant concerns about the way that Michael Lyons' case has been handled - within the chain of command, by the committee that dismissed his claim to conscientious objection as 'political', and in the conclusions of the court martial."

She continued: "In passing sentence, the judge questioned Michael's sincerity, although no evidence to question this was brought before the hearing. On the contrary, Michael's immediate commanding officer did not block his application."

"It is quite clear that Michael's awareness and conscience have developed significantly since he enlisted aged 18. He joined up because he was sold the story that, as a member of the Navy, he would be offering humanitarian aid to people who needed it. Michael has been extremely courageous to act on his conscience and remain consistent and dignified throughout this whole process," she added.

"The simple injustice of Michael's treatment illustrates how the government and the Ministry of Defence repeatedly fail to recognise conscientious objection in practice. We hope the recent recognition given to those who object on moral grounds to military service by the European Convention on Human Rights will create a change of attitude in the UK armed forces," concluded Ms Sangster.

* More on the background to the case, and the legal issues involved, here: <http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/node/15546>

* ForcesWatch, which is backed by Ekklesia and many other NGOs and individuals, is a network launched in 2010 concerned with ethical issues around armed forces recruitment and the rights of forces personnel. www.forceswatch.net

The make-up of modern Britain: 70% of us claim to be Christians... and only 1.5% are gay`

By Steve Doughty

The Daily Mail (29.09.2011) / HRWF (03.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - England - Three Britons count themselves as Christian for every one non-believer, according to a major survey.

And nearly seven in ten said they were Christian, even if they never go to church.

Fewer than a quarter said they had no religion and only one in 12 follows another religion.

The finding that the nation remains overwhelmingly Christian comes days after it emerged that BBC programme-makers have been put under pressure to stop describing dates as BC or AD.

Instead, they have been told to use the non-Christian alternatives Before Common Era and Common Era.

The Corporation's religion and ethics department has said that 'as the BBC is committed to impartiality it is appropriate that we use terms that do not offend or alienate non-Christians'.

Meanwhile, four Christians denied the right to wear crosses or act in accordance with their beliefs at work are taking cases to the European Court of Human Rights claiming the State is trying to suppress their religion.

The Office for National Statistics' new Integrated Household Survey, which collects the views of 420,000 people, found that 69 per cent of people in Britain said they were Christian.

Nearly nine in ten over-65s are Christian. But even in the least religious age group, 25 to 34-year-olds, more than half – 55 per cent – profess Christianity.

Fifty-nine per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds and 60 per cent of under-16s said they were Christian.

Support for other religions breaks down as 4.4 per cent Muslim, 1.3 per cent Hindu, 0.7 per cent Sikh, 0.4 per cent Buddhist, 0.4 per cent Jewish, and 1.1 per cent who say they follow other religions.

Only 23 per cent of the population said they had no religion. Christian groups said the findings showed that State agencies which act as if Christianity was a minority hobby are wildly wrong.

Simon Calvert, of the Christian Institute think tank, said: 'These figures must come as a shock to the BBC and the political class. It is about time that this reality, that people want to be identified as Christian, was reflected not only in the output of our major broadcasters but also in the policies of the Government.

'Ministers are still barrelling along with enforcing civil partnerships in churches and redefining marriage. We can only hope that the reality will catch up with them and give them pause for thought.'

The Integrated Household Survey was put together from five ONS surveys which asked the same 'core questions' over a year.

Polygamous marriages won't be recognised, say Government – but some already are

National Secular Society (29.07.2011) / HRWF (29.08.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - After the leaking of a Government document that suggested that multiple Islamic marriages could be officially recorded by the state, Ministers have made clear that no such plans are in train.

The internal document, prepared by civil servants, warned that women who enter religious marriages are "unprotected" if their husband then takes a second or third wife. One possible solution could be to require all Islamic and other religious marriages to be registered with state authorities, the document suggested.

The document was obtained by the former MP, Paul Goodman, who published extracts from it on his blog on the ConservativeHome website.

But the suggestion caused alarm among some MPs, who warned that any move towards official recognition of polygamy would be "wholly unacceptable".

The Department for Communities and Local Government quickly ruled out legalising multiple sharia law marriages. A spokesman for the Department said: "The Government

has ruled out the registration of Islamic marriages. Polygamy is illegal in Britain and will remain so.”

That does not mean, of course, that those participating in polygamous Islamic marriages that have been conducted abroad in countries where they are permitted do not qualify for benefits when they come to this country. An investigation by the Daily Mail showed that the authorities turn a blind eye to such arrangements and that benefits payments are made in recognition of them.

Muslims give backing to Christian electrician persecuted for cross in van

By Nick Fagge

Council boss has Che Guevara poster on office wall

Daily Mail (20.04.2011) / HRWF (21.04.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Hindu, Muslim and Sikh leaders last night offered support to electrician Colin Atkinson who faces the sack for making a stand over his Christian beliefs.

The religious leaders joined former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey to demand that the 64-year-old grandfather be allowed to mark Easter by displaying a tiny palm cross in his work van.

Mr Atkinson has been thrown out of his workplace and fears he will lose his job at Wakefield District Housing (WDH) because he refuses to remove the cross.

Christian leaders have condemned his treatment as ‘scandalous’.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey described Mr Atkinson’s case as ‘an outrage’.

And last night Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs added their voices to the uproar.

Niranjan Vakhaira, President of the Hindu Charitable Trust in Leeds, West Yorks., said: ‘Everybody has the right to preach their own religion.’

‘I don’t see how anyone can take offence at this cross, the employers are definitely in the wrong.’

‘Every human being has the right to follow his faith, as long as it doesn’t harm anybody. ‘If it hasn’t harmed anybody then I don’t see the logic in telling him to remove it.’

Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, of the Muslim Institute, said: ‘I can’t see any problem at all in displaying this symbol.’

‘I can’t see how this would offend anybody.’

‘I really don’t think people should become so touchy about these things.’

‘You have to respect other people’s feelings and beliefs.’

A spokesman for the Sikh Education Council said: ‘We find it difficult to understand why an employer would terminate someone’s employment for having a crucifix in their vehicle.’

'We suggest the employer should rethink their actions in this particular case.

'Sikhs believe in freedom of expression and freedom of belief with respect.

'As long as what someone is doing is doing it with respect for other people we would support their right to practice as they see fit.'

WDH bosses claim they are trying to hammer out a compromise with Mr Atkinson that will allow him to practice his faith at work with dignity.

But one, Environment Manager Denis Doody, was arrested by police after he assaulted a Daily Mail photographer covering the story.

Mr Doody has a poster of communist revolutionary Che Guevara on the wall of his office. And a Muslim clerical worker at WDH headquarters has a Koranic verse hanging in the windscreen of the car she uses for work.

Last night WDH chief executive Kevin Dodd maintained it was "unacceptable" for Mr Atkinson to have the Christian cross on display in his work van as it was crucial for the organisation to maintain 'neutrality'.

But WDH executive director of people Gillian Pickersgill added she was powerless to stop the Muslim worker displaying the Koranic verse.

She told the Daily Mail: "Our corporate policy is that there can be no personal items displayed in company vehicles.

"We advise our managers that they should not display personal items in their cars when they use them for work purposes but we cannot enforce this. These are their own cars." Last night WDH was accused of rank hypocrisy.

Former Home Office Minister and devout Christian Ann Widdecombe said: 'This is proof positive that WDH are anti-Christian rather than neutral.

'Where is the difference between the cross for a Christian and a verse from the Koran for a Muslim.'

Mike Judge from the Christian Institute said: 'The injustice is plain to everyone except the equality bureaucrats.

**'This is proof positive that Wakefield District Housing are anti-Christian'
Ann Widdecombe**

'The company will allow an Islamic burka but not a Christian cross.

'When it comes to equality Christians are pushed out into the cold.

'This latest example shows the anti-Christian bias at WDH.'

Colin's ordeal began last year after bosses received an anonymous letter claiming tenants may be offended by the 8-inch cross in the van.

He refused to remove it and was accused of rejecting a 'reasonable' management complaint.

Mr Atkinson and his Unite union rep had argued there was nothing in company rules prohibiting the cross. Hindu and Sikh colleagues appeared as witnesses in his defence.

WDH promotes its inclusive policies and allows employees to wear religious symbols – including burkas – at work.

But it changed company policy on Christmas Eve last year banning all personal effects in its vehicles.

In January Mr Atkinson was reported for continuing to display the cross in the van and last week WDH concluded he had breached company rules.
The electrician says he expects to lose his job.

'Wear a headscarf or we will kill you': How the 'London Taliban' is threatening women and trying to ban gays in bid to impose sharia law

Daily Mail (18.04.2011) / HRWF (21.04.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Women who do not wear headscarves are being threatened with violence and even death by Islamic extremists intent on imposing sharia law on parts of Britain, it was claimed today.

Other targets of the 'Talibanesque thugs', being investigated by police in the Tower Hamlets area of London, include homosexuals.

Stickers have been plastered on public walls stating: 'Gay free zone. Verily Allah is severe in punishment'.

Posters for H&M which feature women in bikinis and a racy poster for a Bollywood film have been defaced.

An Asian woman who works in a pharmacy in east London was told to dress more modestly and wear a veil or the shop would be boycotted.

When she went to the media to talk about the abuse she suffered, a man later entered the pharmacy and told her: 'If you keep doing these things, we are going to kill you'.

The 31-year-old, who is not a practising Muslim, said she has since been told to take holiday by the pharmacy owners and now fears she may lose her job.

She said: 'Why should I wear a hijab (headscarf) or burqa? I haven't done anything wrong.'

Other incidents reported include the placing of stickers across the white-minority borough which state it is a 'gay-free zone' and the daubing of paint on posters for clothing shop H&M featuring women in bikinis.

Ghaffar Hussain, of the anti-extremism think-tank the Quilliam Foundation, told The Sunday Times that the intimidation was the work of 'Talibanesque thugs'.

He added: 'This minority think they have the right to impose their fringe interpretation of Islam on others.'

Three men have been charged with religiously-aggravated criminal damage in connection with some of the incidents, which have mirrored crude attempts at censorship in Birmingham.

Borough Commander of Tower Hamlets, Paul Rickett, said: 'I am saddened that there are a small minority of people who do not wish to respect the lifestyle choices of others.

'I would like to reassure the people of Tower Hamlets that we are investigating these incidents.

'At this stage there is no information to suggest any of the incidents are linked. Anyone found committing such criminal acts will face criminal proceedings.

'We work closely with faith leaders in the community, the Tower Hamlets interfaith forum, our partner agencies and the local community to ensure that people feel safe in the borough.'

Khalid Mahmood, MP for Birmingham Perry Bar, said he had seen posters vandalised in Birmingham but was not aware of threats being made.

He said: 'I have seen posters defaced in Birmingham and it's just complete nonsense.

'If people choose to follow the religion they should be free to do so and we don't want to go down the route that the French have done, but these people have to accept other people.

'If it's about the freedom to do what you want, others should have the freedom to do what they want to do.

'It's the actions of a very small minority, and in Birmingham we have not seen people threaten women who are not wearing the burqa - if someone were to do that the police should be informed.'

Firebrand Muslim cleric Anjem Choudary said that he was aware of individuals who would speak up if they saw a Muslim woman without a headscarf, but insisted they were only giving advice about their views of Islam.

He said no threats would be made and described the allegations of threats of death as 'completely ridiculous'.

He said: 'There are groups who propagate Islam, and if they see a Muslim woman without a hijab they may say "sister, it's obligatory that you cover your hair".

'It's an individual intervention to propagate Islam. For non-Muslims, they may point out to them that women are being exploited in the West.

'It's about telling people about the preference of covering up, but nobody's going to say "you are going to be killed".'

Tower Hamlets has a reputation for being a centre of Islamic extremism in London.

Recently it was revealed that Rich Dart, a middle-class former BBC worker, had converted to Islam and was living in Bow, east London in a £300,000 flat paid for by benefits.

Despite being unemployed, Mr Dart regularly attends Muslim rallies in which he was recently heard to say: 'When the Taliban defeat the allies we will establish sharia law and take the fight to the enemy.'

Before Christmas posters appeared in the borough claiming the religious festival was 'evil'.

The campaign's organiser was 27-year-old Abu Rumaysah, who once called for sharia law in Britain at a press conference held by hate preacher leader Anjem Choudary, the leader of banned militant group Islam4UK.

Mr Rumaysah said: 'Christmas is a lie and as Muslims it is our duty to attack it.

'But our main attack is on the fruits of Christmas, things like alcohol abuse and promiscuity that increase during Christmas and all the other evils these lead to such as abortion, domestic violence and crime.

'We hope that our campaign will make people realise that Islam is the only way to avoid this and convert.'

Census: How religious is the UK?

BBC (21.02.2011) / HRWF (10.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - London, UK - A publicity drive has started for the census, now just five weeks away, but the survey is being criticised for its question on religion. So is it even possible to accurately measure how religious the UK is?

According to the Gospel of Luke, it was a Roman census that sent Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, where she gave birth to Jesus Christ.

And more than 2,000 years later, the same kind of counting exercise is being used to gauge the religious make-up of the UK.

According to the last census 10 years ago, more than two-thirds of people in Britain regarded themselves as Christian - 72% in England and Wales, and 65% in Scotland.

More than 1.5 million in England and Wales, more than 3% of the population, said they were Muslim and nearly eight million ticked "no religion". There were also 390,000 self-proclaimed Jedi.

But five weeks before the next census day, Sunday 27 March, some groups are questioning whether the religious numbers are at all accurate, and could ever be.

They prefer to use the British Social Attitudes survey, carried out annually by the National Centre for Social Research, which paints a picture of a less-religious country, with 51% describing themselves as non-religious and 43% as Christian.

The religious question in the census was first introduced in 2001, as a voluntary option. In some other countries such as France, state questions about race, ethnicity or religion are not permitted.

But in the UK, the vast majority of people answered it despite not having to, although the reappearance of the same question in the forthcoming census has prompted complaints.

Question 20 in England and Wales will say: "What is your religion?" In Scotland, question 13 will ask: "What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?"

The British Humanist Association (BHA) believes they are leading questions that actively encourage people to tick a religious answer, thereby inflating the numbers, especially among Christians because many people hold a weak affiliation.

If you were baptised but had not been to church since then, you might be inclined to say you were still Christian, says Naomi Phillips, the head of public affairs at the BHA. She says the actual number of secular people is probably double the number the census recorded.

"Many people tick Christian but wouldn't consider themselves to be religious if you asked them otherwise. And this is used to justify maintaining faith schools and used by local authorities to make their planning decisions to allocate resources to public services.

"It means more budgets go to Christian groups and the needs of non-religious groups are not taken into account."

The BHA begins a poster campaign next week on buses and at railway stations that urges people who are non-religious to "for God's sake, say so".

Ms Phillips says it would be preferable not to have the question, because it's hard to get an accurate picture.

"It's very difficult to measure. There are so many different things to measure - by belief, practice, whether you believe in God, whether you attend places of worship, whether you pray."

The census question pre-supposes you have a religion, she says, and a two-part question like they have in Northern Ireland would be fairer, which differentiates between your faith at birth and your faith now.

The humanists are not alone in wanting the question changed. The Foundation for Holistic Spirituality (F4HS) wants it easier for those people who have a spiritual but non-religious tendency to answer the question.

But the Office for National Statistics, which collects the data, says the question is one of a number that allows people to fully express their identity in the way they consider most appropriate.

"The religion question measures the number of people who self-identify an affiliation with a religion, irrespective of the extent of their religious belief or practice," says a spokesman.

It's a question that is worded in the most sensitive way possible, says historian and broadcaster Nick Barratt, especially with the subtle change of emphasis introduced in the new census - respondents are now faced with "no religion" as the top option to tick, rather than "none".

"This [change] makes it more secular, and easier for people to identify with the question and where they are coming from. There's the question of faith and belief as opposed to religion. It allows other beliefs to get in. If you said 'none', it is like you have no belief or faith, but 'no religion' means you may have."

He expects this change could mean fewer Christians this time, but it's an important question, he says, because it shows how richly diverse some communities are.

It also has a practical purpose, says the ONS. The results are used to improve understanding of communities, it says, and to provide public services, monitor discrimination and develop policy to best cater for people's religious backgrounds.

But what is the true picture? Whichever survey is accurate, it's clear that many people in Britain still feel an affinity with Christianity, even if they haven't attended church in many years.

Average Sunday attendance in the Church of England was 960,000 in 2008, a figure which has been falling for a number of years. A survey by Christian charity Tearfund suggested it was one in 10.

Yet nearly 40 million people in England and Wales, 72%, identified themselves as Christian. Other surveys suggest the majority of people pray and believe in God, even if they don't regularly go to church.

Christianity should not be measured simply in terms of Sunday worshippers, which are falling in number, says a Church of England spokesman, because the numbers of people going at other times remains high.

"The 72% figure seems to be constant and not decreasing. What's interesting for us is the social mobility and social change. People might not go on a Sunday to church any more but might go on a Saturday or Thursday or they might go less often. It's a change in how much time they have available.

"We have made worship available online, in the morning and in the evening. There's probably more people engaging with the church than ever before."

Christianity is a religion that people identify with, he adds, regardless of their level of church-going.

But it's impossible to quantify the numbers, says pollster Stephan Shakespeare, founder of YouGov.

"It's very hard to make an absolute measurement. You have to get an ideal definition about what being a Christian means or what being religious means. But what is useful is to ask the same question as last time and see the change."

So even if a question is slightly flawed, it's better to stick with it.
