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Woman wins Scientology marriage bid

Belfast Telegraph (11.12.2013) - A woman who wants to marry in a Church of Scientology chapel has won a battle in the UK's highest court.

Scientologist Louisa Hodkin took her fight to the Supreme Court after a High Court judge ruled that services run by Scientologists were not "acts of worship".

Five Supreme Court justices analysed the case at a hearing in London in July and ruled in her favour today, announcing that the Scientology church was a "place of meeting for religious worship".

Miss Hodkin wants to marry fiance Alessandro Calcioli in a Church of Scientology chapel in central London.

She took legal action after the registrar general of births, deaths and marriages refused to register the London Church Chapel for the solemnisation of marriages under the 1855 Places of Worship Registration Act - because it was not a place for "religious worship".

Supreme Court justices said religion should not be confined to faiths involving a "supreme deity". They said the Church of Scientology held religious services, therefore its church was a "place of meeting for religious worship".

The justices unanimously allowed Miss Hodkin's appeal against the High Court ruling.

In 1970 the Church of Scientology launched a similar case.

Then the Court of Appeal ruled that Scientology did not involve religious worship because there was no "veneration of God or of a Supreme Being".

Miss Hodkin lost her High Court fight in December 2012 when Mr Justice Ouseley said he was bound by the 1970 Court of Appeal decision and therefore had to dismiss her challenge.

But he said Supreme Court justices should consider the question of whether Scientologists worshipped.

He said that because the Supreme Court was a more senior court than the Court of Appeal, Supreme Court justices might take a different view.

Miss Hodkin argued that the 1970 ruling should not be binding because Scientologist beliefs and services had evolved during the past four decades.

She said services were "ones of religious worship" and likened Scientology to Buddhism and Jainism.

Communities Secretary Eric Pickles had welcomed Mr Justice Ouseley's ruling.

Mr Pickles said the Church of Scientology might have been entitled to "tax breaks" - because of rules governing places of public worship - had a decision gone in its favour.

He said taxpayers would not want "such a controversial organisation" to get "special" treatment.

Miss Hodkin said: "I am really excited. I'm really glad we are finally being treated equally and can now get married in our church."

She said they hoped to get married in the next few months but have yet to set a date.

Mr Calcioli added: "I think the court's definition of religion is excellent. I think it's what most people today would understand 'religion' to be. I'm ecstatic."

Local government minister Brandon Lewis said his department would be taking legal advice following the ruling.

He said: "I am very concerned about this ruling, and its implications for business rates.

"In the face of concerns raised by Conservatives in Opposition, Labour ministers told Parliament during the passage of the Equalities Bill that Scientology would continue to fall outside the religious exemption for business rates. But we now discover Scientology may be eligible for rate relief and that the taxpayer will have to pick up the bill, all thanks to [Harriet Harman](#) and Labour's flawed laws.

"Hard-pressed taxpayers will wonder why Scientology premises should now be given tax cuts when local firms have to pay their fair share.

"We will review the Court's verdict and discuss this with our legal advisers before deciding the next steps. However, it will remain the case that premises which are not genuinely open to the public will not qualify for tax relief."

Miss Hodkin said: "My fiance and I have always believed in the fairness of the British legal process.

"It's been a long and demanding journey, but the Supreme Court's decision today has made it all worthwhile.

"We are really excited that we can now get married, and thank our family and friends for all of their patience and support."

Her solicitor Paul Hewitt, a partner at law firm Withers, said: "The Supreme Court's judgment is a victory for the equal treatment of religions in the modern world.

"We are delighted at the outcome - it always felt wrong that Louisa was denied the simple right, afforded to members of other religions, to enjoy a legal marriage ceremony in her own Church."

Today's appeal was allowed by Supreme Court President Lord Neuberger, Lord Clarke, Lord Wilson, Lord Reed and Lord Toulson.

Giving the main judgment of the court, Lord Toulson said Miss Hodkin was born and brought up in a family of Scientologists.

Her brother, David, was married at the Church of Scientology in Edinburgh, which was a valid marriage under Scots law because the registrar general for Scotland authorises ministers of Scientology to perform marriages in Scotland.

She and her fiance wished to be married in the church they regularly attend in Queen Victoria Street, London.

Lord Toulson said: "Unless there is some compelling contextual reason for holding otherwise, religion should not be confined to religions which recognise a supreme deity. "First and foremost, to do so would be a form of religious discrimination unacceptable in today's society.

"It would exclude Buddhism, along with other faiths such as Jainism, Taoism, Theosophy and part of Hinduism."

He said that to confine religion to a religion which involves belief in a "supreme deity" leads into "difficult theological territory".

The court had heard evidence that "Scientologists do believe in a supreme deity of a kind, but of an abstract and impersonal nature".

Lord Toulson said that for the purposes of the Places of Worship Registration Act (PWRA), "I would describe religion in summary as a spiritual or non-secular belief system, held by a group of adherents, which claims to explain mankind's place in the universe and relationship with the infinite, and to teach its adherents how they are to live their lives in conformity with the spiritual understanding associated with the belief system.

"By spiritual or non-secular I mean a belief system which goes beyond that which can be perceived by the senses or ascertained by the application of science.

"I prefer not to use the word 'supernatural' to express this element, because it is a loaded word which can carry a variety of connotations.

"Such a belief system may or may not involve belief in a supreme being, but it does involve a belief that there is more to be understood about mankind's nature and relationship to the universe than can be gained from the senses or from science. I emphasise that this is intended to be a description and not a definitive formula."

Lord Toulson said that on the approach he had taken to the meaning of religion "the evidence is amply sufficient to show that Scientology is within it" - the question was whether the chapel in Queen Victoria Street is "a place of meeting for religious worship". He ruled that the meaning given to worship in the 1970 case was "unduly narrow", adding: "I interpret the expression 'religious worship' as wide enough to include religious services..."

If Scientology came within the meaning of a religion - which the court held it did - but its chapel could not be registered under the PWRA because its services did not involve the kind of veneration the Court of Appeal in 1970 "considered essential", then "the result would be to prevent Scientologists from being married anywhere in a form which involved use of their marriage service".

They would be "under a double disability, not shared by atheists, agnostics or most religious groups," said the judge.

He added: " This would be illogical, discriminatory and unjust."

Allowing Miss Hodkin's appeal, the court overruled the 1970 decision, declared that the chapel in Queen Victoria Street is a place of meeting for religious worship, and ordered the registrar general to register the chapel under the PWRA, and as a place for the solemnisation of marriages under the Marriage Act.

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/uk/woman-wins-scientology-marriage-bid-29828261.html>

Britain's Mosques are burning

On Religion (31.10.2013) - The mosque is a powerful symbol of belonging for British Muslims, which is perhaps why it has been the focus of many who would prefer a monocultural Britain.

The British Empire, the empire upon which the sun never set, faced its twilight in the middle of the twentieth century. Britain, a small island but with an ambitious colonial project, changed the world more significantly perhaps than any previous empire. The pomp of Alexander the Great and the viciousness of the Mongols could not compare to the wealth accumulated by Empire, nor the scale of the atrocities committed by it. Following the Second World War however, there was no doubt that the days of an imperial Britain were over. Britain had only just survived the war, and at a terrible cost.

To rebuild a broken nation, Britain looked to its colonies, namely the Indian Subcontinent (over which the British Raj was dramatically losing control at this point). Britain needed cheap labour, and a mass of young unemployed men in India was the answer. These economic migrants, mainly from parts of what are now Pakistan and Bangladesh, joined other migrants in Britain (usually Arabs and Africans who had worked at British ports).

There were certainly Hindus amongst these recent migrants, but the majority were Muslims. Unsurprising perhaps, considering that at its height the British Empire ruled over more Muslims than the Ottoman Caliphate.

For the time being, the first generation of migrants saw Britain as a relief from the poverty of an India ravished by the economic exploitation of colonisation. The British Raj would surely soon leave India in totality, and in the meantime, they could earn a respectable wage contributing to the UK's post-war reconstruction. However, not everyone did migrate back, even if they intended to. Soon, these temporary migrants became slightly more permanent. There were many reasons to leave, by the 60s and 70s, racism and hostility to migrants increased. Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech cemented the idea that migrants were unwelcome. Yet, despite these pressures, and the prevalence of what sociologists call the 'myth of return', the short-term Muslim migrants began to think long-term about where they would be calling home.

Away from the immediate concerns of food and shelter, Muslims can be trusted to seek one more basic need – to establish a spiritual home. Wherever you find Muslims, you will find mosques. The same was true of Britain's small but sizeable Muslim population.

Fast forward several decades to 2013 and the picture has changed dramatically. The 2011 census confirmed that rather than being a migrant population, the majority of British Muslims were born in the UK. Diversity increased too, with many Middle-Eastern and African Muslims joining those from the sub-continent, alongside a growing population of white, British-born converts to Islam.

Britain has some 1600 mosques. Most are small terraced houses, others converted churches and chapels, and a small handful purpose-built. The early mosques in the 1960s were built by low-income labourers, who often sought a place to fulfil their spiritual desires and little else, but the modern mosque does much more. It is a community centre, a school, a place of social gathering. Mosques are not only places of congregational prayers but also provide counselling, advocacy, sporting activities and so on. The most active mosques are also key arenas of civic participation, joining campaigns and lobby groups on issues as diverse as the Living Wage and safer communities.

Aside from the practical needs met by the modern British mosque, there is an important symbolic value. When the Prophet Muhammad and his followers were persecuted out of Makkah, they emigrated to Yathrib (now called Madinah) a city slightly further north along the eastern coast of modern day Saudi Arabia. They joined there a community of recent converts to Islam. Together, they began building a new community, and at the heart of this community a masjid, or mosque – a place to worship God and to really make Madinah home.

Just like the early Muslims, British Muslims establishing a mosque in a locality is indicative of a sense of belonging. It is an investment into the local landscape.

Perhaps it is the powerful semiotic role of the mosque that means it is the greatest focus for Islamophobic attacks and prejudice. The rise of Islamophobia in Europe and elsewhere can be traced historically to the earliest Muslim presence in the UK. Abdullah Quilliam, a Victorian lawyer and convert to Islam, established a mosque in Liverpool in the late nineteenth century. As one of the earliest British mosques, and one which was particularly active, it faced what academic and historian Ron Geaves described as a constant low-level abuse in the form of vandalism and intentional desecration.

In 1996 the Runnymede Trust published its research on Islamophobia against British Muslims, noting an increase in both attacks and the narratives that support them. Unsurprisingly however, the situation has become substantially direr since the 2001

terrorist attacks in New York and 2005 attacks in London. It is beyond the scope of this article to look at all the causes behind Islamophobia – but it is clear that media reporting on Muslims is a significant factor in normalising and indeed encouraging hatred toward Muslims.

The overrepresentation of coverage on British Muslims in the media and the discourse used creates a narrative that supports the conclusion that Muslims are violent, aggressive, criminally minded and diametrically opposed to 'British values'. A simple example from my own experience is the arrests of a number of Muslims in Wales under the Terrorist Act. When these attacks took place, I checked my figures and found that a larger number of white, far-right extremists had been arrested in Wales (one even under the Explosives Act) than Muslims, but the media reported more on the Muslims than on the far-right extremists and so a distorted picture emerges in public consciousness that Muslims are more likely to be terrorists than others. Add to this the constant news published on trivial topics such as 'women-only' sessions at swimming pools or Muslim women who choose to wear the niqaab and the situation is primed for an aggressively anti-Muslim rhetoric.

The media, essentially, acts as a confirmation bias for the far-right and Islamophobes, and thus begins a vicious circle, as the same individuals point towards the media coverage on Muslims to recruit others into their hatred and mindset, and very often, these manifest in actual attacks.

Which leads us to the main topic of this article – the significant and worrying attacks on British mosques, spearheaded by the far-right.

The 'Ground-Zero mosque' in New York (a community centre that contained a mosque, planned to be built several blocks away from Ground Zero) is an example of how a community project can be twisted by rhetoric to become a focal point for contesting ideas. It is not only the US that faces these issues however. Dozens of planned mosques in the UK have faced opposition from far-right groups. A large mosque planned for the suburbs of London faced protests from the EDL after it was branded a 'mega-mosque' by the Daily Mail, run by a supposedly extremist organisation (in reality, the founders, Tablighi Jamaat, have no connections to any violent extremist groups and advocate a message of self-development amongst Muslims).

Likewise, when a Muslim community in Wrexham purchased a disused former Miners Institute, the EDL and WDL took it as an opportunity to construe the Muslim community as aggressively attempting to dominate the town's local history. Note the building was on the market for several years with no buyers, and the mosque management plan to open part of the building as a museum honouring the history of the Miner's Institute.

Such opposition is given professional support by the likes of Gavin Boby, a former member of the EDL and a planning lawyer by vocation. He calls himself as a professional 'mosque buster' who claims his skills have already prevented 17 mosques from being built, and offers his services for free to those who request it. Through his 'Law and Freedom Foundation' he campaigns against mosques.

It is not the organised and at least legal opposition to mosques that is most worrying however, it is the aggressive, violent and sometimes fatal attacks on mosques that provide the most concern.

In the picturesque rural market town of Chipping Norton, the local Muslims organised to purchase a small property to open a place of worship. The plans immediately faced opposition from a spectrum of both locals who considered the mosque too 'un-British' and the national English Defence League who considered it an affront to British values.

There were, as always with the EDL, demonstrations against the mosque, and a significant amount of lobbying to the local council. Ultimately however, the local planning council approved the mosque and it was believed the issue was finally laid to rest. That is however until the landlord of the property received threats that should the mosque be opened, it would be burnt down. Given the nature of the threat, the contract was terminated and the mosque plans abandoned.

The threat of arson is not an empty one. In February 2011, the Shotton Lane Social Club in North Wales burnt down following what was described as a 'deliberate' arson attack. The Flintshire Muslim Cultural Society had proposed opening a mosque at the site – a move that was contested by the English Defence League. Only a few weeks later, the arson attack took place.

In March 2011, a church that had been purchased by the Islamic charity JIMAS to be reopened as a Muslim-run community centre was also subject to an arson attack. The fire left the former-church in smouldering ruins.

In December 2011, Stoke on Trent mosque also suffered an arson attack, in this case, two members of the EDL were later convicted.

In April 2012, Bury Park mosque was subject to an arson attack. Although no culprits were found it was considered clearly deliberate. A mosque only a few miles down the road, Medina Mosque, had also recently been vandalised – in this case windows smashed and EDL graffiti on the walls.

In fact the list of mosques in the UK that have been damaged in arson attacks goes on – Edinburgh in 2001, Birmingham Central Mosque in 2006, Livingston in 2007, a proposed mosque in Lincoln in 2008, the Usmani Mosque in Leicester in 2012 and so on. This in a backdrop of other mosque attacks in Europe and the US.

There is an emerging pattern in many of these mosque attacks. They are in the context of an increasingly Islamophobic media narrative that portray Muslims as foreign, aggressive and as 'other'. The mosques tend to have already seen protests or opposition to their presence from the far-right. The attacks are deliberate, and in most cases, culprits are not found. When culprits have been apprehended, they have links to the far-right.

It is worrying to think that, perhaps one day; these covert attacks on mosques will translate into something much more overt, potentially fatal (the Oslo killings are a chilling reminder of a sole gunman can achieve). Baroness Warsi recently commented that Islamophobia is so widespread that it is considered appropriate for dinner-table talk – an indicator that it is not simply the far-right who are promoting these messages but that they have entered public consciousness more generally. If this trend continues, we should all be worried.

There are ways forward however. Politicians must first recognise the seriousness of Islamophobia and the threat posed by the far-right. Oslo has shown the real and significant danger posed by nationalist extremists, especially those with hatred for Islam and Muslims. Policy, funding and counter-terrorism units should not wait until the situation has become fatal. There needs to be a concerted effort against the rise of far-right extremism. Counter-terrorism strategies in the UK currently only pay lip-service to white supremacists and fascist extremism; this has to change.

The media too must take responsibility – first to appropriately address the way in which they report stories involving Muslims and second, to end the narrative that means only stories that bolster the image of a foreign, violent and radical Muslim are reported. The

Leveson Enquiries have shown that tabloid media has no qualms about breaking the law and bending the truth for a headline that will sell papers. We too, as consumers, must also begin taking action. By objecting to reporting that is biased and consuming media from sources that provide an accurate picture.

Finally, faith leaders and community leaders should begin to recognise the danger of a fragmented society and re-double efforts to work together to end Islamophobia and indeed other forms of bigotry.

The mosque is a symbol of belonging of British Islam. Those who prefer not see Britain as a place which is organically home to Muslims will no doubt continue to oppose mosques, and even attack them when all else fails. The question is not simply about Muslims and Islamophobia. It is about what kind of Britain we want to live in.

National Secular Society concerned over judge's ruling that woman need only remove niqab to give evidence

NSS (16.09.2013) - The National Secular Society has expressed concern over a court's decision to allow a Muslim woman to stand trial wearing a full-face veil, only needing to remove it while giving evidence.

The case involves a 22 year old woman accused of allegedly intimidating a witness, involved in a separate case, in June this year. The woman had previously been allowed to enter her plea after she agreed to lift her veil in front of a female police officer, in a room next to the court.

Ruling at Blackfriars Crown Court on how the case should proceed, Judge Peter Murphy said he proposed to adopt "the least restrictive approach" consistent with what he saw as the necessity of enabling the Court to conduct the proceedings fairly and effectively in the interests of all parties.

In passing judgment Judge Murphy said:

"It is unfair to ask a juror to pass judgment on a person whom she cannot see. It is unfair to expect that juror to try to evaluate the evidence given by a person whom she cannot see, deprived of an essential tool for doing so: namely, being able to observe the demeanour of the witness; her reaction to being questioned; her reaction to other evidence as it is given. These are not trivial or superficial invasions of the procedure of the adversarial trial. At best, they require a compromise of the quality of criminal justice delivered by the trial process. At worst, they go to its very essence, and they may render it altogether impotent to deliver a fair and just outcome. They drive a coach and horses through the way in which justice has been administered in the courts of England and Wales for centuries."

However, Judge Murphy later then went on to conclude:

"While it remains true that juries scrutinise defendants throughout the proceedings, and take note of a defendant's reaction to the evidence as it is given throughout the trial, I am not persuaded that this is of sufficient importance to require a restriction on the defendant's right to wear the niqab."

However, the judge said it was necessary for a democratic society to restrict the rights of a defendant to wear a niqab during court proceedings. He said:

"Balancing the right of religious manifestation against the rights and freedoms of the public, the press and other interested parties such as the complainant in the proper administration of justice, the latter must prevail over D's right to manifest her religion or belief during the proceedings against her to the extent necessary in the interests of justice. No tradition or practice, whether religious or otherwise, can claim to occupy such a privileged position that the rule of law, open justice and the adversarial trial process are sacrificed to accommodate it. That is not a discrimination against religion, it is a matter of upholding the rule of law in a democratic society."

He said he hoped that parliament or a higher court would review the issue "sooner rather than later" and provide a "definitive statement of law".

Responding to the ruling, Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, said: "In the interest of justice, we consider it vital that defendants' faces are visible at all times, including while others are giving evidence. We therefore regret the judge's decision not to require this, despite making the case for it in his ruling. We will now be calling for visibility of defendants throughout court hearings to be made mandatory, and not subject to judges' discretion."

The full ruling is available at [http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/the-queen-v-d-\(r\).pdf](http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/the-queen-v-d-(r).pdf)

See also: Anne Marie Waters taking part in a Channel 5 News Talk Live debate - Should veils be banned in schools & public spaces?

<http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2013/09/nss-considers-complaint-against-judges-ruling-that-woman-need-only-remove-niqab-to-give-evidence>

Muslim group demands tougher response to mosque attacks

The Guardian (23.07.2013) - One of Britain's largest Islamic groups has said a "dramatic escalation in violence" against British Muslims needs a much tougher response from the government.

Farooq Murad, secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), said the bombings of three Midlands mosques marked "the crossing of a red line".

On Tuesday a man was charged over the bomb attacks in June and July. Pavlo Lapshyn, 25, who was charged a day earlier with the terrorist-related murder of a Muslim pensioner, Mohammed Saleem, in Birmingham in April, appeared before City of Westminster magistrates court where the new charges were announced.

Lapsyn, a postgraduate student from Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, was in Birmingham on a work placement. He was charged with carrying out a series of acts with the intention to commit acts of terrorism between 24 April and 18 July, related to three separate explosions in Walsall, Wolverhampton and Tipton. No one was injured in the explosions.

He was also charged with two offences of unlawfully and maliciously causing an explosion with the intent to endanger life or cause serious injury to a person or property.

The court heard that Lapsyn allegedly purchased chemicals to make explosive devices and modified mobile phones to act as detonators. He spoke only to confirm his name and was remanded in custody until another hearing this month.

The MCB said the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in an alleged terrorist act in Woolwich, south London, in May had unleashed an increase in violence. A series of incidents had added to "a palpable sense of fear" among Muslim communities, it said.

"The community has patiently borne the brunt of these attacks despite condemning in the strongest possible terms the tragic murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby," Murad said. "Despite this spike in incidences, there has yet to be a co-ordinated national effort to ensure that these sorts of attacks never happen again. It cannot be right that a minority community is allowed to be targeted in this manner."

He added: "There is an urgent need for the government and police to respond with a co-ordinated national strategy so as to prevent further attacks."

Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism command is investigating an arson attack on a mosque in north London on 5 June. Graffiti reading "EDL" – a possible reference to the English Defence League – was found nearby.

The West Midlands explosions and the murder of Saleem, 82, are being investigated by the West Midlands counter-terrorism unit. Detectives are expected to arrive in Ukraine shortly to continue inquiries into Lapshyn.

On Sunday the home secretary, Theresa May, said: "I have been shocked and sickened at the brutal murder of Mohammed Saleem and recent attacks on mosques in the West Midlands, all of which are now being investigated as terrorist incidents.

"Just as we saw people coming together to denounce Woolwich, so we must come together and stand firm against extremism whatever form it takes."

British government asks church to take over thousands of state schools

By Trevor Grundy

The Washington Post (10.07.2013) - Canterbury, England - Leading secularists are calling on nonreligious parents to fight a government effort that would allow the Church of England to run thousands of state schools.

The schools, or academies, would be privately funded, quasi-independent and accountable to the church for their curricula, organization, admission policies and teachers' pay and conditions.

As of July, there were 3,049 such academies operating in England, many financed by businessmen, finance companies, supermarkets, football clubs and a growing number of faith-based organizations including the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist Church and the largest of all — the Church of England.

Following a recent agreement between the Department of Education and the church, thousands more state-run schools could be taken over by the church.

Under this new undertaking, bishops would be given the power to appoint school governors — unpaid private citizens who volunteer to oversee the performance of educational institutions.

The Church of England — a pioneer in the field of education in the early days of the 19th century — already runs more than 5,000 schools, several hundred of them academies.

The church's work bringing the gospel and "three R's" ('reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic) to impoverished working class children is well documented.

It was only in 1870 that the government accepted a responsibility for educating children here.

So the church's educational track record is greatly admired as well as criticized by many secularists who say the days when Christian philanthropists gave their time and money to educate the poor should be a thing of the past.

"The Church of England is rapidly changing its focus from its primary purpose — church worship — which has failed spectacularly, with empty pews all over the country, to getting its message out in schools," said Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society.

He called on parents who might be uneasy with the new deal between government and church to "make their feelings known both to schools and, more importantly, politicians."

Added Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood: "Nonreligious and religiously unconcerned families are now in the majority and this move will further alienate them from the education system. This will surreptitiously bring the education system under religious control. Once our schools have been taken over by religious interests, it will be almost impossible to ever bring them back under community control."

Academies were set up under Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2000.

While the governments of Blair, and now David Cameron, insist academies will raise standards throughout Britain and enable the country to catch up with its educational model state — Finland — there is also a belief that the present cash-strapped government is anxious to lessen its financial commitment to education by encouraging the formation of privately sponsored academies.

The Church of England insists that state schools that become academies under its control will lead to higher educational standards and not the Christian "indoctrination" of pupils that the National Secular Society fears.

Oxford Bishop John Pritchard, who oversees education policy within the Church of England, said he expects many small village primary schools, which educate children aged five to 11, will want to link up with the church academy chains.

"I think people may not realize the significance of what looks like a small technical change but actually allows the mutual support, the drawing together of resources, experiments in collaboration," he said. "It allows a whole lot more and it will enhance the educational experience of millions of children."

About three-quarters of church schools are judged as "good" by Ofsted, Britain's official body for inspecting schools, compared with 57 percent of secular schools in the UK.

Pritchard predicted a "steady, faster" growth in the number of church-led academy chains and said that in years to come the academy status would become "the norm" for church schools.

But Education Minister Michael Gove raised eyebrows when he told The Times that he wanted the church to recover "the spirit which infused its educational mission in Victorian times."

The new archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, suggested the Christian mission would continue.

"It is obviously true that good schools help produce an educated workforce," Welby said. "But the Christian vision is a far greater one. It is about setting a framework for children as they learn, which enables them to be confident when faced with the vast challenges that rapidly changing culture bring to us."

England has an established church and no constitutional principle of freedom of religious exercise. But the state allows other religious groups to worship freely alongside the established church.

Preacher arrested for calling homosexuality a sin

By Todd Starnes

Fox News (08.07.2013) - An American evangelist said he was arrested and interrogated about his Christian faith after he was caught on a London sidewalk preaching that homosexuality is a sin.

Tony Miano, a retired deputy sheriff and former chaplain with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Dept., was charged with "using homophobic speech that could cause people anxiety, distress, alarm or insult."

Miano had been preaching on a London street corner during the Wimbledon Tennis Championships with a ministry group called Sports Fan Outreach International.

He was preaching about immoral living – and cited homosexuality as an example of lifestyle choices that are contrary to biblical teaching.

"I never used any gay slurs," he said. "You would never hear me using slang or discriminatory language against homosexuals or any other group. That would be contrary to my faith."

At some point, the evangelist quoted I Thessalonians 4:1-2 – a passage of scripture that mentions sexual immorality.

"I talked about women addicted to romance novels, men addicted to pornography, people with lustful thoughts, heterosexual fornication and homosexuality," Miano told Fox News. "When I mentioned that the Bible was clear that homosexuality is a sin, a lady walked by and she glared at me and hurled the f-bomb."

Miano said the woman came back a short time later and began to videotape his sidewalk sermon. Then, she called the police.

"They were concerned about homophobic speech," he said. "But I told them I don't fear homosexuals. The language I used was not homophobic, as I was not promoting fear or hatred of homosexuals."

Miano said he did not limit his remarks to homosexual acts.

"I did not speak solely about homosexuality as a form of sexual immorality but also about any kind of sex outside marriage between one man and one woman, as well as lustful thoughts," he said. "All of these are considered mainstream Christian positions and have been taught and believed by Christians for thousands of years."

Police took the retired deputy sheriff to a nearby jail where he was fingerprinted. Officers also took a sample of his DNA and then he was interrogated.

"It was very distressing to be arrested and interrogated for openly expressing my deeply held Christian beliefs," he said.

According to a transcript of the interrogation provided to Fox News, the officers asked if he really believed homosexuality is a sin. He was also asked whether he would help a homosexual who requested a favor.

"I was made to feel that my thoughts could be held against me," he said. "The detective also asked me if I thought I was 100 percent right in what I had done. I said yes."

Miano said he would gladly offer assistance to a homosexual.

"The Christian faith is dictated by the two greatest commandments – to love the Lord your God and to love your neighbor," he said. "As such, I am compelled to love all people. Had a gay come up and asked me for something to eat, I would have fed him."

But what troubled Miano is the idea that a hypothetical situation could have been used against him in court.

"I was actually going to be tried for how I thought," he said.

In an ironic twist, the officers made arrangements to provide the evangelist with a Bible to read in jail – the same book that led to his arrest.

"The same book I read from in public which resulted in my arrest, was now the same book the police were giving to provide me comfort," he said.

Miano, who is a member of the Evangelical Free Church, has been open-air preaching for eight years. He said this is the first time he's been arrested.

"It was a rather surreal experience," the retired deputy sheriff said. "I've conducted many interrogations but I've never been the subject of one."

Miano spent about seven hours in jail before he was released without explanation and without an apology.

Now back home in Southern California, Miano said he fears that what happened in Great Britain could soon happen in the United States.

"I believe that's what our government is going to eventually do here," he said. "I believe homosexuals or others who are sensitive to their point of view will be visiting churches to listen to what preachers say from the pulpit. And I believe that pastors will be arrested in their pulpits for teaching what the Bible says about homosexuality and other sins."

Andrea Williams, the chief executive of the British Christian Legal Centre echoed those concerns.

"It's clear that there is already a clamp down on freedom of speech where people publicly express mainstream Christian views on sexual ethics," he said.

Church could take control of secular schools under new deal, report says

Huffington Post UK (04.07.2013) - The Church of England could be given the power to run thousands of secular schools, the Times has reported, in a move that could "bring the education system under religious control" according to secular campaigners.

Under a deal with the government, The Church will be forced to preserve the character of non-faith schools and community schools joining a Church of England academy chain would not have to change its admissions policy, religious education lessons or employment terms for teachers, The Times said.

The Church will be forced to preserve the character of non-faith schools and community schools joining a Church of England academy chain would not have to change its admissions policy, religious education lessons or employment terms for teachers, the paper said.

Bishops will also have the power to appoint governors at the schools.

But the move has caused disquiet among secular groups, who said the decision would irreversibly increase religious influence over state schools.

Keith Porteous Wood, of the National Secular Society, told the paper: "This will surreptitiously bring the education system under religious control. It will lead to the further alienation of school children who are from non-religious or religiously unconcerned families.

Education Secretary Michael Gove praised the standards and popularity of church schools during a seminar at Lambeth Palace yesterday and urged a continuing partnership with the Church.

In a statement Gove said: "We would not have so many great state schools in this country without the Church of England.

"I know the Church does a wonderful job helping to raise educational standards and in providing a safe and loving environment for hundreds of thousands of children.

"However, there is much more we can do together. I want the Church to recover the spirit which infused its educational mission in Victorian times and support more new schools - especially academies and free schools - to bring educational excellence to the nation's poorest children."

Approximately one million children currently attend Church of England schools.

There are 4,484 Church of England primary and middle schools, a quarter of the total, and 193 secondary schools.

The Bishop of Oxford, the Right Rev John Pritchard, who leads education policy within the Church, believes small village primary schools will want to join academy trusts led by its schools to secure their future, and promised they would be "safe with us", The Times said.

Bishop Pritchard said: "This will be a way for them to have the security of a larger body with mutual support, with resources that are much more extensive."

He added: "Dioceses have the privilege and opportunity to put local church and local school into the same box, as it were, and say that's where the mission of the Church lies."

The bishop said Gove had set the Church a challenge to "raise our game", which "echoes our own determination to make a real step change in the way we serve our communities, working to the highest standards".

Bishop Pritchard said: "I think people may not realise the significance of what looks like a small technical change but actually allows the mutual support, the drawing together of resources, experiments in collaboration.

"It allows a whole lot more and it will enhance the educational experience of millions of children."

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, said the vision for church schools would "continue our mission of transforming every part of our society".

"It is obviously true that good schools help produce an educated workforce," the Archbishop said.

"But the Christian vision is a far greater one. It is about setting a framework for children as they learn, which enables them to be confident when faced with the vast challenges that our rapidly changing culture brings to us."

The British Humanist Association's Pavan Dhaliwal said the organisation was "deeply concerned to hear it reported that the Church of England is to be able to take control of schools without a religious character, incorporate them into their Academy chains and appoint governors.

"While it is reported that there will be safeguards to stop religious discrimination in admissions, employment or teaching, it is hard to see how these safeguards would be great enough to offset the Church having control of a school's governance.

"Already the Academies programme is allowing the Church to extend its influence over other schools in ways never previously possible and it is vital to social cohesion that these new avenues are not extended even further."

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain, chairman of the Accord Coalition, which campaigns for admissions and recruitment in state schools to be free from religious discrimination, said: "Despite the positive aspects of church schools, those that select pupils on the basis of their faith are not only guilty of discrimination, but also help to fragment society.

"A tolerant pluralist society can only be created by having tolerant pluralist schools where children of all backgrounds grow up and interact together.

"If Michael Gove really wants church schools to recover the spirit which infused the Church's educational mission in Victorian times then he must make sure that church schools are not permitted to segregate and divide, but are made open and suitable for all in their respective local communities."

632 anti-Muslim hate incidents recorded by Tell Mama

BBC News (10.03.2013) - A government-backed project set up to monitor anti-Muslim hate has recorded 632 incidents in its first year.

The UK project is based on the Community Security Trust's model, which records anti-Semitic incidents.

'Tell Mama' is run by interfaith organisation Faith Matters, which says victims who have come forward range from a five-year-old to an 89-year-old.

They say women are targeted more than men and the majority of incidents are online abuse.

Mama stands for Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks and Fiyaz Mughal, director of Faith Matters, said he wants to see a notable change in what is considered acceptable behaviour in the UK.

"By highlighting these incidents we want people to realise that Islamophobia is equally as disgusting and poisonous as anti-Semitism and I think that people do not take it at that level right now - at least some people don't," said Mr Mughal.

"We need to reduce the volume of online hate towards Muslim communities, but we also need to create some framework for the police and other institutions to get them to up recording and prosecutions in this area," he added.

Smartphone app

This week Tell Mama is launching a free smartphone app to support access to the service.

Three-quarters of the incidents recorded by Tell Mama occurred online, with Twitter particularly highlighted as a source of abuse. In cases of verbal or street-based abuse those behind the project say it is Islamic clothing, like hijabs, that singles people out.

Other incidents include direct attempts to offend those of Muslim faith.

To be honest I don't think Islamophobia is taken very seriously - it feels like if what had happened to me happened to a Jewish family there would have been outrage"

In January a pig's head was left in the garden of an Afghan family in London. There have been a number of incidents involving pork-based items being left at mosques and in December a cross wrapped in ham was left outside the home of a Muslim family in Bingham, Nottinghamshire.

Murad Alam, 39, moved his wife and two young sons out of the area following that incident.

He says he was happy to deal with the police himself but he said Tell Mama was vital in bringing attention to what had happened.

"I looked online and found the service so called and told them what had happened. They contacted the media about it which was great for me; I needed people to know what had happened," said Mr Alam.

"To be honest I don't think Islamophobia is taken very seriously - it feels like if what had happened to me happened to a Jewish family there would have been outrage," he added.

"There's a sense that because of our history as Muslims, terrorist atrocities and such, people feel like we deserve the abuse," said Mr Alam.

The 2011 census revealed there were 2.7 million Muslims in England and Wales (4.8% of the population) - compared to 1.5 million in the 2001 census (3%).

The Home Office has also recently started publishing statistics for all hate-crime in England and Wales. In 2011-12 43,748 hate crimes were recorded by the police, of which 35,816 (82%) were race hate crimes and 1,621 (4%) were religion hate crimes.

Comparisons

The comparison with anti-Semitism is frequently mentioned when discussing this work - the Jewish community is much smaller in the UK, but has for years recorded anti-Semitic attacks.

The Tell Mama project wants to carry the same weight as the Community Safety Trust (CST), which has for almost 30 years been recording incidents of anti-Semitism in the UK.

The CST published its annual statistics in February and recorded 640 anti-Semitic incidents across the country in 2012, compared to 608 incidents in 2011.

Of these there were 69 'violent anti-Semitic assaults' in 2012, including two classified as extreme violence; 53 incidents of damage and desecration of Jewish property; 467 incidents of abusive behaviour, including verbal abuse, anti-Semitic graffiti and one-off cases of hate mail; 39 direct anti-Semitic threats; and 12 cases of mass-mailed anti-Semitic leaflets or emails.

Mark Gardiner of the CST said he was pleased their work could inform Tell Mama.

"CST is glad that our work countering anti-Semitism has helped Tell Mama provide the Muslim community with a proper mechanism for reporting and understanding anti-Muslim hate crimes," said Mr Gardiner.

He said: "It has taken CST nearly 30 years of focus and professionalism to get to where we are today, so what Tell Mama has achieved in just one year is very impressive.

"We wish Tell Mama every success for the future; and if our joint co-operation helps break down barriers between British Muslims and Jews, then all the better."

Mr Mughal is encouraging more people to report: "We need to send a clear, straight message that this is not acceptable because to be honest those working on this project feel that in some instances Islamophobia has actually passed that dinner-party test that Baroness Warsi talked about and we think it's a bad place that we're in right now."

14 March 2013: International day to defend apostates and blasphemers

Council of Ex Muslims of Briton (14.03.2013) - Countless individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy face threats, imprisonment, and execution. Blasphemy laws in over 30 countries and apostasy laws in over 20 aim primarily to restrict thought, expression and the rights of Muslims, ex-Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

On 14 March 2013, we, the undersigned, call for an international day of action to defend apostates and blasphemers worldwide by highlighting ten cases though there are countless more.

Alex Aan, Indonesia: 30 year old atheist, in prison for blasphemy for saying there is no god on Facebook.

Abdul Aziz Mohammed Al-Baz (also known as Ben Baz), Kuwait: Blogger and atheist charged with blasphemy.

Turki Al Hamad, Saudi Arabia: Novelist in prison for Tweets critical of Islam and Islamism.

Raif Badawi, Saudi Arabia: Charged with apostasy for setting up a website that "harms the public order and violates Islamic values".

Asia Bibi, Pakistan: 45 year old Christian mother of five, sentenced to death for blasphemy for 'insulting Mohammad'.

Hamza Kashgari, Saudi Arabia: 23 year old Muslim charged with blasphemy for Tweeting about Mohammad and women's status.

Saeed Malekpour, Iran: Sentenced to death for 'insulting and desecrating Islam'.

Shahin Najafi, Iran: A death fatwa for apostasy has been issued by Iranian clerics against Shahin Najafi living in Germany for a song critical of an imam.

Ahmad Rajib, Bangladesh: The well-known 35 year old atheist blogger had his head hacked apart with a machete one day after attending anti-Islamist protests in Bangladesh.

Alber Saber, Egypt: The atheist blogger has been sentenced to three years in prison for blasphemy.

We urge the public to mark this day by taking action in support of the many women, men and even children languishing in prison or on death row.

We must never forget them.

Take action on 14 March to highlight this intolerable situation, including by Tweeting, signing a petition, writing a letter of protest, drawing a picture, taking a photo, making a

video – anything at all to defend free expression and thought and the many whose lives are at stake.

Signed

The list will be updated regularly until 15 March morning.

Aakar Mathur, Electronics Engineer, India, Proud Atheist
Afsaneh Ramez
Alan Palmer, Trustee, British Humanist Association
Alastair Lichten
Alexandra Cook, The Brights
Allan Harmer
Amir Tavakoli, Stockholm
Ana Lucic, Student and Atheist, Canada
Andrew Mortlock, Staffordshire, England
Andrew Zdenkowski, Australia
Anita Zawiślak, member of Polish Rationalist Association, Poland
Anna Bergström, Trustee, Swedish Humanist Association
Annie Sugier, President, Ligue du Droit International des Femmes, France
Anthony B Pinn, Academic, USA
Anwar Bilal, Indian-American ExMuslim
Asad Abbas, UK
Bala Naidoo
Barry Walker
Behzad Varpushty, Atheist, Secularist, Humanist
Ben Holgate
Ben Six, Student, UK
Bill Jennings
Bjarte Foshaug
Brad Garrison
Brendan Maher, Atheist/Secularist Humanist, Ireland
Brian & Helena Wilder
Brian Conklin Jr, Student, USA
Brian Creamer
Brian D. Engler, USA
Brian Leslie
Brian Trenbeath
Bry Outlaw, Atheist
Carlos A. Diaz, President, Atheist Alliance International, Argentina
Caroline Fourest, Writer, France
Center for Inquiry
Central London Humanists
Charya Hilton, Atheist feminist, UK
Chris Davis
Chris Fiorentino, Student and Atheist, Canada
Chris Mirana
Christian Grass
Christopher Roche, Bath Atheists, Humanists and Secularists, UK
Contessa de Metoncula
Cort Greene
Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain
Craig Morgan, Atheist, California, USA
D. R. Khashaba
Daniel Abineri
Daniel Bradman
Darell Irving, Australia

Darina al Joundi, Writer and Actress, France
Darren Johnson, London Assembly Member, UK
Dave Gilbert
Dave Watts
David Gamble – Skeptic and Atheist
David Gray, Australia
David Nicholls, President, Atheist Foundation of Australia, Australia
David Pollock, Trustee, British Humanist Association, UK
David Taylor
Dinesh Dalal
Dirk Verhofstadt, Author, 'The Third Feministic Wave'
Djemila Benhabib, auteure, Prix international de la laïcité 2012
Dominic Wirdnam, Bristol Secular Society
Dr. Shaker B. Srinivasan, USA
Dylan Gray, Athiest – Australia
Edward Sadkowski
Elham Manea, Writer, Switzerland
Equal Rights Now – Organisation against Women's Discrimination in Iran
Ertan Zeki
Esam Shoukry, Organization for Secularism and Civil Right in Iraq, Canada
Eve Beresford, Anthropologist
F. E. Long, RN, United States of America
Fakher Haddaoui, Tunisia
Fariborz Pooya, Iran Secular Society, UK
Felix Strüning, Stresemann Foundation, Germany
Fouad Boussetta, Montreal, Canada
Franco Pace
Frank Bath
Fredrik Sandberg
Gemma Gray
Gita Sahgal, Centre for Secular Space, UK
Glen Carrigan
Graham Piddington
Greg Lammers
Guy Otten, Trustee of the British Humanist Association
Hanne Stinson, UK
Harald Kavli, Atheist
Harold Walter Kroto, 1996 Nobel Prize winner in Chemistry, USA
Harris Wain
Helen Palmer, Chair of Central London Humanists
Henrik Sundt
Houzan Mahmoud, International Representative, Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq, UK
Ian MacKay
Ibn Warraq, Writer, USA
Ileen McDuring, Writer and Atheist, United States.
Imad Iddine Habib, an outspoken Moroccan Atheist, Co Founder of "Masayminch" Movement (We Won't Fast) against the article 222 of the Moroccan penal code which consider eating in public during Ramadan as a crime
Jaakko Wallenius, Lohja, Finland
Jacek Tabisz, President, Polish Rationalist Society, Poland
James Lindsay
Jan Wojcik
Jeff Parkes, Citizen and atheist, Australia
Jim Craig-Gray
Joe Kelly
John and Alison White

John Griffin
John Morton
Jordan Stephenson, Student, UK
Joseph Gelovani
Josh Altom, American, currently studying in the UK
Josh Kutchinsky, Central London Humanists
Justin Doolittle
Kaja Bryx, President, Wroclaw Branch of the Polish Rationalist Association.
Karen Lynn, Atheist
Keith Cardwell
Ken and Elaine Moon
Kerry Barnsley
Krista Lomu, United Kingdom
Labi Siffre, Atheist, Secularist, Songwriter, Musician, Poet
Laurence Villard
Leonie Fulton, Teacher and Atheist, Australia
Les Mallett
Ligue du Droit International des Femmes
Lila Ghobady, Writer & Documentary maker, Canada
Lloyd Newson, Producer, DV8 Physical Theatre, UK
Margaret Kroto, UK
Marieme Helie Lucas, Secularism Is A Women's Issue, France
Marjan Teal, Atheist, Manchester UK
Mark Mennie, Humanist
Mark Senior
Marty McCorkle, Fine artist and painter
Mary Grove, Central London Humanists (committee member)
Maryam Namazie, Spokesperson, Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, One Law for All and Equal Rights Now, UK
Matthew Alexander
Matthew Willcox
Michael Bennett, Humanist, London, UK
Michael De Dora, U.N. Representative, Center for Inquiry, USA
Michael Greenwood
Michael Greenwood, anti-theist, Australia
Michael J. Forster
Michael McGrath
Michael Nugent, Chair, Atheist Ireland, Ireland
Mina Ahadi, International Committee against Stoning and Execution, Germany
Monique Blaize, cartoonist, comic artist
Muhammad Habib, Atheist, Bangladesh
Nadia Duvall, UK
Nahla Mahmoud, researcher and activist, Sudan/UK,
Najat Kessler
National Secular Society
Nazanin Afshin-Jam, President and co founder, Stop Child Executions, Canada
Nicola Duffy, New Zealand
Nima Mashouri
Nina Sankari, President, European Feminist Initiative, Poland
Oliver Bennett
One Law for All, UK
Organization for Secularism and Civil Right in Iraq
P Madhusudanan
Pallab Kalita, Student
Patricia Rogers
Patrick Rentmeesters – coördinator Humanistisch Vrijzinnige Vereniging gewest Brussel - Belgium

Patrik Lindenfors, Stockholm University
Patty Debonitas, Iran Solidarity
Paul Ivanoff
Paul Sellick, Humanist, Secularist, London, UK
Pavel Mahmud, Ex-Muslim from Bangladesh. Currently, grad student in NJ, USA
Peter & Annette Cotterill (former CFO & CEO Learning Through Action Trust)
Peter Bowley
Peter Evans
Peter Tatchell, Human Rights Campaigner, UK
Philip Schröder, protestant Christian
Philip Wagstaff`
Pierre A Renaud, Atheist Freethinkers
Pippa Mitchell, Chair of Imperial College London Atheists, Secularists and Humanists
Rafiq Mahmood, Indonesia
Rainer Ebert, Rice University & Bangladesh Liberal Forum
Ratul Das, Lawyer, India
Ray Norman
Rebecca Poata-Smith, New Zealand.
René Hack, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Richard Dawkins, Scientist and Atheist, UK
Rob Mallows, Central London Humanists
Robert Ferris, Atheist, Dublin, Ireland
Roger Lowe, Atheist, Australia
Roger Winchester, Atheist and secularist, UK
Ronald Lindsay, President, Centre For Inquiry, USA
Rose-Anna Bleasdale
Sarah Brown
Sarah Hague
Secularism is a Women's Issue
Setareh Sharifzade Abdi, Atheist asylum seeker from Iran, Sweden
Siba Shakib, Writer/Filmmaker, Germany
Siddhant Shirodkar, Atheist/Secular Humanist
Sikivu Hutchinson, Editor, blackfemlens.org, USA
Simon Arnall, Australian, Humanist Atheist
Simon Gandevia
Soad Baba-Aissa , President, Association pour la mixité, l'égalité et la laïcité en Algérie, France
Sohaila Sharifi, Women's Rights Campaigner, UK
Sonja Eggerickx, President, International Humanist and Ethical Union, Belgium
Stefan Detrez
Stephen Howling
Steve Hossen
Steven Howard, Australia
Sture Qvarfordt, Member, Swedish Humanist Association
Sue Cox, Survivors Voice Europe, UK
Sundas Hoorain, Human Rights Lawyer, Pakistan
Tarek Fateh, Writer, Canada
Taslina Nasreen, Writer
Terry Sanderson, President, National Secular Society, UK
The Pink Triangle Trust
The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science
Tim Ayres
Timothy Ward
Tom Doherty
Tommi Paalanen, Finland
Ulf Gustafsson, Sweden
Uwe Max Jensen

Victor Franco, Vice President, Atheist Alliance International
Vincent Federico
Z A Akbar

(Please add your full name as well as affiliation if any in the comments section below and the list will be updated with your details on a regular basis until 15 March 2013.)

NOTES:

1. Join the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain at its upcoming events. On 15 March, there is a Muslimish launch in Chicago; evening drinks with Sudanese atheist Nahla Mahmoud on 22 March in London; 24 March Nowrooz Party in Manchester; and a meet-up for apostate refugees and asylum seekers on 26 March in London. Find out more here.
2. See the CEMB's latest statement against sex segregation at an Islamist-organised event at UCL. The university banned the group IERA from holding future events on its premises. More information is available here.
3. Read Maryam Namazie's most recent speech at Birmingham University's Reason Week on Apostasy and Freedom of Conscience and watch her interview on shouting atheism from every rooftop.
4. 4. See the latest media coverage, including a piece in the Washington Post about Muslimish and Maryam's interview with the Thinking Atheist.
5. To donate to the important work of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, click here.
6. For more information:
Maryam Namazie
Spokesperson
Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain
BM Box 1919, London WC1N 3XX, UK
email: exmuslimcouncil@gmail.com
web: <http://ex-muslim.org.uk/>

'God' dropped from UK air cadet organization pledge for atheists

The Christian Post (22.01.2013) - Following a campaign sponsored by multiple humanist organizations, one of the most well-known youth organizations in Great Britain has recently decided to offer nonbelievers an alternative oath that omits the mention of a higher power.

"British society is changing dramatically: over two-thirds of young people have a non-religious identity and that proportion is growing all the time. The institutions of our society need to catch up with this demographic fact if they are going to remain relevant and build cohesion between young people of different beliefs,"

Andrew Copson, chief executive of the British Humanist Association [BHA], said in a statement released by the British Humanist Association.

Copson, whose group joined forces with the United Kingdom Armed Forces Humanist Association to push for the oath change, went on to add that the humanist organization plans to pursue other youth organizations in Great Britain to make similar changes to their pledges.

The humanist groups argued that the Cadet Organization would fall out of favor with the Ministry of Defense's policy on equality and diversity should it continue to force non-religious members to pledge their allegiance to God.

Originally, the oath of the Air Cadet Organization, which is regarded as one of the largest youth organizations in the country with a 14,000-person membership for students ages 13-20, stated that each cadet promised "to be a good citizen and to do my duty to God and the Queen, my country and my flag."

This oath was usually delivered during an initiation ceremony presided over by the young cadet's presiding officer.

Now, non-religious members will be given the opportunity to make a non-religious oath to the organization, which was founded prior to World War II and receives sponsorship from the Royal Air Force.

Great Britain's other major youth organizations, the Scout Association and Girlguiding U.K, are also reportedly considering formulating a non-religious oath, but not all countrymen are on board with the plan.

Andy Tilsley, a spokesman for ChristChurch London, told the Guardian that he believes the change in oath raises broader questions in the country.

"Should we change the words of the national anthem because they include 'God save our gracious Queen'? What are people threatened by?" Tilsley questioned.

In Dec. 2012, the Scout Association of Great Britain announced its plans to offer a new oath to atheist members so that they too may join the youth organization.

"All bodies have to stay fresh and current, while remaining true to their founding principles," Derek Twine, chief executive of the Scout Association, previously wrote in a statement for The Telegraph.

Additionally, in early 2013 it was announced that Girlguiding U.K., the largest voluntary youth organization for girls in the country, was also considering removing any mention of God from its oath.

In response, Andrea Williams, CEO of Christian Concern, a U.K.-based organization which seeks to introduce a Christian voice into the public sphere, argued that she believes Girlguiding U.K. should stay true to the principles it was founded on.

"I think it is a great sadness when you lose that ethos, you lose what you believe in and [the organization] ends up meaning nothing. These organizations should be proud of their heritage, proud of their beliefs – it is what makes them special," Williams previously told the Guardian.

A 2011 United Kingdom Census found that 14.1 million people in England and Wales do not associate with a religion, nearly double of the 7.7 million who said the same thing in the 2001 census, according to the Daily Mail.

European court rejects three UK faith bias complaints

Reuters (15.01.2013) - Europe's top human rights court ruled on Tuesday that equality laws and safety concerns trumped religious freedom in three cases where British Christians were sacked or sanctioned for expressing their beliefs at work.

The European Court of Human Rights ECHR.L ruled employers did not violate the religious rights of a registrar who refused to officiate for civil partnerships of same-sex couples and a counsellor deemed unwilling to offer sex therapy for gays.

It also turned down an appeal by a nurse whose hospital barred her from wearing a cross around her neck. In the fourth case in the verdict, a British Airways clerk suspended for wearing a cross won her appeal and was awarded damages.

"The principle of non-discrimination against gay people has been upheld," said Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society which opposed all the appeals.

"The rights of gay people to fair and equal treatment would have been kicked back by decades" if the two appeals concerning same-sex partnership had been upheld, he said.

Andrea Minichiello Williams, whose Christian Legal Centre in London represented two of the losing plaintiffs, said she would make a final appeal to the ECHR Grand Chamber.

She said the ruling let the government decide who abided by "an equality policy that promotes a same-sex agenda and asks you to believe in it, to comply with it and promote it."

If upheld, the court's ruling would mean European companies must be careful to balance employees' rights to express their religious beliefs on the job against equality laws meant to end discrimination, especially against gays.

Growing Trend

The trend toward stronger equality laws to prevent discrimination against homosexuals has created problems for religious groups that consider same-sex relations to be sinful.

The Catholic Church has closed adoption services in two U.S. states because it refused to give children to same-sex couples and a British Catholic adoption agency recently lost a legal battle to win an exemption from equality laws there.

British Prime Minister David Cameron hailed the court on Twitter for upholding one case: "Delighted that principle of wearing religious symbols at work has been upheld - people shouldn't suffer discrimination due to religious beliefs."

He plans to submit a bill to allow faith symbols at work.

In the case of the British Airways (ICAG.L) employee Nadia Eweida, the ECHR found her religious rights took precedence over BA's "wish to project a certain corporate image."

She was suspended in 2006, when BA's dress code allowed Sikh turbans and Muslim headscarves, and returned to work 17 months later after Christian and Jewish symbols were added to the list.

"I am very pleased that Christian religious rights have been vindicated both in the United Kingdom and in Europe," she told Reuters, adding she was disappointed for the other plaintiffs.

But in another case, the ECHR agreed with hospital officials that nurse Shirley Chaplin's cross could cause injury to her if a patient pulled it or it came into contact with an open wound.

It said "the protection of health and safety in a hospital ward" was "inherently more important" than her wish to manifest her faith and the hospital was the best judge of each case.

Gay rights vs faith Tenets

The court found the London borough of Islington had the right to discipline registrar Lillian Ladele in 2007 for refusing to perform ceremonies for gay civil unions, which she said her faith did not approve of.

The ECHR also rejected the appeal of relationship counsellor Gary McFarlane, who was dismissed in 2008 because his employers concluded his Christian beliefs would stand in the way of providing sex therapy to homosexual couples.

The ECHR has in the past given considerable leeway to member states to decide issues of religion in the public sphere.

It has allowed a French school to require Muslim students to remove headscarves for sports classes but also let Italian state schools leave crucifixes hanging in classrooms.

Paul Lambdin, an employment law expert with the British firm Stevens and Bolton LLP, said the effect of the rejected appeals would be that "others with similar religious convictions may be lawfully excluded from certain jobs."

Gregor Puppink of the European Centre for Law and Justice, which supported the appeals, said the three rulings amounted to a "monopolistic imposition of postmodern ideology over individual consciences and religious beliefs."

'Insulting' to be dropped from section 5 of Public Order Act

The Guardian (14.01.2013) - Using insulting language will no longer be illegal in cases in which a specific victim cannot be identified, says home secretary

The use of insulting language will no longer be illegal in cases in which a specific victim cannot be identified, the home secretary, [Theresa May](#), has said.

In a government climb down, the Public Order Act that covers speech and writing on signs and states: "A person is guilty of an offence if he uses threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour", will be changed to remove the word insulting. The move

follows a high-profile campaign which united Christian and secular groups and was spearheaded by the comedian Rowan Atkinson, the human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell and the former shadow home secretary David Davis.

The push to change section five of the act followed a series of headline-grabbing arrests and prosecutions ranging from an Oxford student asking a police officer "Do you realise your horse is gay?" which Thames Valley police described as homophobic and "offensive to people passing by", to a 16 year old holding up a placard that said "Scientology is a dangerous cult".

In December, the government suffered a heavy defeat in the House of Lords which voted 150 votes to 54 in favour of an amendment to remove the word "insulting". Campaigners had complained the clause had been used by police as a "catch-all" offence to arrest people on trivial matters. It will continue to be illegal to use insulting language when an victim is clearly identifiable.

May told MPs the government was "not minded to challenge the amendment" made by the Lords even though ministers "believe that the police should be able to take action when they are sworn at, when protesters burn poppies on Armistice day and in similar scenarios".

She added: "I respect the review taken by their lordships, they had concerns which I know are shared by some in this House that Section 5 encroaches upon freedom of expression. On the other hand the view expressed by many in the police is that Section 5 including the word 'insulting' is a valuable tool in helping them keep the peace and maintain public order.

"Looking at past cases the director of public prosecutions could not identify any where the behaviour leading to a conviction could not be described as abusive as well as insulting. He has stated that the word insulting could safely be removed without the risk of undermining the ability of the CPS [Crown Prosecution Service] to bring prosecutions."

The government announcement has delighted Simon Calvert, director of the "feel free to insult me" campaign which argued the law should not be used to protect people from having their feelings hurt. "It is good news for free speech whoever you are," he said.

Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, said: "We congratulate the home secretary for removing a much-abused catch all provision where the police could charge anyone for using trivial words that irritated them.

"The police did not even need to identify the victim that allegedly had been insulted. The change is likely to prevent street evangelists preaching against homosexuality being charged."

Right to manifest religion at work is protected but must be balanced against rights of others

Registry of the ECHR (15.01.2013) - In today's Chamber judgment in the case of **Eweida and Others v. the United Kingdom** (application nos. 48420/10, 59842/10, 51671/10 and 36516/10), which is not final, the European Court of Human Rights held:

by five votes to two, that there had been a **violation of Article 9 (freedom of religion)** of the European Convention on Human Rights as concerned Ms Eweida; unanimously, that there had been **no violation of Article 9** of the European Convention, taken alone or in conjunction with **Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination)**, as concerned Ms Chaplin and Mr McFarlane; and by five votes to two, that there had been **no violation of Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 9** as concerned Ms Ladele.

All four applicants are practising Christians. Ms Eweida, a British Airways employee, and Ms Chaplin, a geriatrics nurse, complained that their employers placed restrictions on their visibly wearing Christian crosses around their necks while at work. Ms Ladele, a Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and Mr McFarlane, a Relate counsellor complained about their dismissal for refusing to carry out certain of their duties which they considered would condone homosexuality.

The Court did not consider that the lack of explicit protection in UK law to regulate the wearing of religious clothing and symbols in the workplace in itself meant that the right to manifest religion was breached, since the issues could be and were considered by the domestic courts in the context of discrimination claims brought by the applicants.

In Ms Eweida's case, the Court held that on one side of the scales was Ms Eweida's desire to manifest her religious belief. On the other side of the scales was the employer's wish to project a certain corporate image. While this aim was undoubtedly legitimate, the domestic courts accorded it too much weight.

As regards Ms Chaplin, the importance for her to be allowed to bear witness to her Christian faith by wearing her cross visibly at work weighed heavily in the balance.

However, the reason for asking her to remove the cross, namely the protection of health and safety on a hospital ward, was inherently more important than that which applied in respect of Ms Eweida and the hospital managers were well placed to make decisions about clinical safety.

In the cases of Ms Ladele and Mr McFarlane, it could not be said that national courts had failed to strike a fair balance when they upheld the employers' decisions to bring disciplinary proceedings. In each case the employer was pursuing a policy of non-discrimination against service-users, and the right not to be discriminated against on grounds of sexual orientation was also protected under the Convention.

The applicants, Nadia Eweida, Shirley Chaplin, Lilian Ladele and Gary McFarlane, are British nationals who were born respectively in 1951, 1955, 1960 and 1961. They live in Twickenham, Exeter, London and Bristol, respectively.

Chaplin and Eweida

Both applicants believe that the visible wearing of a cross is an important part of the manifestation of their faith.

From 1999 Ms Eweida worked part-time as a member of check-in staff for British Airways and was required to wear a uniform. British Airways' uniform code required women to wear a high necked shirt and a cravat, with no visible jewellery. Any item which a staff member had to wear for religious reasons was to be covered by the uniform or, if this was not possible, approval had to be sought. Until May 2006, Ms Eweida wore a small silver cross on a chain around her neck concealed under her uniform. As a sign of her commitment to her faith, she then decided to wear the cross openly. In September 2006, she was sent home without pay until she agreed to comply with the uniform code. In October 2006 she was offered administrative work without the obligation to wear a

uniform or have contact with customers, which she refused. She finally returned to work in February 2007 when the company's policy was changed to permit the display of religious and charity symbols, with the cross and the star of David being given immediate authorisation.

Ms Chaplin worked as a qualified nurse employed by the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust from April 1989 to July 2010. At the time of the events in question she worked on a geriatrics ward. In June 2007, when new uniforms with V-necks were introduced in the hospital, Ms Chaplin's manager asked her to remove the crucifix on the chain around her neck. Ms Chaplin sought approval to continue wearing her crucifix which was refused on the ground that it could cause injury if a patient pulled on it or if, for example, it came into contact with an open wound. In November 2009 she was moved to a non-nursing temporary position which ceased to exist in July 2010.

Both applicants lodged claims with the Employment Tribunal complaining in particular of discrimination on religious grounds. The Tribunal rejected Ms Eweida's claim, finding that the visible wearing of a cross was not a requirement of the Christian faith but the applicant's personal choice and that she had failed to establish that British Airways' uniform policy had put Christians in general at a disadvantage. Her appeal to the Court of Appeal was also subsequently rejected and the Supreme Court refused her leave to appeal in May 2010. Ms Chaplin's claim was also rejected in May 2010, the Tribunal holding that the hospital's position had been based on health and safety grounds and that there was no evidence that anyone other than the applicant had been put at particular disadvantage. Given the Court of Appeal's decision in Ms Eweida's case, Ms Chaplin was advised that an appeal had no prospect of success.

Ladele and McFarlane

Both Ms Ladele and Mr McFarlane are Christians, who believe that homosexual relationships are contrary to God's law and that it is incompatible with their beliefs to do anything to condone homosexuality.

Ms Ladele was employed as a Registrar by the London Borough of Islington from 1992 to 2009. When the Civil Partnership Act came into force in the United Kingdom in December 2005, she was informed by her employer that she would henceforth be required to officiate at civil partnership ceremonies between homosexual couples. When Ms Ladele refused to sign an amended contract, disciplinary proceedings were brought against her in May 2007 which concluded that, if she failed to include civil partnership ceremonies as part of her duties, she would be in breach of Islington Council's equality and diversity policy and her contract could be terminated.

Mr McFarlane worked for Relate2 as a Counsellor from May 2003 to March 2008. In 2007 he started a post graduate diploma in psycho sexual therapy which deals in particular with sexual dysfunction and aims to improve a couple's sexual activity by improving the relationship overall. By the end of 2007 Mr McFarlane's superiors as well as other therapists had expressed concern that there was conflict between his religious beliefs and his work with same-sex couples. In January 2008 a disciplinary investigation was opened. In March 2008 Mr McFarlane was dismissed summarily for gross misconduct on the ground that he had stated that he would comply with Relate's Equal Opportunities Policies and provide counselling to same-sex couples without any intention of doing so. A subsequent appeal was rejected.

Both applicants brought proceedings before the Employment Tribunal on grounds of religious discrimination; Mr McFarlane also claimed that he had been unfairly and wrongfully dismissed. Both claims were rejected on appeal on the basis that their employers were not only entitled to require them to carry out their duties but also to refuse to accommodate views which contradicted their fundamental declared principles –

and, all the more so, where these principles were required by law, notably under the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007. Ultimately, in March 2010 Ms Ladele was refused leave to appeal to the Supreme Court and, in April 2010, Mr McFarlane was refused permission to appeal again to the Employment Appeal Tribunal as there was no realistic prospect of it succeeding, given that Mr McFarlane's case could not sensibly be distinguished from Ms Ladele's.

Complaints, procedure and composition of the Court

All four applicants complained that domestic law had failed adequately to protect their right to manifest their religion. Ms Eweida, Ms Chaplin and Mr McFarlane relied on Article 9 (freedom of religion), taken alone and in conjunction with Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination), while Ms Ladele complained only under Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 9.

The applications were lodged, respectively, with the European Court of Human Rights on 10 August, 29 September, 27 August and 24 June 2010. The Court communicated³ all four applications to the United Kingdom Government on 12 April 2011 and asked both parties to submit their observations.

The Court authorised to intervene as third parties in the proceedings and to submit written observations⁴: the Equality and Human Rights Commission; The National Secular Society; Dr Jan Camogursky and The Alliance Defense Fund; Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali; The Premier Christian Media Trust; the Bishops of Chester and Blackburn; Associazione "Giuseppi Dossetti: i Valori"; Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe; Liberty; the Clapham Institute and KLM; the European Centre for Law and Justice; Lord Carey of Clifton; and, the Fédération Internationale des ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH, ICJ, ILGA-Europe).

A hearing took place in public in the Human Rights Building, Strasbourg, on 4 September 2012.

Judgment was given by a Chamber of seven judges, composed as follows:

David Thór **Björgvinsson** (Iceland), *President*,
Lech **Garlicki** (Poland),
Nicolas **Bratza** (the United Kingdom),
Päivi **Hirvelä** (Finland),
Zdravka **Kalaydjieva** (Bulgaria),
Nebojša **Vučinić** (Montenegro),
Vincent A. **de Gaetano** (Malta),
and also Lawrence **Early**, *Section Registrar*.

Decision of the Court

The Court emphasised the importance of freedom of religion, as an essential part of the identity of believers and one of the foundations of pluralistic, democratic societies. Freedom of religion under Article 9 of the Convention includes freedom to manifest one's religious belief, including in the workplace. However, where an individual's religious observance impinges on the rights of others, some restrictions can be made. It is up to the authorities of the Contracting States, in the first place, to decide what is necessary. The Court's task is to review whether the measures taken at national level were justified in principle and struck a fair balance between the various competing rights and interests.

Ms Eweida and Ms Chaplin

The Court considered that there had been an interference with both women's right to manifest their religion in that they had been unable to wear their crosses visibly at work.

As concerned Ms Eweida, who worked for a private company and could not therefore attribute that interference directly to the State, the Court had to examine whether her right freely to manifest her religion had been sufficiently protected within the domestic legal order. In common with a large number of contracting States⁵, the UK does not have legal provisions specifically regulating the wearing of religious clothing and symbols in the workplace. However, it was clear that the legitimacy of BA's uniform code and the proportionality of the measures it had taken had been examined in detail by the domestic courts. Therefore, the lack of explicit protection in the UK law in this area did not, in itself, mean that Ms Eweida's right to manifest her religion had been breached.

Nonetheless, the Court concluded in her case that a fair balance had not been struck between, on the one side of the scales, her desire to manifest her religious belief and to be able to communicate that belief to others, and on the other side of the scales, her employer's wish to project a certain corporate image (no matter how legitimate that aim might be). Indeed, other BA employees had previously been authorised to wear items of religious clothing such as turbans and hijabs without any negative impact on BA's brand or image. Moreover, the fact that the company had amended the uniform code to allow for visible wearing of religious symbolic jewellery showed that the earlier prohibition had not been of crucial importance. The domestic authorities had therefore failed sufficiently to protect Ms Eweida's right to manifest her religion, in breach of Article 9. It did not consider it necessary to examine separately her complaint under Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 9.

On the other hand, the reason for asking Ms Chaplin to remove her cross, namely the protection of health and safety on a hospital ward, was inherently of much greater importance. Moreover, hospital managers were better placed to make decisions about clinical safety than a court, particularly an international court which had heard no direct evidence. The Court therefore concluded that requiring Ms Chaplin to remove her cross had not been disproportionate and that the interference with her freedom to manifest her religion had been necessary in a democratic society. Accordingly, there had been no violation of Article 9 as concerned Ms Chaplin. It also found that there was no basis either on which it could find a violation of Article 14 in the case.

Ms Ladele and Mr McFarlane

The Court considered that the most important factor to be taken into account was that the policies of the applicants' employers – to promote equal opportunities and to require employees to act in a way which did not discriminate against others – had the legitimate aim of securing the rights of others, such as same-sex couples, which were also protected under the Convention. In particular, in previous cases the Court had held that differences in treatment based on sexual orientation required particularly serious justification and that same-sex couples were in a relevantly similar situation to differentsex couples as regards their need for legal recognition and protection of their relationship.

The authorities therefore had wide discretion when it came to striking a balance between the employer's right to secure the rights of others and the applicants' right to manifest their religion. The Court decided that the right balance had been struck and therefore held that there had been no violation of Article 14 taken in conjunction with Article 9 as concerned Ms Ladele, and no violation of Article 9 – taken alone or in conjunction with Article 14 – as concerned Mr McFarlane.

Just satisfaction (Article 41)

The court held that the United Kingdom was to pay Ms Eweida 2,000 euros (EUR) in respect of non-pecuniary damage and EUR 30,000 for costs and expenses.

Separate opinion

Judges Bratza and Björgvinsson and De Gaetano and Vučinić expressed partly dissenting opinions which are annexed to the judgment.

Full judgment available at [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-115881#{"itemid":\["001-115881"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-115881#{)

British Airways Christian employee Nadia Eweida wins case

BBC News (15.01.2013) - A British Airways employee suffered discrimination at work over her Christian beliefs, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled.

Judges ruled Nadia Eweida's rights had been violated under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

She took her case to the European Court of Human Rights after BA made her stop wearing a cross visibly.

Judges ruled that the rights of three other Christians had not been violated by their employers.

The other cases involved nurse Shirley Chaplin, 57, whose employer also stopped her wearing necklaces with a cross, Gary McFarlane, 51 - a marriage counsellor fired after saying he might object to giving sex therapy advice to gay couples - and registrar Lillian Ladele, who was disciplined after she refused to conduct same-sex civil partnership ceremonies.

All four lost separate employment tribunals relating to their beliefs and made individual applications to the court, but their cases are being heard together.

Ms Eweida, 60, was banned from displaying her white gold cross at work.

The four Christians claimed their employers' actions went against articles nine and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protected their rights to "freedom of thought, conscience and religion" and prohibited religious discrimination.

Ms Eweida, a Coptic Christian from Twickenham in south-west London, was asked to leave her job in 2006 after refusing to remove her cross.

An employment tribunal found she had not been subjected to religious discrimination but BA later altered its uniform code to allow symbols of faith, including crosses.

Ms Ladele was disciplined by Islington Council, in north London, after saying she did not want to conduct same-sex civil partnership ceremonies. Her lawyers said the service could have been performed by other employees who were prepared to carry them out.

Mr McFarlane, a Bristol relationship counsellor, worked for the Avon branch of national charity Relate but was sacked for gross misconduct in 2008 after saying on a training course he might have an objection to discussing sexual problems with gay couples.

Ms Chaplin, from Exeter, was transferred to a desk job by Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Trust Hospital for failing to remove a confirmation crucifix on a small chain, which she had worn to work for 30 years.

The BBC's Dominic Casciani says judges decided health and safety matters outweighed her religious rights.

Judgment to be announced in UK religious freedom and employment cases

Strasbourg Consortium (08.01.2013) - The Court gives notice that its judgment in the consolidated cases [Eweida and Others v. the United Kingdom](#) (nos. 48420/10, 59842/10, 51671/10 and 36516/10) will be announced on Tuesday, 15 January 2013. Press releases and texts of the judgments will be available at 10 a.m. (local time) on the Court's Internet site (www.echr.coe.int).

From the Court's Press Release: The applicants, Nadia Eweida, Shirley Chaplin, Lillian Ladele and Gary McFarlane, are British nationals who were born in 1951, 1955, 1960 and 1961 and live in Twickenham, Exeter, London and Bristol (UK) respectively. Relying on Article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) and Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination), they complain that UK law does not sufficiently protect their rights to freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination at work. All four applicants are practising Christians. Ms Eweida, a British Airways employee, and Ms Chaplin, a geriatrics nurse, complain that their employers placed restrictions on their visibly wearing Christian crosses around their necks while at work. Ms Ladele, a Registrar of Births, deaths and Marriages, and Mr McFarlane, a Relate¹ counsellor, complain about their dismissal for refusing to carry out certain of their duties which they considered would condone homosexuality. The Court held a hearing in this case on 4 September 2012.

¹*Relate is a national organisation which provides a confidential sex therapy and relationship counselling service.*

See documents concerning these cases:

<http://www.strasbourgconsortium.org/portal.case.php?pageId=10#caseId=654>

<http://www.strasbourgconsortium.org/portal.case.php?pageId=10#caseId=655>

Atheist 'Church' to host godless Sunday gatherings in London

The Christian Post (03.01.2013) - Two British comedians have announced their plan to start an atheist "church," known as The Sunday Assembly, to be offered for free once a month in London.

"We thought it would be a shame not to enjoy the good stuff about religion, like the sense of community, just because of a theological disagreement," said Sanderson Jones, a stand-up comedian who hatched the idea for the "church" with fellow comedienne Pippa Evans.

The Londonist blog describes the monthly morning meeting, held at a former church in Islington known as The Nave, as a "godless gathering for people who want to hear funny and interesting people talk, sing songs and celebrate life."

Additionally, The Sunday Assembly's motto is to "live better, help often and wonder more," and will include an array of inspirational speakers touching on a new theme each month.

The upcoming meeting on Jan. 6, 2013, will revolve around the theme "Beginnings," focusing primarily on keeping New Year's resolutions.

Future speakers at the event include stand-up comedians Arthur Smith, Lucy Porter, Josie Long, Susan Calman, Imran Yusuf and Nick Revell, according to the Londonist.

Plans for organized atheist worship have been acknowledged by atheists in the past, who argue that a communal gathering of praise and worship is contrary to the central atheist belief that there is no higher power.

Well-known atheist Richard Dawkins blasted a separate plan last year to build a network of atheist churches throughout the U.K., beginning with a 150 tower to celebrate atheism.

"Atheists don't need temples," Dawkins said at the time of author Alain de Botton's plans to build the atheist temple, which ultimately never came to fruition.

"There are better things to spend this kind of money on. You could improve secular education and build non-religious schools which teach rational, skeptical critical thinking," Dawkins added.

Christian group makes legal appeal for charity status

The Guardian (03.01.2013) - Last month saw the formal start of a charity tribunal appeal that could redefine the place of religion in the charity sector. The case – which has been the subject of increasingly acrimonious debate in parliament and the media – concerns the Charity Commission's decision not to grant charitable status to the Preston Down Trust, which runs a meeting hall for south Devon's Plymouth Brethren community.

Founded in the 19th century, the Brethren are a Christian movement whose lifestyle is characterised by daily bible study, an emphasis on traditional family roles and a rejection of radio, TV and cinema. Their doctrine of "separation" limits time spent with outsiders, but adherents say the popular perception that the community lives in isolation, severing all ties with those who choose to leave – hence the "Exclusive Brethren" epithet – is an outdated stereotype.

The case hinges on whether the doctrine and practices of the Brethren are compatible with the public benefit requirement of charity law. Until the Charities Act 2006 there was a presumption that "advancement of religion" was in itself a public benefit, but the act removed that presumption and required religious charities – just like those with other legally defined charitable purposes – to demonstrate explicitly how their activities made a positive contribution to the community.

In a recent letter to the Commons public administration select committee, which is conducting an inquiry into the regulation of the charity sector and the 2006 act, the

commission was forced to explain why the Druid Network had charitable status while the Brethren did not. The commission said this was because the former did not support events or organisations that were "exclusive".

The commission has previously drawn on case law developed before 2006 to resolve such questions. But in its letter to the trust, the regulator said the act's introduction – and the tribunal's recent assessment of public benefit in relation to private schools – meant this aspect of charity law was now unclear. "The evidence in relation to any beneficial impact on the wider public is perhaps marginal and insufficient to satisfy us as to the benefit to the community," it said.

The letter outlined two specific concerns: first, that the trust may not provide "meaningful access to participate in public worship" and secondly, that the supposedly rigid disciplinary practices of the Brethren, and the "effects of the doctrine and practice of separation on family, social and working life", may negate potential public benefit. The letter stresses, however, that the latter is based on "public criticism" rather than solid evidence.

The commission considered referring the matter to the charity tribunal for clarification but decided not to. And as it deemed an internal decision review to be "inappropriate", the trust's only option – apart from accepting the decision – was to appeal to the tribunal and become a test case for other Brethren congregations, and potentially for other religious groups too.

When parliamentarians and parts of the media found out about its decision, they were quick to accuse the commission of "anti-Christian" bias. Brethren elders were invited to give evidence to the public administration select committee, during which Charlie Elphicke MP claimed the regulator was "committed to the suppression of religion". The case also dominated last month's Westminster Hall debate on charity registration, with some MPs calling for a full parliamentary inquiry.

To the surprise of many, the Brethren have run a tight public relations campaign – not that they're relishing the attention. "It's a feeling of puzzlement and great sorrow to us that we're having to go through this battle," says Rod Buckley, a member of the Preston Down congregation. "I don't quite understand it. We do a lot in the community and people that know us, know that."

Buckley points to the Brethren's soup kitchens, food parcel collections and the help they gave to those affected by the recent floods as clear examples of their positive impact on the community. He adds that while Holy Communion – the "Lord's supper" in Brethren parlance – is accessible only to members, other events are open to all. No different, he says, to many mainstream religious groups.

The commission stresses that it does not have general concerns about religious charities, but those following the case have warned it could have wider ramifications. "It does potentially impact on other organisations, particularly where they restrict access to participation in religious services, meetings or activities, or where there's an emphasis on an enclosed community," says Stephanie Biden, a senior associate at charity solicitors Bates Wells & Braithwaite.

In an unprecedented move, the tribunal has allowed the commission to file anonymous witness statements and for witness protection measures to be put in place. The decision is in response to evidence received by the commission from former Brethren members, whose relationships with family members still in the group are particularly sensitive.

If these witnesses do testify at the full hearing in March 2013, the tribunal may have to answer a question that could have far-reaching consequences: when do allegations of harm against a particular religion or denomination outweigh potential public benefit? There is no shortage of controversial religious groups on the register, after all.

Despite the commission's protestations, the case is unlikely to be seen merely as a clarification of charity law. The regulator has found itself at the centre of a row about religious freedom – and with the Brethren vowing to take their case to the European Court of Human Rights if necessary, it's a row that's likely to get even more heated in the coming months.
