

many nineteenth-century timber ships over 90 metres long (295 feet). It is therefore clear that the technology required to build a timber ship

the size of Noah's Ark was already available long before the nineteenth century, and had been used to construct vessels almost as large as the Ark.

## Principles, preaching and problems

# A secularist Britain?

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*"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good. The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God" (Ps. 14:1,2).*

ON THE SURFACE, at least, Britain is a very long way from being a secularist society at present, but there are some ominous stirrings beneath the surface that make one wonder what might be afoot. If there were to be an orchestrated push towards secularism, we might be surprised how very quickly things could change—in the way that there has been very rapid change, for example, in the matter of homosexuality and civil partnerships.

### Recent news items

- A BBC news item on 28 March 2010 reported that a number of Christians had walked out from a meeting of an Advisory Group to the EHRC (Equality and Human Rights Commission) because of the attitude of humanists and secularists who regarded any concessions sought on behalf of church or religious organisations as 'privileges.'
- The motion of a debate on secularism on 18 March 2010 in the House of Lords was "To call attention to the British Humanist Association's reports *Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations* and *The Case for Secularism: A Neutral State in an Open Society*, and to move for papers." The debate itself went nowhere, of course, the motion being withdrawn, but the very fact that it was held is of more than passing interest. It was linked to possible reform of the House of Lords, which is an issue that Parliament will certainly return to at some point.
- Just after that, and still under the Labour administration, publicity was given to a government Foreign Office memo or e-mail which

made highly inappropriate suggestions for visits and activities in which the Pope might be involved during his forthcoming visit to Britain. Serious political comment on BBC Radio 4, examining why this might ever have been considered funny, suggested that

the young civil servant involved was part of a culture which sees religion in this country as 'gone,' that is, a thing of the past.

- Then there was the high-profile case of a Relate counsellor dismissed from his work for his refusal to offer sex therapy to homosexuals, claiming that this was against his beliefs. Lord Justice Laws rebuffed the attempted intervention of Lord Carey (ex-Archbishop of Canterbury) on behalf of Mr MacFarlane, and was quoted as saying that "the promulgation of law for the protection of a position held purely on religious grounds cannot therefore be justified" (*Daily Telegraph*, 30 Apr. 2010). Where does that leave conscientious objection? Ex-Bishop of Rochester Michael Nazir-Ali's comment in the *Daily Telegraph* was that "Lord Justice Laws' judgement . . . that legislation for the protection of views held purely on religious ground cannot be justified has driven a coach and horses through the ancient association of the Christian faith with the constitutional and legal basis of British society . . . If this judgement is allowed to stand, the aggressive secularists will have had their way."

In the same week came news of a rescue package for the Greek economy. It was not very clear whether the terms of the final package included all that was earlier proposed, but one of the measures being urged in the earlier discussions was that all churches, including the Greek Orthodox Church, would have to pay taxes on all income; in other words, that the established church would cease to enjoy the rights and privileges traditionally accorded it.

## Significance

The judgement of Lord Justice Laws may turn out to be significant if it remains unchallenged or is not overturned by subsequent cases. Taken alone, none of the above news items appears to be of any particular consequence in its own right; together, however, they may indicate a drift in one particular direction.

It is difficult to anticipate what the effects of any secularisation of this country might be. It is unlikely that the loss of the Lords Spiritual from the House of Lords would affect us as a Brotherhood, since the established church in this country has already lost its way in terms of morality, and its influence in matters that would concern us is probably minimal. However, if ever Britain were officially to become a secular society, the traditional respect for religion and religious people would no longer exist. It is hard to quantify this, but we would be living in a very different climate, and it might be more noticeable than we can imagine at present.

## Possible effects

Reform of the House of Lords may well result in the established church losing considerable power and influence. Certain protective exceptions may initially be made for the Church of England (and/or the Roman Catholic Church), but churches generally could become simply 'religious institutions', and could lose their privileges. For example, it is not difficult to see how, in constrained economic times, the Greek model could be implemented in Britain and the income of churches be taxable.

In a fuller secularist society the church would not be recognised as at all different within the legislative framework from any other organisation. Organisations of whatever kind would fall into two main categories, either business organisations or social/community/charitable organisations. It is in this area that the Christadelphians may encounter most difficulty. Some of our ecclesias and organisations are charities legitimately registered with the Charity Commissioners, others have simply registered a charitable status with the taxman, but in very few cases are their aims and objectives what the public would regard as those of a charity. They are mostly inward-looking, concerned with the preaching of the gospel and the welfare of church members, with perhaps two notable exceptions.

At the ecclesial level, only in a few (ill-advised) cases have Christadelphians made their buildings available for community use or gone wholesale

into providing a community service through mother-and-toddler groups etc. Consequently, it is still unlikely that they would enjoy their present privileged status and still possible that they would be subject to a rating assessment on their properties.

The removal from the law of 'church organisations' or alteration in their status would probably also bring them more into line with businesses in terms of their responsibilities towards employees—and possibly also voluntary workers. There would then be no exceptions made for organisations with rules (beliefs) about sex outside marriage, homosexual relationships or civil partnerships. You can see that this would suit the authorities very well. Indeed, it is not impossible that there would even be 'targets' introduced to ensure that any organisation was representative of the diversity within society as a whole.

Secularisation would place the Church of England on the same footing as the Roman Catholics and Islam. All religious groupings, including the Christadelphians, would then find themselves in a similar, defensive, position in relation to the secular state around them. In this sense, we would then have more common cause with other religious groups than we do at present, and there then becomes a danger that separation is compromised by the 'huddling together' of the churches against a common 'enemy.'

## Preparation

None of these things will happen overnight, and it is not suggested that we will have to face them all at once. However, perhaps we need to be aware of the current drift within society, the aggression of certain lobbyists within government (of whatever persuasion or colour) and the possibility of testing times ahead.

Perhaps this assessment of current trends is wide of the mark. The prophetic scriptures may indicate the dominance of a religious power (the harlot) in Europe and Russia in the last days. Does this indicate that Britain will tread a different path from the rest of Europe? That may well be so, but in any case not all Europe was part of the old (or Holy) Roman Empire, and it is not all one entity now. There are other European countries that might become secular in their outlook.

This makes all the more relevant the apostle's call to prayer for those in authority, that we might continue to lead quiet and peaceable lives and to enjoy the freedom to worship and to preach that precious truth revealed in the Scriptures.