

Extremism flourished as UK lost Christianity

Contributed by Michael Nazir-Ali, Bishop of Rochester
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One reason for this is the arrival of large numbers of people of other faiths to these shores. Their arrival has coincided with the end of the Empire which brought about a widespread questioning of Britain's role.

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This required that people should be facilitated in living as separate communities, continuing to communicate in their own languages and having minimum need for building healthy relationships with the majority.

Alongside these developments, there has been a worldwide resurgence of the ideology of Islamic extremism. One of the results of this has been to further alienate the young from the nation in which they were growing up and also to turn already separate communities into "no-go" areas where adherence to this ideology has become a mark of acceptability.

Those of a different faith or race may find it difficult to live or work there because of hostility to them. In many ways, this is but the other side of the coin to far-Right intimidation. Attempts have been made to impose an "Islamic" character on certain areas, for example, by insisting on artificial amplification for the Adhan, the call to prayer.

Such amplification was, of course, unknown throughout most of history and its use raises all sorts of questions about noise levels and whether non-Muslims wish to be told the creed of a particular faith five times a day on the loudspeaker.

This is happening here even though some Muslim-majority communities are trying to reduce noise levels from multiple mosques announcing this call, one after the other, over quite a small geographical area.

There is pressure already to relate aspects of the sharia to civil law in Britain. To some extent this is already true of arrangements for sharia-compliant banking but have the far-reaching implications of this been fully considered?

It is now less possible for Christianity to be the public faith in Britain.

The existence of chapels and chaplaincies in places such as hospitals, prisons and institutions of further and higher education is in jeopardy either because of financial cuts or because the authorities want "multifaith" provision, without regard to the distinctively Christian character of the nation's laws, values, customs and culture.

Not only locally, but at the national level also the establishment of the Church of England is being eroded. My fear is, in the end, nothing will be left but the smile of the Cheshire Cat.

In the past, I have supported the establishment of the Church, but now I have to ask if it is only the forms that are left and the substance rapidly disappearing. If such is the case, is it worth persevering with the trappings of establishment?

Much of this has come about because of a "neutral" secularist approach which refuses to privilege any faith. In fact, secularism has its own agenda and it is certainly not neutral. It is perfectly possible for Britain to welcome people on the basis of its Christian heritage.

Christian chaplains can arrange for people of other faiths to have access to their own spiritual leaders without compromising the Christian basis of their own ministry.

Instead of this, the multifaith "mish mash" is producing a new, de facto, establishment as the Government attempts to bring particular communities on to its agenda for integration and cohesion, an agenda which still lacks the underpinning of a moral and spiritual vision.

If it had not been for the black majority churches and the recent arrival of people from central and eastern Europe, the Christian cause in many of our cities would have looked a lost one.

At last it seems the Government may be waking up to the situation; to the importance of English as a means of communication, to greater integration in housing, schools, and leisure pursuits and in citizenship education.

But none of this will be of any avail if Britain does not recover that vision of its destiny which made it great. That has to do with the Bible's teaching that we have equal dignity and freedom because we are all made in God's image.

It has to do with a prophetic passion for justice and compassion and it has to do with the teaching and example of Jesus Christ regarding humility, service and sacrifice. Let us pledge in this New Year to restore this noble vision to the centre of our national life.