

C Religious identity in the UK

On December 5, 2007, Mark Pritchard, a conservative Member of Parliament, delivered a speech in the House of Commons at Westminster Hall, London. He gave the speech the following title:

Christianophobia

This debate is about the relentless assault, mostly by stealth, on this nation's much-loved Christian heritage and traditions. It is about how anti-Christian sentiment is increasing, not decreasing; why many Christians feel they are not getting a fair hearing when it comes to Christianity in the public square; and what many people of all faiths and no faith see as the increasing marginalisation of Britain's Christian history, heritage and traditions through the actions of Whitehall Departments, Government agencies, local authorities, the charity commissioners, or other sectors of society. [...]

Britain's Christian traditions are both rich and deep, and are enjoyed today by people from all faiths and none. Furthermore, this Christian tradition has held Britain's communities together for many hundreds of years and through the very many challenges of British history. The most recent English church census reveals that at least 3.2 million people still attend church every Sunday. The Christian Church is not dead: it is very much alive. Perhaps that is an important oversight that some have mistakenly made.

In education, there should be no discrimination against Christians who want to provide home schooling. There should be no discrimination against faith groups that wish to set up new schools and/or expand their existing schools network. People of all faiths and none queue to send their children to such schools – schools with a Christian ethos. Do not take my word for it: look at the evidence. More widely, state schools have a legal and educational duty to ensure that pupils are taught about Britain's Christian traditions, at least for educational, if not for spiritual, purposes.

A recent survey in *The Sunday Telegraph* revealed that fewer and fewer schools are staging traditional Christmas nativity plays, supposedly through fear of offending people of other faiths and those with no faith. But what about the offence to Christians? And whatever happened to allowing children to explore? I would like to put on record that I have never met a single Muslim, Jew, Sikh or Buddhist, or person of any other faith, who has told me that they object to Christians celebrating Christmas. That they do object is a false, secular-driven proposition, and a divisive one. Indeed, the Muslim Council of Britain said: "We see no reason for any Muslim to be upset or offended for the celebration of Christmas or any other festival of any faith".

Let me give the Minister more examples from both the private sector and the public sector. In the retail sector, many shoppers find it increasingly difficult to purchase greetings cards that refer to Jesus. My constituent, Mrs. Patricia Smyth of Wellington, Shropshire, has e-mailed me in the last few days to say that, while shopping for her grandchildren, she found that "there are plenty of Santas and snowmen but nothing to do with the real meaning of Christmas."

I like Santas and snowmen as well, but I think that we also have to have more about what Christmas is about. Advent calendars are also extremely hard to find. I hope that the British Retail Consortium ensures that its members do not inadvertently fall into the trap of political correctness, but meet the needs and

wants of its diverse – including Christian – customer base. Christ has been and always will be at the very heart of Christmas. Without wishing to be irreverent, taking religion out of Christmas is like serving the Christmas turkey without the stuffing.

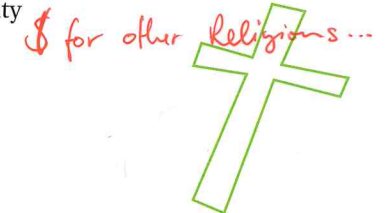
Other examples include some charity organisations banning Christmas messages or nativity scenes from their shop windows and displays; some – not all – Government Departments banning the word "Christmas" from all official celebrations; and the Home Office spending tens of thousands of pounds a year on celebrating Muslim and Hindu festivals, but very little on celebrating Christmas. The Department for Transport has admitted sending staff to minority religious events, but did not "officially" participate in Christmas celebrations. At the Foreign Office – I am a fan of the Foreign Office – Muslim and Chinese religious events are marked with VIP receptions. I have no objection to that, or to the Home Office celebrating Muslim and Hindu festivals, but why is Easter completely ignored? Such discrepancies in using public money potentially divide, alienate and frustrate, rather than unite. [...]

If the Government and their institutions continue to marginalise the Church, to try to remove it from public life and the public square, and to fail to acknowledge the Christian traditions that have weaved the very fabric of our nation and its heritage, a faith that espouses love and hope may be hijacked by extremist parties that espouse nothing more than hate and despair.

Mark Pritchard, MP for *The Wrekin*, 2005–08



A debate in the House of Commons



⁴⁵irreverent disrespectful
⁴⁷stuffing mixture of food to fill meat or vegetables
⁶⁴to espouse to support

WORD BANK
Talking about identity to maintain one's identity
• to preserve one's sense of identity • to stick to one's religious practices
• to become alienated/estranged from sth • to relinquish one's religious heritage • to abandon religious traditions

- Explain the term "Christianophobia". According to Pritchard, where does it manifest itself?
 - What evidence does he give that the Christian faith is still relevant today in British society?
- How does Mr Pritchard implicitly and explicitly try to convince his audience? Analyse the stylistic devices he uses and the effect it has on the listeners. These parliamentary debates are televised. Given his style and choice of words, what audience is Mr Pritchard actually addressing? → S5
- This debate takes place in the House of Commons, where members of the House are allowed to interrupt the speaker and formulate "points of information". Imagine you are on the Labour Party's bench and would like to ask Mr Pritchard questions or make a brief comment to challenge his argument. Where would you interrupt and what would you ask or say?
- Creative writing:** Who do you think would respond negatively/positively to Mr Pritchard's speech? Write a letter of protest or appreciation to Mr Pritchard.
- Round table:** Mr Pritchard meets with young British Muslims to discuss their concerns about their future in a predominantly Christian society. Follow the Online-Link and choose one person portrayed there, taking on his or her role in the discussion. Introduce yourself briefly and then state your opinion or challenge Mr Pritchard's position. → S21



The Archbishop of Canterbury (2nd from right) and other Christian church leaders walk through Bethlehem

FACT FILE

Unlike the US, the United Kingdom does not separate between church and state. The Anglican Church is the "established" Church of England with the Monarch being the Supreme Governor of the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury the religious head. Queen Elizabeth's son Prince Charles has suggested that he does not want to be "Defender of the Faith" (namely the Christian faith) but rather "Defender of Faith" in an effort to reach out to British people of other denominations.

- ¹relentless cruel and endless
- ¹assault attack
- ¹by stealth not openly
- ⁵marginalisation the act of making sth unimportant
- ¹²census official count of the population of a country
- ¹⁵oversight sth that is ignored
- ²⁵nativity the birth of Jesus Christ
- ³⁵retail sale of goods in shops
- ⁴³inadvertently unintentionally