

WE DON'T DO GOD



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In memory of Simon,  
a beloved grandson and nephew.

1986–2010

*We thank you for the life and  
love you gave.*



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# INTRODUCTION

There is a deep malaise in modern Britain about the role of faith in the public square. At times it seems a “crusade” is being waged by the militant wing of secularism to eradicate religion in general – and Christianity in particular – from any role in public life. Yet this is only a small part of the story we tell during the course of this book. For the most part, the “unease” with which modernity regards the public manifestation of faith arises out of ignorance, historical forgetfulness, and well-meaning but mistaken “multiculturalism”. There is a hard-fought conflict between a secular spirit and the Christian faith. We have no problem at all with an open spirit of enquiry or even unbelief. We believe wholeheartedly in the freedoms we have gained. To live in an open democracy where ideas flourish is something we have experienced in the West for centuries. The evidence from 2011’s so-called “Arab Spring” is that this open democracy is something that is envied throughout the world.

In the course of this book we salute the few brave Christian souls who have had the courage to stand up against bullying tactics and, as a result, have lost employment. But what they have lost exactly is even more precious than jobs – they

are the victims of injustice, for to hold to principles central to biblical Christianity is now being increasingly seen as unacceptable. We believe this to be wrong. Presciently, Tom Bingham, in his magisterial book *The Rule of Law*, states: “You may believe what you like provided you keep your beliefs to yourself or share them with like-minded people, but when you put your beliefs into practice in a way that impinges on others, limits may be imposed, if prescribed by law, necessary in a democratic society...”<sup>1</sup> That is the crux of the matter. Tom Bingham, while acknowledging the fundamental role that the Christian faith has played in the development of the law, shows that the advancement of “human rights” has had the effect of removing a uniquely Christian belief system from the same.

This is the argument of our book. We are not pleading for special treatment for Christians, only for justice. It is our hope that the Christian faith that has blessed our nation more than most of us realize, may continue to flourish and make a positive contribution to our world. We believe that our current laws, and the way they are being implemented, are impeding the work of the church and challenging our effectiveness into the future.

I have no doubt that many will come to this book with different backgrounds and agendas; nevertheless it is squarely addressed to Christians and the churches. This book should be seen as a “call to arms”, where our weapons

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1 Tom Bingham, *The Rule of Law*, London: Penguin, 2011, p. 76.

## INTRODUCTION

are not weapons that hurt and destroy, but those that rely on truth, good will to all, and a deep faith in a Lord who calls us to follow him.

It has been a great pleasure to write this book with Andrew, my son. I want to acknowledge the tremendous contribution – indeed, the lion’s share – he has made. We are grateful to friends and family who have added to this book and who, in so doing, have strengthened its argument. Pride of place must go to our friend Barry Smith for his constant encouragement and, at times, gentle bullying. The Revd Dr Alistair MacDonald-Radcliff and Dr Michael Poole, Visiting Research Fellow in Science and Religion at King’s College London, have helpfully taken a look at various chapters, as have Andrea Williams and Paul Diamond. We are indebted to Tony Collins of Monarch Books for his patience, advice, and guidance.



## CHAPTER ONE

# LIVING IN CRITICAL TIMES

My decision to write this book was made on a precise date. It was 29 April 2010, when Lord Justice Laws' ruling in the case of Gary McFarlane (who had been dismissed from relationship counselling agency Relate because he refused to counsel a same-sex couple) declared: "We do not live in a society where all the people share uniform religious beliefs. The precepts of any one religion – any belief system – cannot by force of their religious origins, sound any louder in the general law than the precepts of any other. If they did, those out in the cold would be less than citizens, and our constitution would be on the way to a theocracy, which is of necessity autocratic."

As I read those words I realized how different my world view is from that of this learned judge and, at the same time, how ill-informed he was about the Christian tradition – and even less informed about the way that the Christian faith is

woven into the history, culture, ethics, laws, and political life of the United Kingdom.

The curious thing is that in my witness statement (which Lord Justice Laws rejected) there was nothing that contradicted his words.

This witness statement arose out of my own sense of frustration on the part of some good Christian people, who had been dealt with harshly. I too am not arguing for a theocracy. Indeed, I am entirely at one with Lord Justice Laws in people having the same rights and being subject to the same laws. My objection to his ruling that led to the dismissal of a good man who had been a very good Relate counsellor for some years, is that it was now evident that if a person were a Christian and sought to live her or his life by Christian principles in the workplace, they would not get fair treatment. The interesting, yet very disturbing thing about Lord Justice Laws' presuppositions was that he assumed that the Christian faith had nothing to say about justice today and could be dismissed with remarks that bordered on the contemptuous.

As I read Justice Laws' summary I thought back to the Queen's Coronation in 1953 where the Queen was presented with a Bible: "To keep your Majesty ever mindful of the Law and the Gospel as the rule for the whole of life and government of Christian princes." Those powerful and precise words were not designed as a commitment binding

on the young Queen alone; they were intended to signal that what our country stood for was a commitment to Christian values and teaching that stemmed from our foundational document. From 2 June 1953 to 30 April 2010, rather than the UK growing in greatness, we have witnessed a slow decline in moral values and a loss of memory regarding our indebtedness to Christian truth.

But it is all so puzzling. How is it possible that, in a country which has an established Church and a Queen who by tradition “defends the faith”, that Christianity is being squeezed out or marginalized? Yet that very question dominates the pages of tabloid newspapers annually as they reveal yet more stories of nativity plays banned in schools; “Seasons Greetings” replacing “Happy Christmas” on the cards of political leaders; and the switching on of “Winter lights” rather than “Christmas lights” by twitchy local authorities. These may seem trivial examples, yet the same question was to dominate a BBC documentary by the well-known broadcaster, Nicky Campbell, in April 2010 under the title *Are Christians Being Persecuted?* While he concluded that persecution was too large a word for what was happening, he nevertheless pointed to a series of running skirmishes between Church and State, and the worrying signs of entrenched cultural warfare between the State’s official religion, and the State itself.

We should avoid the word “persecution” because what

Christians face in Britain does not have that aspect of suffering for one's faith that many experience abroad – sadly, many in Muslim countries. Discrimination is a more accurate word, but for those who have lost their jobs because they have stood up for their Christian convictions it is entirely natural for them to feel that their experience is one of “persecution”. The legal battles over the wearing of symbols of faith such as the cross by individual Christians, the sacking of staff because of their refusal to act against their Christian conscience, the cry of “foul” from some quarters when political leaders wear their faith on their sleeves can all be noted as examples of a society newly ill at ease with faith.

While these are well-known cases of secular ambivalence towards Christianity, behind them lies a new level of anxiety and alienation among believers. Church of England General Synod members have never been noted as unduly alarmist, yet a survey of them by the *Sunday Telegraph* in February 2009 found that up to two-thirds believe that Christians are discriminated against at work.<sup>2</sup> A further national opinion poll survey by the same newspaper in May 2009 revealed that this feeling was shared by Christians throughout Britain. One in five of respondents said they faced opposition at work because of their faith. More than half revealed they had suffered some form of “persecution” for being a Christian. Three quarters of those polled said they felt that there is less

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/4622858/Christians-face-discrimination-in-workplace-say-church-leaders.html>



religious freedom than twenty years ago. And a staggering 84 per cent of Christians thought that religious freedom of speech and action are now at risk in the UK.<sup>3</sup>

The truth on the ground is that Christians feel hemmed in as never before by often well-meaning legislation which they believe has had the unintended consequence of restricting religious liberties that have been taken for granted for centuries. In the light of recent cases in which public servants have been suspended for offering to say a prayer for members of the public, Christians question whether they can even mention their faith during their working life. The heavy-handed actions of some police in arresting street preachers makes them doubt whether they have the freedom to evangelize or share their faith. They ask whether they still have any freedom of speech, given the welter of hate crimes legislation during the past few years.

Can they any longer state traditional Christian views on the uniqueness of Christ without risking the charge of being prejudiced against those of other faiths? Is it possible to defend Christian marriage without being abused as “homophobic” and worse, arrested for inciting hatred?

The worrying aspect of these developments is that people who would in previous decades have been recognized as pillars of the community, now feel alienated and discriminated against. The rate of change has been bewildering and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/5413311/Christians-risk-rejection-and-discrimination-for-their-faith-a-study-claims.html>

worrying for many ordinary Christians.

However, I do recognize that some Christians themselves scoff at the notion of “discrimination”, or even a marginalization of Christianity. Some argue that it is high time that Christianity was divorced entirely from any supposed submissive role to the State, and its “privileged” status in the British constitution.

Christians who hold this view want a post-Christendom church, believing that Christianity sold itself out under Emperor Constantine in a Faustian pact with temporal power, which resulted in some 1,500 years of a spiritual dead-end. The uncoupling of Christianity from the machinery of State, the reduction of the Christian message to just another competing voice in a world of ideas of roughly equal validity, is simply a necessary evolution for the Church. It must be freed from the curse of privilege, prestige, and recognition to follow its true mission as Jesus Christ’s community for outcasts, the poor, and dispossessed.

I understand the force of this argument and it may be that the time will come when the Church of England will, for the sake of its own dignity and independence, have to separate from an Establishment that is indifferent to the religious identity that once shaped it. But that time has not yet come because there are still very many people both within and without the Church who believe passionately that the Church in England (and in that I include all mainstream traditions)

is still the backbone and sinew of what it is to be British. Indeed, this view is often echoed by those of other faiths who are just as disturbed as Christians by the erosion of faith in our land: secularism challenges all creeds.

This is an argument we will revisit later. However, it does not address the actual reality of the situation in which despite its established status, the Church has the freedom to pursue its mission. The novel situation that this book attempts to highlight is that under this new dispensation of a “neutral secularism”, the first signs are that the mission of the Church is restricted. The brave new world into which secularists believe the Church may emerge with its integrity intact, may in contrast be a wholly bad thing. The signs point to restrictions in religious freedoms and an outcome that actually suppresses rather than releases the true voice of Christianity.

Can anyone still pretend that a secular State delivers neutrality? In fact, from the point at which it casts down state religion it makes a powerful statement of repudiation of the religious voice – all religious voices – in the public square. However, there appears to be no appetite for wholesale disestablishment on the part either of the public or of Parliament. As a consequence, the secularist strategy is simply to pretend that the current state of constitutional affairs does not exist. This has proved successful in spite of its dishonesty. Simply by pretending we live in a secular

state, the secularist can make it so with a series of much smaller campaigning steps in that direction, such as seeking the abolition of the Lords Spiritual (the bishops in the House of Lords), or of faith schools. More audacious tactics include a national campaign to sue a West Country district council over the practice of saying prayers at the beginning of council meetings, completely sidestepping or ignoring the fact that prayers are said daily in the House of Commons, led by the Speaker's Chaplain.

The disappointing thing, of course, is that politicians have colluded in this dishonesty by neglecting the Church–State relationship progressively over recent Parliaments. From Prime Minister Gordon Brown's voluntary relinquishment of his part in appointing bishops, to the incomplete reform of the House of Lords, constitutional questions have been left hanging in the air to damaging effect on public confidence in our country's institutions. The former Bishop of Durham, N. T. Wright, currently Research Professor of New Testament at the University of St Andrews, has been one of the few voices raised in the House of Lords decrying constitutional reform “on the hoof” and calling for a Royal Commission to apply “joined-up” thinking to this state of affairs. His voice has been largely ignored.

The “new secularism” which will be observed during the course of this book has as its champion the atheist scientist Richard Dawkins whose challenges to faith have often

been bad-tempered and ill-informed. His critique of faith reached its nadir with his claim that to bring up children in a faith is tantamount to child abuse. His is hardly an unrepresentative voice among the atheist community, though it has to be said that many atheists find his more outrageous statements embarrassing. Looking at the websites of national newspapers, whenever the question of faith is raised, one can see an astonishingly illiberal and intolerant attitude from atheists and secularists. There is an apparent fanaticism in this section of society, a fanaticism unrivalled in mainstream forms of British Christianity for decades, if not hundreds of years.

The task of this book then is to explore the roots of this distemper with the Christian faith and to present the argument that, far from enriching our nation when the Christian faith is stripped from our cultural and public life, our society will be infinitely poorer and far less united.

We live in critical times for Christian people. However oddly it might seem, I think the struggles that we face present an exciting opportunity to draw on the reserves of our faith, to present it once again to our nation as something that “makes all things new”. Christianity began its life facing discrimination, which went on to become full-blown persecution. It has overcome many, many problems in the last two millennia. It can triumph still.