



JANICE TURNER

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Politics and religion are a dangerous mix

JANICE TURNER

While non-believers make up a majority in Britain, zealots of all faiths are drowning out the sane voices of secularism



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Across the world the tide of religion rises, swamping political debate and civic life, redefining what must be worn, what can be said. Those who struggle, brave and often alone to patch the crumbling defence wall of secular values, perish in the flood.

tenets of Ataturk are trashed; even in India, once the world's best hope of peaceful coexistence, Gauri Lankesh, newspaper editor and critic of Hindu extremism, is shot dead in the street. Meanwhile a brimstone, flat earth, crusader Christianity is on the march: from President Trump with his Muslim ban to Viktor Orbán who terrifies Hungary's Jews.

When Jacob Rees-Mogg declared that his Catholic faith meant he believed even a victim of incest-rape must be compelled to bear a child, I felt unease. Not at his fundamentalist views themselves, although they appal me. But because I fear that, tweedily, politely, maybe even unintentionally, Rees-Mogg has planted a banner behind which others will rally, from "moral majority" pro-life Tories to Breitbart types. At last, a Christian hero to lead us against the "tide of Islam"!

We already have a cultural Cold War: tension, division and fear brew in skirmishes over halal meat or the niqab. Societal trust and cool-headedness has largely survived this summer of terrorist attacks. But what binds us is frayed: communities like Dewsbury, as shown in the Channel 4 documentary *White Kid, Brown Kid*, are ever more divided. We must shore up our secular defences against a tide.

It should not, in theory, be hard. In Britain, the irreligious are for the first time a majority; 53 per cent of us, according to the British Social Attitudes Survey, have no faith. We need not do a Dawkins, calling believers evil or infantile. Militant atheism's arrogance only energises religious extremes. It dismisses faith's capacity for giving solace and meaning to millions, and ignores how belief inspires sublime art and music, charitable deeds and social progress.

up new rules under which we can all live.

But the obstacles are on both sides of the political divide. The left has abandoned Enlightenment principles for the fractured discourse of identity politics. Muslim feminists who merely demand the same human rights enjoyed by white women are damned (bizarrely) as Islamophobes. Yet women like Amina Lone of the Social Action and Research Foundation or Sara Khan of Inspire have watched a conservative, prescriptive Islam transform their communities and, in particular, the lives of women and girls

Why is Labour not raising concerns that a hijab is now part of school uniform in a fifth of state primaries? Girls below puberty are told to be modest, wear a stamp of religious difference and feminine deference before they have a choice. Eight-year-olds are pulled out of mixed swimming classes or put into tiny burkinis. Why do Labour MPs not demand the closure of Sharia courts that discriminate against women in divorce or inheritance, and support instead the feminist campaign One Law for All. Or uphold those wishing to raise the minimum marriage age to 18 to protect Muslim girls. These are imperatives for any secular democracy.

Yet they are skated over to placate those who cry racism at every challenge to religious rule. Jeremy Corbyn forced Sarah Champion to quit as shadow equalities minister for talking about a specific child-exploitation model in which mainly Pakistani Muslim men target white girls with “well, abuse happens everywhere”. It was the political equivalent of a shrug. Unless you address specifics, nothing can change.

The left attributes the appalling poverty and underachievement of British Muslims to employment discrimination and Islamophobia alone. One fifth of Muslim adults (compared with 35 per cent of the overall population) are in full-time work, according to a Social Mobility Commission report. Yet look closer and 18 per cent of Muslim women (three times the

motherhood. Sixty-one per cent of young Muslims (compared with 19 per cent overall) live at home during university due to family pressure, reducing academic options and chances of wider integration as young adults. At a London sixth form a teacher told me he was begging parents of a brilliant Muslim girl to allow her to go to Cambridge.

While Labour leaders sit in gender-segregated meetings with male elders who can deliver a block Muslim vote, the Tories have also stoked community division. The free school movement could have been an engine of integration, instead David Cameron let religious schools proliferate to please his Catholic and Anglican base.

Sikh, Jewish and Muslim schools were created too and thus British children who would have grown up visiting each other's homes were segregated by faith aged four. Now Theresa May wishes to overturn even the modest requirement that selection by religion be capped at 50 per cent of a new school's intake. How can Conservatives preach integration to the Muslim community while stoking division? A government that cares about cohesion would urge existing faith schools to open their admissions and order an immediate moratorium on building new ones.

This has been a year of bitter voices and unspeakable acts. That we hold together can never be taken for granted. The certainties of politicised religion are enticing but lethal. We need a secular no-fly zone amid our culture war.



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Ross Sep 11, 2017

Jacob Rees-Mogg declared that his Catholic faith meant he believed even a victim of incest-rape must be compelled to bear a child

Only if she herself genuinely believes it, Jacob, not because you do or the Pope does. Nobody should have the power to make another person kow-tow to anybody's conscience but their own.

Recommend Reply

John Dakin Sep 11, 2017

The latest attack on the values of the Enlightenment comes in the form of a tendentious biography of Charles Darwin.

1 Recommend Reply

Stephen Campbell Sep 10, 2017

Janice makes a very good point in particular, regarding religiously-segregated education. As someone from Northern Ireland, I beg you to consider our example. Half of all children here are educated in Catholic schools, while the other half attend state schools. This amounts to a cultural apartheid of our children, many of whom will never meet a member of the opposite community until they enter secondary education, or the workplace.

It's no surprise that our "troubles" were at least in part, religiously motivated.

3 Recommend Reply

Ruprect Sep 10, 2017

"We need not do a Dawkins, calling believers evil or infantile. Militant atheism's arrogance only energises religious extremes. " Shoddy how Dawkins gets vilified here in way that suggests that Atheism is part of the problem of religion . He does not call all

ignored. Unlike his religious opponents no ones ever beaten him on this issue in a debate.

By asking people to provide evidence to back up thier supernatural beliefs where it impacts on the life's of others and creates harm or neglect is not "militant". It's just reason.

7 Recommend Reply

Simon Gough Sep 10, 2017

@Ruprect

Head, Nail, the, on.

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1 Recommend Reply

John Dakin Sep 11, 2017

@Ruprect I agree; although he is firmly against religion, Dawkins' book "the God Delusion" is subtle; he even deplores the lack of knowledge of the Bible today, and lists over a page of sayings which come from the Authorised Version.

1 Recommend Reply

Richard Burnett-Hall Sep 12, 2017

@Ruprect But if there was incontrovertible evidence for a credo, it wouldn't be a belief. Just an obvious conclusion.

I grant you that too many religious leaders, and those who are at a loss without certainty in their lives, are uncomfortable when it is spelt out, but "belief" is only appropriate for those matters that cannot be proved. It follows that, so far as purely rational behaviour goes, we are all agnostic. You can't prove God doesn't exist; I can't prove he does.

But when it comes to, say, "the meaning of life", "are we here for a purpose and if so what?", "why shouldn't I use my brains/muscle/privilege to grab all the world's goodies for myself, even if that means you and millions starve and rot?", religions can supply answers and practical examples

bulk of a population. Atheism cannot and does not contribute anything socially positive. Religion may seem to be no more than superstition to outsiders (and I regard much of what Roman Catholics are told to believe to be no more than that) but the core messages of at least Christianity, Islam and Sikhism (and probably lots of others I don't know well enough) make good sense to many and are indeed worthy of belief in their truth.

Recommend Reply

Mr R Bloxham Sep 9, 2017

Apologies if someone in the first 215 comments has made the same point, but is just possible that W R-M is carefully disqualifying himself from a job that he doesn't really want?

3 Recommend Reply

Adrian Turner Sep 9, 2017

@Mr R Bloxham I think he is saying that he won't sacrifice his beliefs on the altar of political correctness and public opinion. I wish there were more of his sort in public life.

4 Recommend Reply

Mr R Bloxham Sep 9, 2017

I agree absolutely. Can't think of a better way to ease yourself out of the running (or, in my case, giving someone else the button for the ejector seat).
I'm sure he's made of the right stuff to ignore the inevitable poo-storm.

1 Recommend Reply

AOLondon Sep 9, 2017

@Adrian Turner @Mr R Bloxham Who is asking him to do so? If he cannot set aside his beliefs in order to represent all of his constituents he is free to look for employment in another field where he can follow his doctrine. Though I suspect he feels entitled to be an MP rather have to perform in a more demanding profession.

Recommend Reply

Bmewsed Sep 9, 2017

Recommend Reply

John Dakin Sep 11, 2017

@Mr R Bloxham I think that W R-M is the father of the MP.

Recommend Reply

Bmewsed Sep 9, 2017

The solution to this is for people to grow up and accept that we will not always agree but not act as though our very lives have been threatened by those that disagree with us simply because they do.

The vast majority of us do just that. The rest have been labelled "extremist", of one ilk or another, by the media. A tragic misstep because they were elevated from "criminal".

This article is a perfect illustration of the hysterical overreaction to a man expressing his personal beliefs. The implication of the writer is that such beliefs should not be expressed lest extremists (once criminals) twist them for their own extreme ends. That seems a rather extreme position.

3 Recommend Reply

AOLondon Sep 9, 2017

@Bmewsed The issue is not his personal beliefs, though I find them repugnant. The issue is that he votes according to the doctrine of the Catholic Church and not in the interests of his constituents. In Ireland we see first hand what that means - women dying rather than being given access to abortion, forced to carry unviable pregnancies, denied life-saving medical treatment in some cases. If Mr Rees Mogg had his way that would be case here too.

3 Recommend Reply

Bmewsed Sep 10, 2017

@AOLondon @Bmewsed I am afraid you do not have an argument.

The only way he has constituents is if they vote for him on the basis of his campaign. He has been honest about his beliefs.

being honest. I disagree with his personal beliefs but he has made it clear that they are his beliefs and not law.

I have no idea what any other politician believes personally.

Recommend Reply

Mr Ian Pauw Sep 9, 2017

It is easily solved.

Parliament should be made up of 53% non- believers, 47% believers.

Then of course we have to have similar representation of men and women, blacks and whites, old and young, gays and miserables, employed and unemployed, soldiers and sailors, northerners and southerners, easterners and westerners - oh heavens lets leave it all to the lord(s).

2 Recommend Reply

Epi-man Sep 9, 2017

And of those 53% a significant proportion should believe in God to reflect society as a whole. Read the article on those statistics. The 43% are people denoting themselves as Christians. Also note that the trend line on everything but the confused middle showed a strengthening number claiming to be Christian.

3 Recommend Reply

Adrian Turner Sep 9, 2017

Nearly all the examples quoted are about Islam, not Christianity, and Mr Rees Mogg was stating a personal, not a political, position.

It is wrong to generalise in the way this article does. Christ founded a church, not a political party. His ministry was devoted to challenging hypocrisy in the establishment of his day and to helping the poor and suffering is was leaving behind.

Christians should be doing more, not less, of this.

3 Recommend Reply

AOLondon Sep 10, 2017

record speaks for itself. No one is making Christians have abortions or have same-sex relationships - and they should not impose their beliefs on those who do not share them.

1 Recommend Reply

Allison Laird Sep 9, 2017

@NombaNinshi "Try for once to write an article about Islam, without that liberal twitch which seems to oblige the writers to add that Christianity is just as bad, when it so clearly isn't"

Whilst I can agree with some of your comment, I have to take issue with the assumption that Christianity is not as bad as Islam. In the right circumstances Christians have shown themselves capable of monstrous acts. Who do you think massacred 8000 Muslims at Srebrenica? Or who was responsible for the slaughter of Muslim civilians at Sabra and Shatila?

And in my own hometown in Georgia in the 1960s, it was members of the Baptist and Methodist Churches who were found to be responsible for a series of lynchings of blacks.

No, Janice is right- religious fervour in the hands of some people is more dangerous than a gun the hands of others.

4 Recommend Reply

Jeremy Lowman Sep 9, 2017

@Allison Laird True, Allison, but then again the so-called Christians doing those abominable things in Srebrenica were explicitly going against Christ's commands to love your enemy and the sermon on the mount (try Mstthew 5:38-41). The way of the cross is about Jesus and his followers absorbing evil out of the world rather than combating it by violence. Srebrenica and Sabra were horrific examples of people denying by their actions the heart of their belief and trampling on it. (Although, it would have been good to see the leaders of the institutional churches getting stuck in there to stop them doing so - but the bigger and more powerful the religious institution the more it tends to drift from the original vision.)

3 Recommend Reply

Janice Haigh Sep 9, 2017

@Jeremy Lowman

distort religion for their own ends.

1 Recommend Reply

Adrian Turner Sep 9, 2017

@Janice Haigh They weren't 'misinterpreting' it, they were acting against everything it stands for: love, compassion and mercy.

2 Recommend Reply

Jeremy Lowman Sep 9, 2017

@Adrian Turner @Janice Haigh Can I take the opportunity to agree both with this and with Janice Haigh's comment too? Wicked people will indeed distort religion for their own ends (partly because "religion" connects with some of our deepest human drives). Then again, wicked people will also distort football loyalties for their own evil ends.

Recommend Reply

Damocles59 Sep 9, 2017

The Muslims at Srebrenica were not massacred by Christians, but by nationalists who previously had been Communists, therefore atheists.

Recommend Reply

Epi-man Sep 9, 2017

We must look clear eyed at the encroachment of secular values into the public sphere and draw up new rules under which we can all live. That includes the leader of the Liberal Democrats being able to regard homosexuality as a sin, and the prospective leader of the Conservative party being able to regard the life of a foetus as sacred, and the leader of the Labour party being able to take Roman Catholic communion. Without any rancour from secular people. Live and let live and bury political correctness in the dustbin of history.

4 Recommend Reply

Janice Haigh Sep 9, 2017

@Epi-man

anyone believing that life begins at conception, that same-sex marriage is wrong; nor does it prevent any political leader worshipping at the altar of their choice.

However, it should prevent girls being treated as less valuable than boys and should not allow any religious group to impose their values on others (for example those believing that life begins at birth or that everyone should be entitled to marry the person they want to.

I suspect by "clear eyed" you mean "from my point of view"

2 Recommend Reply

AOLondon Sep 10, 2017

@Epi-man I couldn't care less which form of superstition MPs follow in their personal life - I do care if they are passing laws that affect me on the basis of those superstitious beliefs. By all means let them declare their beliefs and then people can choose whether to vote for them or not.

1 Recommend Reply

LearnedFriend Sep 9, 2017

Janice, please start a political party. Currently I am politically homeless but your columns would make a good manifesto.

5 Recommend Reply

noel ashworth Sep 9, 2017

A good place to start, when considering the challenges that JT draws attention to, is to make a clear distinction between RACISM and CULTURALISM.

It is too easy when making comments on culture to be shouted down as a racist.

3 Recommend Reply

Jeremy Lowman Sep 9, 2017

said. Those who struggle, brave and often alone to patch the crumbling defence wall of secular values, perish in the flood.'

Well, maybe. But in some professions at least in this country if you express standard Christian or Jewish views (as your private opinion - even on Facebook) you're quite likely to lose your job. It's Christians and Jews whose free speech is being taken away here.

14 Recommend Reply

Janice Haigh Sep 9, 2017

[@Jeremy Lowman](#)

It is illegal in the UK to discriminate in employment many grounds - but specifically including religion.

Do you have an example of someone being sacked for expressing their religious beliefs? Or is it that your religion thinks its OK to make stuff up to promote your victimization story? Or do you perhaps work for the Christian Legal Centre?

1 Recommend Reply

Jeremy Lowman Sep 9, 2017

[@Janice Haigh](#) [@Jeremy Lowman](#) Hi Janice. No, I don't have anything to do with the Christian Legal Centre, but if you're genuinely interested in this you might like to keep an eye on their website and that of the Christian Institute - there have been a number of troubling cases in the last year or two, and as I said some involved what people said in their private Facebook pages.

PS Can I say that I felt your second sentence turned up the aggressiveness? If we're going to live together in a pluralistic country we need to be able to discuss each other's perceptions of these things without imputing bad motives to those we disagree with?

2 Recommend Reply

Janice Haigh Sep 9, 2017

[@Jeremy Lowman](#)

[Recommend](#)[Reply](#)

N Marsh Sep 9, 2017

Is there really a serious widespread problem here? There was a problem with certain Muslim schools in Birmingham but I have never heard of difficulties caused by childhood attendance of Jewish, Catholic or Church of England schools in England and Wales. Don't these schools tend to teach compassion, kindness, tolerance and good citizenship, like other modern state schools?

[7](#)[Recommend](#)[Reply](#)

Janice Haigh Sep 9, 2017

@N Marsh

The problem may not be widespread but it certainly exists. These are the issues:

- children being segregated by their parents' religion at a young age. Even if the education is good, segregation cannot help. Even if these schools teach compassion and all the other good stuff, they also reinforce difference and separation. Even children can tell the difference between "do as I say" and "do as I do".
- at least some faith schools do not provide a good education. Muslim and Jewish schools both fail on this one

[1](#)[Recommend](#)[Reply](#)

N Marsh Sep 10, 2017

To be honest I know little about Muslim schools though clearly there were problems with some schools in Birmingham. I can see that in theory one might think that problems might arise from separating children during school time and this could outweigh the benefits perceived by proponents of faith schools - and one would be more likely to think that if one were sceptical about the possible benefits in the first place. However, I worked for a long time and with people from many different backgrounds (including young Muslims incidentally) and with different educational experiences. I do not know what difference differing types of education made to their personal lives but I have never detected societal problems arising from differences in educational background. But your experience and observation might be quite different.

David Allen Sep 9, 2017

Argue that the Jewish schools accept other faith children like the C of E Janice and see how far you get.

4 Recommend Reply

Lawman Sep 9, 2017

In the second part of her article, Miss Turner rightly draws attention to the far left's technique of classifying people as minority groups, to be set against each other. She gives the particular example of the left courting fundamentalist Moslems, implicitly undermining those who seek equality.

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However, does this not undermine her first point: that the politics and religion do not mix, and the influence of religious groups is (at least in part) malign?

.

British citizens are entitled to hold belief or non-belief as they wish; in contrast to the rest of the world, it is said mainly non-belief. This suggests the claim that 'across the world the tide of religion rises' is not correct: it is only a forceful aggressive part of one religion that gives this impression.

Belief or non-belief is irrelevant. In Britain we all live in a secular society under the rule of law. Well thinking atheists, Christians and others subscribe to the principles of tolerance and respect. Let us not join those who seek to define us artificially and set us against each other.

16 Recommend Reply

Janice Haigh Sep 9, 2017

@Lawman

Hear, hear

Recommend Reply

Deziree Wilson Sep 9, 2017

Please keep writing about this crucial issue, Janet. I wish there were other such courageous journalists and politicians.

16 Recommend Reply

Deziree Wilson Sep 9, 2017

 Recommend Reply

Mr Alan Green Sep 9, 2017

I could never vote for Corybn or Mogg. In fact their views seems 100 years out of date.

The world is vastly over populated yet one never hears a British politician say that .

In short we are doomed

 6 Recommend Reply

Kenneth Attwell Sep 9, 2017

Could someone please let me know what 'Militant atheism's ' is, its so called dangers and how many followers it has.

 7 Recommend Reply

OldManDJ Sep 9, 2017

@Kenneth Attwell Militant atheists are those who dare to express logical opinions on the subject of religion and ask believers awkward questions.

Religious belief is fostered by the four stages of brainwashing

- 1) You must believe.
- 2) It is wrong to disbelieve
- 3) It is wicked to disbelieve
- 4) It is wicked even to think about disbelief.

Once the fourth statement has been absorbed, it is clear that anyone who suggests to a believer that their faith is unfounded is a very wicked and militant person indeed.

 9 Recommend Reply

N Marsh Sep 9, 2017

@OldManDJ. Brainwashing can't be what it used to be: I have never met anyone who believes any of those things.

 3 Recommend Reply

OldManDJ Sep 9, 2017

@N Marsh There are, unfortunately many people who are caught by these carefully honed stages. They include many older people who never think about their religion and if

terrible thing to say", and quickly change the subject.

4 Recommend Reply

N Marsh Sep 9, 2017

Thanks for replying @OldManDJ and for the info.

Recommend Reply

Janice Haigh Sep 9, 2017

@N Marsh

Why not answer the question? What do you define as militant atheism?

1 Recommend Reply

N Marsh Sep 9, 2017

@ Janice Haigh. I don't recall being asked that question. I simply commented that I had not met anyone who believes the 4/5 points listed by @OldManDJ. He has replied that there are many. Fair enough. I have never used the phrase "militant atheism". I suppose a militant Christian or other religious believer is someone who not only practises his/her faith but is uncomfortable with the fact that others do not share his/her beliefs and proselytises forcefully. I imagine that a militant atheist would be the non-believer equivalent - someone who does not believe in God but moreover feels that belief is so misguided and harmful that he or she is moved to persuade people against it. I may not have read all the posts that have led up to this, so apologies if my response misses the point.

1 Recommend Reply

Janice Haigh Sep 10, 2017

@N Marsh

Apologies - I think I confused you with the poster who did ask the question.

The phrase militant atheism was used in the article and another posters talk about "militant secularists". It's a frequent accusation made of those who challenge religion with reason and ask for evidence.

Recommend Reply

N Marsh Sep 10, 2017

Thanks @ Janice Haigh. No problem.

Recommend Reply

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