

Should Britain stop acting as if it were a Christian country?



This was the question debated by the panel and audience of over 90 people at a lively public debate on the motion “Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop behaving as if it is” hosted by Farnham Humanists at South Farnham School on 8th November, 2016.

The debate centred around what was meant by a Christian country. Does a culture make a country Christian or does it need actual church attendance? And what would not behaving like a Christian country entail?

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association, spoke first in favour of the motion. He said church attendance was minimal and had halved in 30 years. We no longer held the basic Christian beliefs, and Christianity was not part of our identity. It was no longer the port of call in times of crisis or celebration. He acknowledged that our society was partly shaped by Christianity, but that much was pre-Christian. This all mattered for three reasons. Firstly, truth matters; myths can inhibit non-religious beliefs and prevent beneficial changes to laws. Secondly, it is alienating for non-believers. Thirdly, it is internationally harmful, as our requests to other countries that they should have religious freedom are viewed as hypocritical.

Opposing the motion was The Reverend Canon Dr Andrew Bishop, Residentiary Canon & Anglican Chaplain at the University of Surrey. He said that Christianity arrived in Britain in 304 AD and was deeply interwoven into

its history. For him, it formed the basis of the relationship between state and people, and acted for the common good. Christians had fought against the slave trade and worked against deprivation. More recently bishops had been against excessive government actions of the 1980s and some had campaigned for the legalisation of homosexuality. The Christian influence is historical, yet still valid. It is inclusive not exclusive; for example, remembrance at the cenotaph is an inclusive ceremony of national mourning. We can't abolish our memory.

Alex Marks Healy of Guildford County School Secular Society next supported the motion. He asked what being a Christian fundamentally meant. Many religious sects are based on the Old Testament and have the ten commandments in common. It would appear they are not unique to Christianity. They are not divinely inspired but are indicative of humanity as a wider species. In general, we don't kill and steal. Rather, we are a human based society sharing common goals.

George Chantry, ex-Godalming College and now an Oxford University PPE student, then seconded the opposition to the motion. He said that so much of our culture is of Christian origin, developed over 1500 years, that it can't be reversed overnight. Christianity is so much more than just the ten commandments. Even Richard Dawkins says he is a cultural Christian. There may currently be a dip in church attendance, but this had happened before and could well be temporary. It is the belief that God is on their side that motivates people to altruism.

There were many contributions from the floor from an involved and interested audience. The time allocated for summing up was shortened to cater for the number of people wishing to raise issues. In his summing up, Andrew Bishop said that he doesn't regard the state's role in religion as being essential to Britain being a Christian country; he himself was in favour of disestablishment. Andrew Copson in turn explained what "stop behaving" meant to him. It entailed not talking abroad as if we were a Christian country, building on our current laws, and "spring-cleaning" existing laws to remove requirements such as religious worship in schools.

The meeting was excellently chaired by Anthony Kirby, who is a History & Politics Tutor at Godalming College. The motion was carried by 53 votes to 23, with 8 abstentions. 6 people indicated that they had changed their mind during the debate. Entry to the debate was free but a charity collection at the end raised £185 for Disability Challengers.