

UK: Leicester strikes a blow for secularism

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If a secularist revolution were to emerge in Britain, where would it start? London is too pragmatic to care about such an earnest cause – you can't imagine Boris picking a fight with a bishop. What about the Oxford of Dawkins and Pullman? No: the whiff of royalism and incense lingers in that brainy city. What about more Whiggish Cambridge? No, secularism never grew roots there, despite Francis Crick's best efforts.

Look north – a bit north anyway. Look to Leicester. It's an unlikely choice on the surface: its huge Muslim minority makes it more religious than most cities. But it also has an old secularist tradition – it was here that the first secular society was formed. And this tradition has suddenly flared into life.

The new Lord Mayor is picking a fight with the local Anglican establishment.

Councillor Colin Hall's first move was to appoint fellow secularist campaigners as his Lady Mayoress and his chaplain. The former post went to Eleanor Davidson, who conducts humanist celebrations, and the latter to Allan Hayes, president of Leicester's secular society. Last week Hall refused to attend the traditional cathedral service that welcomes new Lord Mayors. He had asked for the service to be more inclusive of other faiths, and of humanism; he wanted the Lady Mayoress to read a humanist text, and his chaplain to give an address. When the bishop asked to see the sermon in advance, the mayor and his secularist sidekicks pulled out.

Hall has also announced the banning of prayers before monthly council meetings, calling the practice "outdated, unnecessary and intrusive". He added: "I consider that religion, in whatever shape or form, has no role to play at all in the conduct of council business. This particularly applies in Leicester, where the majority of council members, myself included, do not regularly attend any particular faith service." His chaplain has backed the move: "I think it's a good move because saying Christian prayers picks out one particular stance of people in the city. It's rather divisive, in my view."

I met this godless chaplain last weekend when I gave a talk at Leicester's Secular Hall. It's right in the city centre, overlooking a wide pedestrianised high street, in which a huge screen has been erected for the World Cup. It's a sort of Victorian anti-church, a temple to the benign power of reason. Its façade features the busts of five men. In chronological order: Socrates, Jesus, Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Robert Owen. They're in terracotta, which gives them a rather amateur feel, like the art project of a schoolboy radical. It's a very odd sight. One wonders how much common ground this group might have found at a hypothetical dinner party. Inside, the building's a bit tatty – they're hoping for National Lottery funds, I soon learn. Maybe Nick Clegg could fast-track them some cash, in return for toeing the line on faith schools.

Allan Hayes is a gentle, charming man – a natural chaplain. He has no blanket hostility to religion; indeed he also runs the local Sea of Faith group, which discusses religion's philosophical and ethical legacy; it is mostly composed of liberal Christians. But he is quietly determined to raise the question of why a certain Christian denomination, which no longer secures the allegiance of the majority, should be ceremonially privileged in a multifaith city. Why should interfaith dialogue occur on the church's terms, as if it's the benign host of the party?

It's notable that the Church of England is treading carefully, acting as if it isn't very bothered, just a little disappointed. According to Liz Hudson-Oliff, spokesperson for the diocese of Leicester: "It is up to the mayor to decide what he does and this is his right. But I think Councillor Hall has particular issues with religion and religious practices that have become more important than other things he is involved with." Canon Barry Naylor, who is the chaplain for the deputy mayor, said: "Councillor Colin Hall was elected by the city council, who were aware of his views on these matters and I totally respect his right to hold these views. I will continue to pray for the city council, for its members, officers and staff, as always." The local bishop, Tim Stevens, is keeping quiet. It's a sensible policy: establishment at all levels is more or less indefensible; the more discussed it is, the more obvious this is. The church can only hope that interest dies down.

by Theo Hobson

P.S.

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