

# Comment Debate



AC Grayling

## The rise of Miliband brings at last the prospect of an atheist prime minister

In this climate of quarrels between religionists and secularists, there are very many reasons to hope for a non-believer at No 10

When Labour cabinet members were asked about their religious allegiances last December, following Tony Blair's official conversion to Roman Catholicism, it turned out that more than half of them are not believers. The least equivocal about their atheism were the health secretary, Alan Johnson, and foreign secretary David Miliband.

The fact that Miliband is an atheist is a matter of special interest given the likelihood that he may one day, and perhaps soon, occupy No 10. In our present uncomfortable climate of quarrels between pushy religionists and resisting secularists – or attack-dog secularists and defensive religionists: which side you are on determines how you see it – there are many reasons why it would be a great advantage to everyone to have an atheist prime minister.

Atheist leaders are not going to think they are getting messages from Beyond telling them to go to war. They will not cloak themselves in supernaturalistic justifications, as Blair came perilously close to doing when interviewed about the decision to invade Iraq.

Atheist leaders will be sceptical about the claims of religious groups to be more important than other civil society organisations in doing good, getting public funds, meriting special privileges and exemptions from laws, and having seats in the legislature and legal protection from criticism, satire and challenge.

Atheist leaders are going to be more sceptical about inculcating sectarian beliefs into small children ghettoised into publicly funded faith-based schools, risking social divisiveness and possible future conflict. They will be readier to learn Northern Ireland's bleak lesson in this regard.

Atheist leaders will, by definition, be neutral between the different religious pressure groups in society, and will have no temptation not to be even-handed because of an allegiance to the outlook of just one of those groups.

Atheist leaders are more likely to take a literally down-to-earth view of the needs, interests and circumstances of people in the here and now, and will not be influenced by the belief that present sufferings and inequalities will be compensated in some posthumous dispensation. This is not a trivial point: for most of history those lower down the social ladder have been promised a perch at the top when dead, and kept quiet thereby. The claim that in an imperfect world one's hopes are better fixed on the after-life than on hopes of earthly paradises is official church doctrine.

Atheist leaders will not be tempted to think they are the messenger of any good news from above, or the agent of

any higher purpose on earth. Or at very least, they will not think this literally.

Best of all, if David Miliband becomes prime minister, the prospect of disestablishment of the Church of England will have come closer. This is a matter of importance, for two chief reasons. The first is that the CofE's privileged position gives other religious groups too much incentive to try sharp-elbowing their way into getting similar privileges, such as the ear of ministers, tax exemptions, public funding for their own sect's faith schools, and the big prize of seats in the legislature.

Secondly, the CofE has far too big a footprint in the public domain, out of all proportion to the actual numbers it represents: just 2% of the population go weekly to its churches. Yet it controls the primary school system – 80% of it – and a substantial proportion of the secondary school system, with dozens more academy schools soon due to fall under its control. It is entitled to have 26 bishops sitting in the House of Lords, plus a number more who have been

made life peers on retiring; and it has the automatic ear of government – do not suppose that if Rowan Williams phones No 10 he is told no one is at home.

Having a statedly atheist British prime minister makes it more likely that the functional secularity of British life and politics, the foregoing exceptions noted, will become actual secularity. Secularism means that matters of public policy and government are not under the influence, still less control, of sectarian religious interests. The phrase "separation of church and state" does not quite capture the sense in which a genuinely secular arrangement keeps religious voices on a par with all other non-governmental voices in the public square, and all the non-governmental players in the public square separate from the government itself. It means that churches and religious movements have to see themselves as civil society organisations like trades unions, political parties, the Scouts, and so on: with every right to exist, and to have their say, but as self-constituted

interest groups no more entitled to a bigger share of the public pie of influence, privilege, tax handouts, and legal exemptions than any other self-appointed interest group.

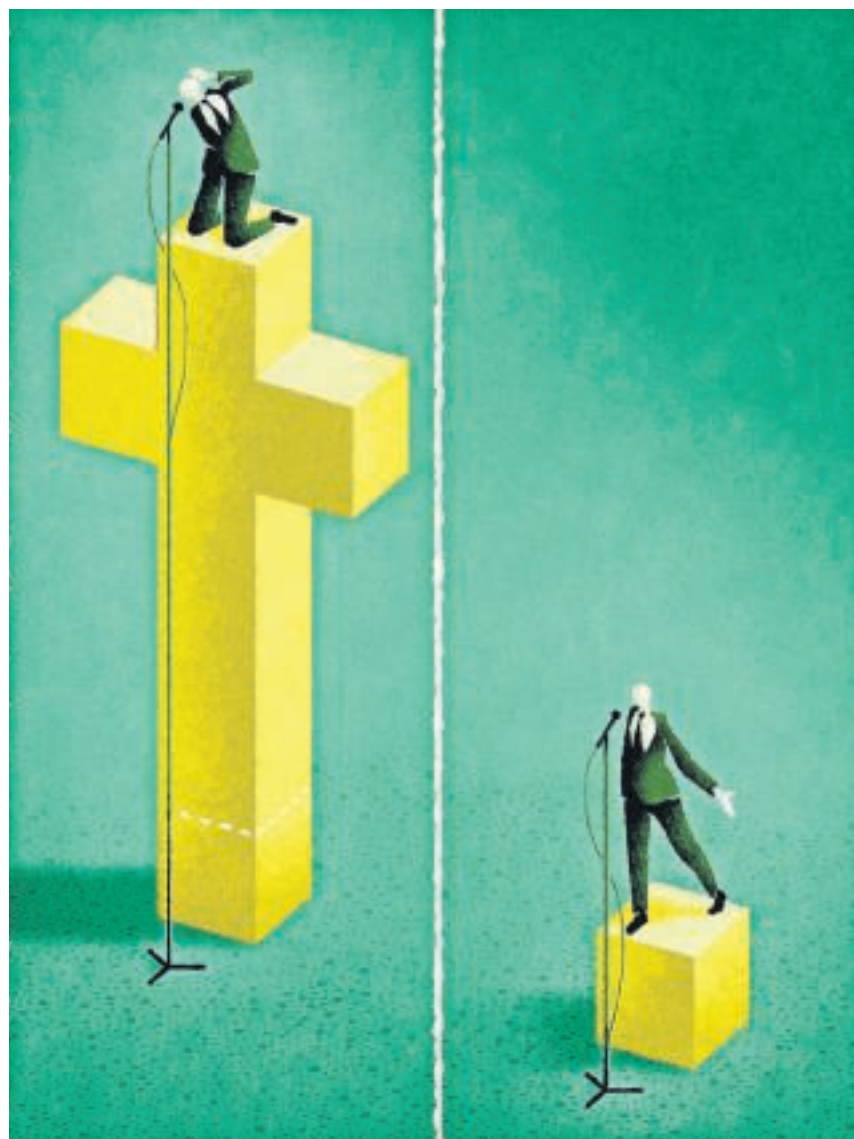
As things stand, religious groups in our society get a slice of the pie vastly larger than their numbers or merits truly justify. The big advantage of an atheist prime minister would be that he or she would see that fact, and act accordingly. An atheist is not going to have the lingering sense that because someone has chosen to believe one or another ancient dogma, he is to be respected and honoured, listened to, given the public's money to bring up his children in the same beliefs and exempted from some of the laws of the land.

Note that none of the foregoing represents either a desire or a prediction that an atheist prime minister will actively militate against religion, certainly not by outlawing it or passing laws that make religious observance more difficult. Instead, one result of the removal of privileges and public money might be that the artificial amplification of religious voices and points of view in our society, and the hold that religion can exert on children and the psychologically needy, might become less. Religion flourishes in conditions of active support and active persecution; in a socially and politically liberal climate it diminishes through natural causes.

Religion is a matter of choice in that, unlike race, age, gender or disability, you can change it, or not have it at all. True, most people's faith was driven into them when they were small children, and belief can be hard to shake off if your community will reject or hurt you for your apostasy. But it is still fundamentally voluntary. As such it should pay its own way and take its place in the queue along with everyone else. That is something that an atheist prime minister might say, and we might all breathe a great deal more easily as a result.

Despite appearances, the world is not seeing a resurgence of religion, only a big turning-up of the volume of religious voices. This is itself a response to increasing secularism among people tired of the disruptions, obstructions and conflicts religion so often causes. Public acknowledgement of atheism by a senior politician who might soon lead his country is just one indicator of the fact that the tide is actually running in the opposite direction: and that is a welcome and hopeful sign.

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MATT KEVINON

An atheist is not going to have the lingering sense that someone who has chosen to follow ancient dogma is to be listened to

## Diary Hugh Muir



At this golden time, when we are doing so much to recognise outstanding talent, it seems churlish not to shine a light towards the official responsible for a Sussex constabulary leaflet on tackling antisocial behaviour. They could have provided the correct web address for anyone seeking further details – [www.sussex.police.uk](http://www.sussex.police.uk) – but instead the document directed the local populace to [www.sussexpolice.co.uk](http://www.sussexpolice.co.uk), the home of a porn site whose strangely similar address had been annoying constabulary bigwigs for some time. This caused some irritation at force HQ. Way too early to say how it impacted on the level of vandalism and graffiti. But in any event, a job well done.

Well done, too, to our friend Piers Morgan; broadcaster, author, talent spotter and fervent disciple of Arsenal Football Club who has been enthroned as the Mail on Sunday's new and authentic voice of soccer. Last week he bemoaned the club's failure to grasp success since 2003-4, when the Gunners completed the season as league champions, unbeaten throughout. "Arse-

nal have won precisely nothing since then. Not even a Carling bloody cup," he said, and he was so overwhelmed by the embarrassment of it all that he forgot about Arsenal winning the FA Cup in 2005 against their bitter rivals, Manchester United, at the Millennium stadium in Cardiff. And the fact that he was there. But disappointment can do that. Emotions rise, memories fade.

Signs that after just eight months as editor of the Times, James Harding is thinking about a more powerful job in the Murdoch empire. How else to explain clue 17 down in yesterday's crossword, which read: "Perhaps Sun's leader replaced? That's sensible." It might seem underhand, but if it results in the top job, what of it. We are with him on this one. Go with what works.

Regrettable that there is continuing fratricide in the Swinton Circle, the far-right grouping beloved by the unmentionables of the Tory party and the unspeakables of the NF/BNP. Discussion forums glow hot, and some of it touches on our diary item on Tues-

day, chronicling the personality clashes and hatreds that make its meetings so unmissable. A gathering at a pub in London last month seems to have been particularly rancorous. Subsequent discussions, with references to "meltdown", have been no better. Gregory Lauder-Frost, that veteran of the far right and former political secretary of the Monday Club, didn't see our item as he isn't a Guardian reader. (C'mon Gregory: we've got Polly, Monbiot, Gary Younge ... think of what you are missing.) But he'd like it known that he played no part in the unpleasantness. "It should be on record that I said nothing at that meeting. Absolutely nothing," posts Gregory. "My behaviour was impeccable". Would that he could vouch for all the others.

It seems that Alan Harvey, the Circle's London chairman and a former NF activist, is the object of most ire among the Swinton types. ("Alan Harvey is a grubby bloop," posts one incisive supporter. "A monumental embarrassment," complains another.) But it was he who warned the forum that their group risks excommunica-

tion from the Tory party unless it stops flirting with unsavoury neofascists. "All Tory MPs have been instructed to have no further dealings with the organisation accordingly," he posted darkly last week. But here the news is good, for we can tell him that there is no ban from Central Office, merely a plea for MPs and party loyalists to keep better company. That might not satisfy mainstream Tory activists, some of whom think Central Office should decisively sever links. But it will do for us.

Not long now, but we are looking forward to next week's Earth First Gathering of ecological activists in Norfolk. There will be lessons in self-defence, squatting, media engagement and discussions, including one we like the look of on the abolition of prisons. Those who get there early can be part of "Library Space: Negotiating Safer Sex: tips on putting the theory into practice, and making your sex life more fun as well as safer!" These people, they know everything.

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