

## Choose Your Bandwagon

There's a secular, politically correct bandwagon that is gaining more riders by the day. At the same time there's a Christian bandwagon waiting for as many of us as possible to climb onto and from which we are to make our voice be heard and our Christian faith principles be made more visible.

There were two articles next to each other in the paper this week. One was about the Royal Mail's decision to issue secular design "festive stamps" this Christmas so as not to offend non-believers. The other was about a newly published report entitled *Doing God: A Future for Faith in the Public Square*, published by the newly-formed 'Theos' religious think-tank.

The first situation annoys me intensely. In the years when I worked in Saudi Arabia, officially Christmas was a non-event because all faiths except Islam were banned. Stationery shops in towns frequented by foreign workers would stock purely secular design cards bearing the innocuous, and at the same time hopelessly bland, message "Happy Holidays" but, in the circumstances, they were better than nothing. And, of course, those circumstances were the prerogative of the Saudi authorities - it was their country and it was their right (no matter how much we might disagree with it) to impose their strictly Islamic policies.

But that's the whole point. This country is still, nominally at least, a majority Christian country and those who profess to be Christian have every right to defend our religious principles and to openly profess our beliefs - that's what a democratic system is all about. At the same time we respect the rights of other faiths and those of no faith - rights to practice their faith or not, but not the right to challenge our religious freedoms. Whether they like it or not, Christmas is a Christian feast. Non-believers are completely free to ignore the season if they so choose, but those who do believe have no need to apologise for, nor to hide, what Christmas is truly about.

Christmas cards are a prime example. They should all be on a religious theme - that's what it's all about, the birth of Jesus Christ - and there is no reason to celebrate Christmas for anyone who doesn't believe. However if they choose to join in the general festivities around them (most of which no longer have anything to do with the real message of Christmas anyway of course), whatever significance the season has for them that's fine, that's up to them, but their non-belief should never impose itself on us and how we keep one of the most significant religious events in our Christian calendar.

In all honesty I don't think any of the voices of protest that we hear are from other faiths but are the voices of the politically correct brigade, in this case

atheists who are out simply to secularise the world at all costs - a thought I'll return to in a moment. And I say this because, again returning to my experience in Saudi, in the main expatriate camp where I worked, every Christmas the company would provide toys for Santa to give to the children just as happens in department stores here. And, of course, all children were welcome. Over the years, Saudi families living in the camp had come to expect this seasonal treat just as much as western families and the figure of Santa Claus didn't offend their religious beliefs. If there can therefore be even that degree of (shall we say) "flexibility" in the midst of an otherwise strictly Islamic society, why are we in this country experiencing a growing wave of anti-Christian rhetoric - and not from other major faiths but from secularists operating under the guise of political correctness and multi-cultural sensitivity? They are the only ones banging that drum - no one else is particularly bothered. And so to that second article.

**I**n the foreword to the 'Theos' report, the Archbishop of Canterbury and our own Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster write that people who campaign for the removal of religion from public life are themselves guilty of an "intolerant faith position". The report argues against confining faith to the private sphere and, in fact, claims that religion will play an increasingly significant role, something that secularist commentators have described as "a dangerous development"! The vice-president of the National Secular Society even claimed in the newspaper article that "religious engagement in the public square was all too often divisive and discriminatory".

**I** think we would argue against the use of the word "discriminatory" in the negative sense that he uses it, but he is probably right in claiming that religious witness can be divisive. Isn't that what Our Lord was crucified for? His public ministry and his preaching and teaching were perceived as a threat by the Jewish authorities - a threat to their entrenched authority but also a challenge to the Jewish people. And that was something that Jesus made no apology for - "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already". It wasn't to be a destructive fire, but the fire of zeal and faith and of the Spirit that would enlighten and mark out those destined for salvation, in that sense "divisive" of sheep from goats in the gospel image.

**C**hrist's public preaching and, through the power of the Spirit, that of the disciples after him, is precisely what caused problems for him and for them. He literally stood in "the public square" and challenged the religious apathy of the people and of their leaders. St Paul travelled widely throughout the Gentile world, again standing in "the public square" preaching the gospel and calling the people to leave behind their pagan ways and discover the call of Jesus Christ in their lives. If Jesus, and perhaps especially those who followed him, had bowed to the secularists of their day where would we be? If the martyrs who gave their

lives in witness to their faith had bowed to their accusers in their day where would we be?

**T**here's a Christian bandwagon waiting for as many of us as possible to climb onto and from which we are to make our voice be heard and our Christian faith principles be made more visible - all aboard!!

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Fr Neil McNicholas