

For the attention of Neil Harris  
Department for Communities and Local Government

23 January 2008

Dear Mr Harris

### **Consultation on the repeal of the law on blasphemy**

Your email to the Faith Communities Consultative Council on the proposed repeal of the law on blasphemy has been passed to me.

I am responding on behalf of the Baptist Union, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church. The three denominations are the largest of the Free Churches in Britain, between them representing over 545,000 members.

The Baptist Union, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church broadly welcome the Government's intention to repeal the law on blasphemy. We do this for a number of reasons:

- The current law is clearly ineffective. The last prosecution was in 1977, and the High Court's decision in December 2007 that broadcasters and theatres could not be prosecuted for blasphemous libel make further prosecutions even more unlikely. An unused and unusable law has little place on our statute books.
- Many members of the Free Churches, and in particular members of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, have had an historic commitment to freedom of religion, believing that the state should be impartial in its treatment of those with religious belief, and so are opposed to an anti-blasphemy law that offers protection for only one particular Christian tradition.
- The presence on the statutes of an anti-blasphemy law is potentially unhelpful to inter faith relations domestically and wider international relations. Encouraging other countries to treat all faiths equally may be seen as hypocrisy if legislation exists protecting the beliefs of the Church of England.
- More importantly the perception that the law protects the beliefs of one faith (Christianity) over and above any other is potentially damaging. In 1992 a report in the wake of the *Satanic Verses* controversy to the Methodist Conference, the governing body of the Church, concluded that *"In a multi-faith society, a law which protects only one Faith is bound, in certain circumstances, to become a provocation to others."*

In addition, the Methodist Church has supported the implementation of legislation on religious hatred, and so welcomes legislation that protects individuals rather than beliefs.

We think it is unfortunate that the timescale for this consultation is so short, though we appreciate the pressures of the legislative timetable, as this may not give adequate time to listen to the fears of those who perceive the move as an attack on Christianity.

We are also very concerned that the abolition of the law on blasphemy is not seen as a down-grading of the role of religion in public life or as giving a licence for the gratuitous offence of the sincerely held beliefs of people of faith. **We urge the Government intentionally and clearly to frame this debate in terms of respect for the beliefs and practices of members of all religions.**

I hope that this response helps you in your considerations

Yours sincerely

Rachel Lampard  
Secretary for Parliamentary and Political Affairs  
The Methodist Church  
on behalf of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the  
United Reformed Church