

Britain repeals act criminalizing blasphemy

LONDON - The criminal offense of blasphemy against Christianity has been abolished in England and Wales.

The House of Lords voted to support a government amendment to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill to scrap the act, which dates back more than 300 years.

Baroness Andrews, communities minister, told Britain's House of Lords, where the bill is in its final stages, that the 1697 Blasphemy Act was anachronistic and had "fallen into disuse."

She said legal protections guaranteed to religious believers by the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 meant that the law could be "safely repealed."

"As long as this law remains on the statute book, it hinders the U.K.'s ability to challenge oppressive blasphemy laws in other jurisdictions, including those used to persecute vulnerable Christian minorities," she said during the March 5 debate. "It is not an attack on the sacred in our society."

However, Baroness O'Cathain, a Conservative Party member, said that "abolishing the blasphemy law does not demonstrate neutrality; rather it contributes to a wider campaign for the adoption of a secular constitution, which ... would actually be hostile to religion."

She said the amendment "proposes to legalize the most intense and abusive attacks on Christ."

The Church of England announced earlier this year that it was not opposed to repeal of the blasphemy laws.

But in a Feb. 29 letter to Hazel Blears, secretary of state for communities and local government, the two most senior Anglican prelates, Archbishops Rowan Williams of Canterbury and John Sentamu of York, sought assurances that the amendment

“should not be capable of interpretation as a secularizing move, or as a general license to attack or insult religious beliefs and believers.”

The amendment was first introduced into the House of Commons in January by Evan Harris, a member of the National Secular Society renowned for his hostility to religion. He withdrew it when the government promised to take it up in the House of Lords.

Harris sent an e-mail to legislators March 5 saying the amendment “should be seen as a secularizing move, and with pride.”

The last public prosecution for blasphemy was in 1921, when John William Gott was sentenced to nine months’ hard labor for publishing a pamphlet comparing Jesus to a circus clown. The last successful private prosecution was in 1977.

The issue of blasphemy became controversial again in 2007 after Christian Voice, an evangelical lobbying group, failed in its attempt to bring a prosecution against the British Broadcasting Corp. for screening on television “Jerry Springer: The Opera,” a theater production that depicts Jesus as a foul-mouthed homosexual.

Police have this year refused to respond to complaints from Christians about a statue of Jesus in a state of arousal, part of an exhibition of the work of Terence Koh, a Chinese-Canadian artist.