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### **Criminalising criticism of religion**

The Government's Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill, introduced on 12 November 2001, punishes religious hatred. This it describes as hatred against a group of persons 'defined by reference to religious belief or lack of religious belief'.

The Bill does not define 'hatred' or 'religious belief', which are both notoriously inexact. It will be punishable 'religious hatred' to criticise a bunch of atheists. Is this really what we want our laws to do?

The penalty for this newly-invented thought crime will be imprisonment for up to seven years. That might be inflicted on a comic who jeers at so-called religions that chop off a thief's hand or stone to death a woman caught in adultery. Is this really what we want?

Or an earnest do-gooder might be imprisoned for criticising so-called religions that prevent a desperately ill child being given a blood transfusion. Again, is that what we want?

I myself am an agnostic, with no desire to defend atheists who presume to have greater knowledge of the Universe than is given to mankind. I claim the right to criticise them. Do I really deserve to be locked up?

The same goes for the multitude of people who endlessly debate faith, and argue for ever about our place in the cosmos. It is what humans have done from time immemorial, so far without challenge.

Will Mr Blair kindly get off our backs?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, 19 November 2001 (lead letter).