

British Prime Minister Accused of Dividing Country With 'Christian' Talk

A group of scientists, academics and prominent writers accused British Prime Minister David Cameron on Monday of stoking sectarian divisions through his repeated description of Britain as a "Christian country."

The public figures, including authors Philip Pullman and Terry Pratchett, said they respected the Conservative leader's own religious beliefs, which he has addressed in a series of statements.

But they took issue with his characterization of Britain, saying, in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, the country was actually a "plural society" of largely "non-religious" people.

"To constantly claim otherwise fosters alienation and division in our society," said the 55 members of the group that also included Nobel Prize-winning scientist John Sulston.

"It needlessly fuels enervating sectarian debates that are by and large absent from the lives of most British people, who do not want religions or religious identities to be actively prioritized by their elected government," the letter added.

The 2011 census showed Christianity was the largest religion in England and Wales but the number of people who described themselves as Christian had fallen from almost 72 percent in 2001 to just over 59 percent, or 33.2 million people.

About 14 million people said they had no religion.

Cameron told an Easter reception this month he was "proud to be a Christian myself and to have my children at a church school."

In an article in the *Church Times* last week, he described himself as “a member of the Church of England, and, I suspect, a rather classic one: not that regular in attendance, and a bit vague on some of the more difficult parts of the faith.”

Britain, he added, should be more confident about its status as a Christian country and more evangelical.

Cameron’s comments follow a period of tension between the Church of England and the Conservative party, the major partner in Britain’s coalition government that faces a parliamentary election next year.

Church leaders have joined forces to criticize welfare reforms and the rising use of free food banks across Britain.

Cameron also angered some Christians—and caused deep splits in the Conservative party—as he drove new legislation through Parliament to allow same-sex marriages in Britain.

A spokeswoman for Cameron said the prime minister’s view that Britain should not be afraid to call itself a Christian country did not mean he felt it was wrong to have another faith or no faith.

“He has said on many occasions that he is incredibly proud that Britain is home to many different faith communities, who do so much to make the U.K. a stronger country,” she said.

Reporting by Belinda Goldsmith; Editing by Andrew Heavens

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