

FEBRUARY 2010

SECULAR SOCIETY

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MOTION:

**“A SECULAR SOCIETY
SHOULD NOT PREVENT
PEOPLE FROM ACTING
ON THEIR RELIGIOUS
BELIEFS”**

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**GLOBAL UNCERTAINTIES
SCHOOLS' RESOURCE**

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KEY TERMS

- Equality
- Multiculturalism
- Religious freedom
- Secularisation

INTRODUCTION

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NOTES

1 In the past few generations, Britain like much of Europe has undergone a process of ‘secularisation’ [Ref:[Encyclopedia.com](#)].

1 While it was once a largely Christian country, church membership and attendances have fallen steadily, and people now tend to see religion as a matter of individual choice rather than public morality or political import. At the same time, immigration has brought significant numbers of Muslims, Hindus and other religious communities into the country, making religion a marker of group identity rather than something that binds the nation together [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)]. In this context, some worry there is a lack of public affirmation or even support for the ‘secular liberal’ values that underlie mainstream politics and culture today. Controversies over Muslim women wearing headscarves or veils reflect a deeper anxiety that some religious beliefs and practices are at odds with modern ideas about women’s rights and personal freedom [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Indeed, there is now a debate about whether religious groups and individuals should be exempt from equality legislation that would otherwise require them to go against their religious beliefs by, for example, helping gay couples to adopt children [Ref:[Christian Institute](#)]. Some argue the principle of equality must come first and be applied universally, but others insist faith groups should be free to act on their beliefs even if others disapprove. Some Christians as well as Muslims protest that a ‘militant’ secularism makes society increasingly hostile to religious belief, and arguments rage about religious symbols, attitudes and practices, from wearing particular symbols to educating children in ‘faith schools’ [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. So should the state compel people to conform with secular values they do not share?

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THE SECULAR SOCIETY DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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What is a secular society?

A secular society is one in which the state and official bodies are neutral with respect to religion, and religious belief is a matter for individuals, families and self-selecting communities rather than the whole society as such. Although the Church of England is 'established' – officially part of the state – Britain is generally considered to be a secular society because its citizens hold many different faiths and none, and religion does not have a prominent role in public life [Ref: [University of Botswana](#)].

By way of comparison, France is a more strictly secular society [Ref: [BBC News](#)], and the USA is secular in that there is a constitutional separation of church and state [Ref: [Religious Tolerance](#)], but Christianity is a prominent part of the culture and the US is therefore often considered less secular than the UK [Ref: [Social Affairs Unit](#)]. Secularism should not be confused with atheism, however, as individuals in a secular society can still be religious [Ref: [BBC](#)].

Is secularism in conflict with religion?

Religion is sometimes controversial in secular societies. In France, the government has banned the wearing of Muslim headscarves [Ref: [BBC News](#)] or any other religious symbols' in state schools, and some have called for a similar law in the UK, where there has also been controversy about Christian and other religious symbols at school or at work [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Some advocates of secularism worry that faith groups are pushing their beliefs on the rest of society, and argue that religion has no place in public life [Ref: [National Secular Society](#)], but others argue that such symbols are harmless and people should be free to express their beliefs [Ref: [The Samosa](#)]. What is at stake is not just

whether people should be allowed to wear particular symbols, but what kind of society we live in. Britain is often described as a 'multicultural' society, but there is disagreement about whether the celebration of diversity should extend to beliefs and values, or whether everyone should subscribe to core, 'secular liberal' values [Ref: [BBC News](#)].

Religious exemptions from equality legislation

One particularly controversial question is whether religious groups and individuals should be exempt from rules against discrimination, most typically in the coming Equality Bill [Ref: [Government Equalities Office](#)]. In general employers are not allowed to discriminate on the grounds of religion, but religious groups can insist that applicants for specifically religious jobs, like being a priest, are of the appropriate faith [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. More controversial is whether such institutions should be allowed to discriminate when it comes to other jobs, like cleaners or accountants, and in particular teachers in faith schools. Most controversial of all is whether religious institutions should be allowed to discriminate against gays and lesbians, not just when employing people, but when providing services such as adoption, on the grounds that their religious teachings condemn homosexuality [Ref: [Pink News](#)]. A similar question is whether religious individuals should be allowed to decline to do certain aspects of their jobs, such as a registrar refusing to perform same-sex civil partnerships [Ref: [Christian Institute](#)]

Tolerance of intolerance?

The question of religious exemptions, or 'conscience clauses', involves a clash of values [Ref: [Christian Institute](#)]. On one hand, equality legislation is meant to ensure that individuals do not suffer discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality, or indeed religion. On the other, in a secular society it is generally held that people are entitled to believe whatever they like, and should not be compelled to go against those beliefs. Some people even argue, quite radically, that coercive equality legislation is fundamentally unjust [Ref: [BNet UK](#)].

More generally, supporters of religious exemptions insist that the conscience of the individual must be respected [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)], but critics object that religious belief should not be a special case: after all racists are not allowed to discriminate against ethnic minorities in the name of their 'conscience' [Ref: [Ekklesia](#)]. In part, then, this is a debate about what constitutes a legitimate belief: should religious beliefs be protected in a way that other beliefs are not, perhaps on the grounds that religion is a wider social good? Or does the state have a responsibility to ensure equal treatment whatever people's reasons for discriminating?

ESSENTIAL READING

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NOTES

Equality Bill 'will be amended'

Anglican Mainstream 15 January 2010

School and religious symbol cases

BBC News 29 July 2008

A matter of principle

Nick Robinson *BBC Newsblog* 24 January 2007

For

The crusade against faith schools is an attack on our freedom

Benedict Brogan *Daily Telegraph* 14 January 2010

Make room for conscience in Equality Bill, says Peer

Christian Institute 14 January 2010

Labour's Equality Bill should not be tolerated

Daily Telegraph 10 January 2010

Who will stand up for freedom of dress?

Symon Hill *The Samosa* 7 January 2010

Why this ruling should make us cross

Neil Addison *spiked* 21 December 2009

Against

They are right to ban the burka, even if it is for the wrong reasons

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown *Independent* 8 January 2010

The JFS ruling is a victory for Jews

Jonathan Romain *Guardian* 16 December 2009

Christian nurse is no martyr

Terry Sanderson *National Secular Society* 3 February 2009

Faith schools may be Blair's most damaging legacy

Polly Toynbee *Guardian* 2 September 2008

Services must stay secular

Andrew Copson *Guardian* 5 December 2007

In Depth

The equality bill is less than equal

Peter Tatchell *Guardian* 2 December 2009

British Humanist Association Briefing: Clause 61, Coroners and Justice Bill

British Humanist Association 7 July 2009

Religious freedom is under attack in Britain

Neil Addison *Catholic Herald* 12 June 2009

A veiled debate

Josie Appleton *spiked* 10 October 2006

Does faith trump equality?

Guardian 1 February 2010

Comparing US and UK Courts' Approaches to Racial and Religious Preferences

Vikram David Amar and Alan Brownstein *FindLaw* 15 January 2010

Parliament move to extend civil partnerships

Religious Intelligence 13 January 2010

Is Islamophobia real?

Andrew Brown *Guardian* 12 January 2010

Archbishop of York Would Not Qualify as Clergy under Labour's Equality Bill

LifeSiteNews 7 January 2010

Equality Bill could increase squeeze on UK Christians

Christian Institute 5 January 2010

What the new Equality Bill means for employers

BBC News 23 December 2009

The Impact of Faith Schools on Teachers

Keith Porteous Wood *National Secular Society* 1 November 2009

UK Parliamentary seminar examines religious freedom

One Country July 2009

Institute of Ideas secularism debates

2008

ORGANISATIONS

Accord Coalition for inclusive schools

British Humanist Association

Equality and Human Rights Commission

Muslim Council of Britain

National Secular Society

The Christian Institute

Liberty

IN THE NEWS

Government defeated three times over church gay plan
BBC News 25 January 2010

Christian BA worker appeals against cross ruling
BBC News 19 January 2010

UKIP woos white working class with call for total ban on burkas
The Times 16 January 2010

Equality Bill 'dangerously' trying to force religious belief behind closed doors, bishops warn
Daily Telegraph 15 January 2010

Teacher suspended in prayer row
BBC News 20 December 2009

Jewish school loses appeal
Guardian 16 December 2009

Court rejects appeal in Christian registrar case
Christian Institute 15 December 2009

Coalition opposes wide religious exemptions from the Equality Bill
Ekklesia 14 December 2009

Exemptions allowing churches to refuse to employ gays to be scrapped following pressure from EU
Pink News 22 November 2009

Decision that belief in climate change is protected by discrimination legislation is upheld
Human Resources 9 November 2009

Shock as head quits to remarry
Star (South Yorkshire) 22 July 2009

Nurse suspended for prayer offer
BBC News 1 February 2009

RC Fireman wins 'landmark' case
Christian Institute 20 January 2009

Religion now more divisive than race, says public
Evening Standard 20 January 2009

Worker loses case against store
BBC News 28 October 2008

Sikh girl wins bangle law battle
BBC News 29 July 2008

Woman loses fight to wear cross
BBC News 20 November 2006

'Chastity ring' girl loses case
BBC News 16 July 2006

Smacking ban challenge rejected
BBC News 24 February 2005

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NOTES

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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

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