

NSS welcomes consultation on Scouts Promise

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News that the Scout Association has decided to review its policy of excluding people without a religious belief has been welcomed by the National Secular Society.

The NSS has been campaigning for the Scouts to introduce a secular oath to enable young people who can't, in good conscience, swear a religious oath, to still participate. Keith Porteous Wood, NSS Executive Director, met the Scout's Chief Executive five years ago to ask for this change.

Leaders insist the existing Scout Promise — which also contains a vow of allegiance to the Queen — will continue to be used alongside any alternative versions.

Wayne Bulpitt, the association's chief commissioner in the UK, said: "We are a values-based movement and exploring faith and religion will remain a key element of the Scouting programme. That will not change. However, throughout our 105-year history, we have continued to evolve so that we remain relevant to communities across the UK. We do that by regularly seeking the views of our members and we will use the information gathered by the consultation to help shape the future of scouting for the coming years."

The Scout Promise reads: "On my honour, I promise that I will do my best to do my duty to God and to the Queen, to help other people and to keep the Scout Law." Alternative versions allow Hindus and Buddhists to use the word "my Dharma" while Muslims can use the word "Allah".

Non UK citizens are permitted to replace the phrase "duty to the Queen" with "duty to the country in which I am now living".

Reacting to the development, Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "This is a positive step in the right direction. By changing their policies to be inclusive of people without a religious belief, the Scouts could bring themselves in line with the reality of 21st century Britain, where more than two thirds of young people say they have no religious belief.

"It will also prevent unnecessary confrontations such as that of 11-year-old George Pratt, who made [national headlines](#) in October when his local Scout troop refused to let him join because he was an atheist.

"If the Scouts do decide to change the promise, it will relieve many young people of having to lie about what they believe in order to be part of this much admired organisation."

An alternative promise, known as the "[Outlander Oath](#)", believed to have been written by Scouts founder Baden-Powell, was intended for those who, for reasons of conscience, could not recognize a "duty to God" and did not worship a deity. It omitted any reference to God or a monarch and, according to scout leaders, was in use as late as the 1990s.

A petition calling on the scouts to open up scouting to non-believers was recently launched by the National Secular Society. [You can sign the petition here.](#)

The NSS also recently wrote to Gill Slocombe, Chief Guide of Girlguiding UK, on the issue of their religious Promise. The current wording states: "I promise that I will do my best, to love my God, to serve the Queen and my country, to help other people and to keep the Guide Law." Whilst the Promise is optional, only girls who have taken it can be awarded the movement's highest badges.

In a progressive move similar to the Scouting Association, Girlguiding UK have also announced the launch, in January 2013, of an [online consultation](#) "on how we express the values embodied by the Promise".

The Times reports:

Guides and their leaders have told bosses at the headquarters of the movement in London that they would prefer a pledge that they could really believe in, insiders say.

At present it states: "I promise that I will do my best: to love my God, to serve the Queen and my country, to help other people and to keep the Guide Law."

The reference to God looks particularly vulnerable when the promise is rewritten next year, after a consultation. A previous survey of guides has found that while the girls generally have their own moral and ethical code, it is not necessarily linked with religion.

Plans to rewrite the promise come as attempts are made to overhaul the image of the organisation as a bastion of traditional values. Instead, the movement wants to be seen as an organisation preparing young women for the challenges of modern adulthood.

It also comes just a month after Julie Bentley, a leading campaigner for abortion and former head of the Family Planning Association, took over as chief executive.

However, Girlguiding UK said it had been drawing up plans to rewrite the promise before her appointment.

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