

# Secularism for beginners

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**The secular state frees believers from religious persecution and non-believers from religious compulsion. Who in their right mind would want anything else?**

Jesus of Nazareth is attributed with saying many things. "Blessed are the meek" was one. "My kingdom is not of this world" was another. As far as we know, he never said, "This thing's never gonna fly unless my followers can secure a whole raft of legal, political and economic privileges."

Why would any self-respecting religion want such Earthly advantages? Are there deficiencies in the messages of Moses, Jesus or Muhammad such that they can only take root if the general population subsidises religious schools? Will Anglicans' faith in the supposedly resurrected Lord be shaken if their 26 bishops are ejected from the House of Lords? Are prayers before council meetings a fundamental Christian duty? God only knows it's hard enough to get Christians to turn up to church on Sunday. If every school in the country needs a copy of the King James Bible, could Britain's 42 million nominal Christians organise that among themselves? Do they need the state to intervene with a nationalised edition complete with ministerial foreword like the scriptural equivalent of a British Rail sandwich?

Secularism says that religion and belief are no business of the state. A secular state offers no special privileges to anyone because of their belief or lack of belief, nor does it disadvantage anyone likewise. A secular state frees believers from religious persecution and non-believers from religious compulsion. Who in their right mind would want anything else?

Secularism is great for believers. A secular state, by definition, is the only state that can guarantee freedom of religious belief, affiliation, worship and expression. Standing completely aside from religious matters, a secular state has no interest in pursuing its citizens for purported acts of blasphemy, heresy or apostasy. Believers are free to speak their belief as they see it, to associate with others who share their beliefs and to worship accordingly. The secular state needs no priest holes or smuggled bibles, no witch hunts or inquisitions. Secular states don't organise pogroms or genocides of believers. They'll never ask a believer to pay tax towards a religion that they oppose or make them a dhimmi — a second-class citizen — by virtue of their creed. They are martyr-free zones.

Sadly, some religions have got far too comfortable with the status quo in Britain. Foremost is the Church of England, the "established" (i.e. official) church in England, though not in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. In his poem "Jerusalem", William Blake wondered whether Jesus paid a visit to this green and pleasant land in his youth. Had he done so, I doubt he would have felt the place would have been significantly improved by a requirement for the monarch to be a member of one branch of a religion he was yet to inspire. Jesus's direction that his followers should "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" was not followed by a footnote requiring some part of that tax to be set aside for a million children to attend Church of England schools. While some religions might be more compatible with the acquisition of temporal power, it's hard to think of anything less authentically Christian than the idea of a Christian state.

[In her speech at the Vatican last year](#), Sayeeda Warsi talks of Europe's Christian heritage in the same way that one might praise a man's fine hand for watercolours while skipping lightly over his

career as a serial killer. Few would deny the beauty of much of England's Christian architecture, music and literature but the true story of the last millennium of Christianity in Europe is a story of extreme religious prejudice and persecution.

There is a terrible irony in a British minister speaking in Rome to denounce an imaginary "militant secularism" to the leaders of a religion that was illegal in England for the better part of 300 years. Secularists, militant or otherwise, would have had no part in the dissolution of the Catholic monasteries, the torture and execution of the 40 Catholic martyrs of England and Wales, the Recusancy Acts by which Catholics were prosecuted for not attending Anglican services, or the Test Acts which effectively barred Catholics from public office. All these measures, which ended or ruined thousands of individual lives, stemmed from a particular form of Christian religious belief combined with a civic principle that the state should act as the arbiter of religious truth and observance.

It was the English and later the British state's enthusiasm to "do God" that extinguished so many pious Catholic lives in our dungeons and on our gallows, and drove many thousands more to the margins of society. The same principle, albeit in a more benign form, motivates Sayeeda Warsi and her cabinet colleagues today: that government can legitimately concern itself with religion and that religion can legitimately concern itself with government. This medieval notion has caused nothing but division and misery wherever it has been applied and Britons of all faiths and none would be wise to have nothing more to do with it.

The passage about "militant secularism" in Sayeeda Warsi's speech is worth quoting in full and stands as an Orwellian distortion of the truth of secularism:

For me, one of the most worrying aspects about this militant secularisation is that at its core and in its instincts it is deeply intolerant.

It demonstrates similar traits to totalitarian regimes – denying people the right to a religious identity and failing to understand the relationship between religious loyalty and loyalty to the state.

That's why in the 20th Century, one of the first acts of totalitarian regimes was the targeting of organised religion.

Why? Because, to them, a religious identity struck at the heart of their totalitarian ideology.

In a free market of ideas, they knew their ideology was weak.

And with the strength of religions, established over many years, followed by many billions...

...their totalitarian regimes would be jeopardised.

Our response to militant secularisation today has to be simple.

Holding firm in our faiths.

Holding back intolerance.

Reaffirming the religious foundations on which our societies are built...

And reasserting the fact that, for centuries, Christianity in Europe has been inspiring, motivating, strengthening and improving our societies.

To say that secularism — which calls for the *withdrawal* of the state from regulating or supporting religion — "demonstrates similar traits to totalitarian regimes" is breathtakingly intellectually dishonest. Secularists want a smaller state not a larger one. Secularism isn't "deeply intolerant", it's absolutely tolerant. The secular state takes no view at all on an individual's beliefs. How more tolerant could you get? The "free market of ideas" which the secular state permits by its inactivity is very different to one which funds religious schools, maintains unelected priests as legislators, compels councillors to attend prayers, mandates Christian assemblies in all state schools and imposes a religious qualification for the head of state. Secularists aren't scared of the free market of ideas, they're trying to create one. If anyone's worried about their prospects in the free market of ideas, it's people like Baroness Warsi who are trying to perpetuate and extend religious privilege and subsidy.

British secularists are calling for religion to be removed from our national constitution not from our national conversation. Ending prayers in the town hall doesn't gag preachers in the town square. We want the Anglican bishops booted from Parliament not from their pulpits. We want religious groups to take their hands out of the public purse and pay their own way, just like everyone else. Secularism isn't the cause of the decline of religion in Britain but a consequence of it. Apathy, agnosticism and atheism have put paid to the idea that religion is something most of us can agree on. The religious among us follow an increasingly diverse range of faiths and sects and the non-religious increasingly hold the view not just that religion isn't their thing but that it does more overall harm than good. In such circumstances the government has no legitimate mandate to continue the current system of selective religious privilege let alone to seek to extend it. If you think you've got God on your side you certainly don't need the state too. If you don't believe in God, the last thing in the world you want is to have to live in a state that does.

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