

Secularism seeks to balance everyone's religious freedoms fairly. Why would anyone oppose that?

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Despite the claims of its critics, secularism protects the freedom of conscience for all citizens, and welcomes believers and non-believers into the public square on equal terms, argues Stephen Evans.

As the old idiom goes, throw enough mud and some of it will stick. This appears to be the strategy of those with a vested interest in resisting secularism.

Secularism is often unfairly and portrayed by some as illiberal, intolerant and anti-religious. There is, without question, plenty of hostility to religion in Britain, but that is not the business of secularism.

In her [speech](#) about faith being "at the heart" of Government last week, the unelected Minister for faith, Baroness Warsi, made a point of singling out the National Secular Society for criticism. After doing so, she said "What really matters is that we support people in their right to believe" and "that we protect people from discrimination, bigotry and intolerance". That, she said, "is our stance on the place of faith in politics".

If this were the case, we would have plenty of common ground with the Baroness. But the trouble is, while she talks a great deal about freedom of religion, freedom from religion barely gets a look in.

But despite the repeated smears and distortions from Baroness Warsi, secularism does take religious freedom seriously. Very seriously. The difference is, secularists take everybody's religious freedom seriously, not just the religious freedoms of the faith communities Baroness Warsi chooses to represent.

As Jacques Berlinerblau rightly points out in [How to be Secular](#): "Secularism is a fierce defender of religious liberty – perhaps civilization's best defender of it." He adds, "Few political ideologies go to the wall, as it were, to secure the freedom of conscience the way secularism does".

But with her desire to ensure religion enjoys "a voice at the top table", Baroness Warsi reveals herself as a firm believer in religious privilege. It should therefore come as no surprise that she appears to have an intense disdain for secularism, and the National Secular Society in particular.

It is a disdain she shares with the Church of England. Again, no surprise there. Secularism challenges the religious privileges that the established Church has grown so accustomed to. Any challenge to its being able to patronisingly impose its beliefs and doctrine on others is greeted with hysterical howls of 'persecution'. The Church, fearful of how it would fare in the free market of ideas without the crutch of its established status, must cling to the past for as long as it can.

In the latest Theos [blog](#) to take swipes at the NSS, the director of the Christian think tank, accused the NSS of wanting to "stamp out public religion in Britain". But what exactly is meant here by "public religion" is not entirely clear. But let's explore the validity of this claim.

At this time of year, some journalists like to peddle the myth that secularists want to 'ban Christmas', or at least take Christ out of it. This is of course, [complete nonsense](#). People and public bodies are free to celebrate Christmas in any way they choose. If shops have stopped stacking their shelves with religiously themed Christmas cards, it's down to market forces, and nothing to do with 'militant' secularists.

Do we want to ban religious symbols? Absolutely not. Citizens should be free to manifest their beliefs subject only to limitations proscribed by law to protect the rights and freedoms of others.

Does the NSS advocate a public ban of burkas? Again, [no](#). Restrictions on where it is worn will be appropriate in some circumstances, but generally speaking a woman's right to choose what she wears and her right to religious freedom should be respected. That said, religious freedom must never be allowed to trump all other considerations.

So what about public prayers? Well, yes, we did recently ask the High Court whether local authorities had the right to summon elected councillors to prayers. And it turns out they didn't. As Mr Justice Ouseley made clear in his [ruling](#):

"[The law] should not be interpreted as permitting the religious views of one group of Councillors, however sincere or large in number, to exclude or, even to a modest extent, to impose burdens on or even to mark out those who do not share their views and do not wish to participate in their expression of them. They are all equally elected Councillors."

The intention behind our judicial review wasn't to "stamp out" religion, it was to point out the inappropriateness of publicly-elected councillors appearing to corporately subscribe to a religious belief – and to ensure that council meetings are conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all councillors, regardless of their individual religious beliefs. The ruling in no way interferes with anyone's religious freedom. The opposite is in fact true.

And yes, we also oppose school worship – which is currently imposed by law on all pupils attending state funded schools. The thing is, like many religious believers, we think religion should be voluntary. We believe in letting parents and young people decide for themselves if, how and when they worship. Who in their right mind doesn't believe that?

And no, allowing parents to 'withdraw' their child so they can sit alone in a room separated from their classmates does not 'respect' anyone's wishes.

We also oppose the public funding of faith schools. We agree that parents have a right to raise their children in accordance with their religious and philosophical beliefs, but they have no 'right' to do that via the state. Schools should respect all parents' beliefs equally (at least until they begin to impede upon a child's education) but it is not the role of state education to mould children into obedient followers of someone else's religion.

What about the so-called secularist desire to banish religion from the public square? Again, not so. Citizens motivated by their religious beliefs have just as much right as anyone else to express their views in the public sphere. Nobody can realistically expect them to 'leave religion at the door', but

they do have a responsibility to express their concerns in universal, rather than religion-specific values. The days of being able to justify your position by claiming it to be the word of God are over, but that's not the same as saying that religious believers must keep their faith entirely to themselves. As the political philosopher John Rawls puts it:

"Reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons - and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines - are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support."

But allowing faith groups privileged access to policy making is highly problematic. Not only does it create a democratic deficit by disadvantaging the non-religious, who don't organise themselves in similar ways as religious believers, it also hands unrepresentative 'faith leaders' undue influence. Of course religious groups should be able to lobby the Government, but only on the same terms as any other special interest group.

Britain has changed a great deal over the last half century. Its demographics and the religious habits of its citizens will continue to evolve. We are a religiously pluralistic and super-diverse society, and a significant and increasing proportion of the population do not hold, or practise, any religious beliefs.

Therefore, when the nation comes together in remembrance, it is reasonable to [question the appropriateness](#) of that remembrance being dominated by the Church of England, particularly when fewer than 2% of the population attend its churches on the average Sunday. Don't forget, this is a Church that has fought tooth and nail to deny homosexuals equal rights to marry. They represent nobody but themselves.

Britain shouldn't be the Christian club that tolerates 'outsiders'. The beauty of a secular approach is that it enables all citizens, whatever their religious affiliations, cultural background, sex, or sexuality, to be — and to be made to feel like — equal citizens.

So while it is true to say the National Secular Society would like to see political structures and state affairs change to reflect the reality of changing times, it is not accurate to describe our agenda as to "stamp out public religion" or to describe our position as in any way "anti-faith".

There is a false dichotomy between secular and religious. The real culture war is between secular and anti-secular. It is only those with a desire to impose their religion on others who have any reason to oppose secularism.

This blog originally appeared in [The Huffington Post](#).

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