

challenging religious privilege

29 January 2008

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Dear Mr Twine

This is a joint letter from Hanne Stinson of the British Humanist Association and Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society.

We appreciated the opportunity to meet Company Secretary David Shelmerdine, Chair of Trustees Mike Goodison and yourself on 24 January. As we said, we acknowledge that Scouts do a great service to the community.

We had assumed or at least hoped that you would have found our nine page submission and subsequent discussions to be persuasive. We noted from your letter of 7 November 2007 that you did not see yourselves making a change to “the Fundamental principles of Scouting”. We had however hoped that you would not have regarded making the religious element of the Scout promise optional (as opposed to removing it altogether) as such a change.

Although part of your justification for your stance was your keenness to adhere to the world conference’s new international agreement, we assume you would be taking a similar line even if it had not been in force. In practice it seems that, when there is a will, there is some flexibility to adapt to national circumstances. To its credit, the Scout Association did so adapt over homosexuals, in what must have been an unpopular move with many countries.

We were therefore very disappointed at the outcome of the meeting. There seems no room for ambiguity that your colleagues and you were of one mind that there was no prospect of any change on the mandatory religious promise soon or in the foreseeable future, nor did you accept that the current policy was discriminatory.

Of course, we fully support freedom of religion and belief and of association. We are adamant however that your exclusion of the growing number of children and young people without religious beliefs flies in the face of the reality of religious adherence in the UK. Above all, it is completely unacceptable for an organisation as large as yours; one that acknowledges that it is the only youth organisation in many localities, and one that is so committed to personal development of young people and that claims to foster mutual understanding between different beliefs, which of course should include those of no belief.

Honorary Associates: Graham Allen MP Robert Marshall-Andrews QC MP Prof. Peter Atkins Iain Banks Lorraine Barrett AM Edward Bond
Michael Cashman MEP Colin Challen MP Nick Cohen Prof. Richard Dawkins Lord Desai Rt. Hon. Michael Foot Prof. A C Grayling Dr.
Evan Harris MP Patrick Harvie MSP Christopher Hitchens Paul Holmes MP Prof. Ted Honderich Kelvin Hopkins MP Sir Ludovic Kennedy Graham
Linehan Baroness Massey of Darwen Lord McIntosh of Haringey Jonathan Meades Siir Jonathan Miller Taslima Nasrin Lord O’Neill of Clackmannan
Lord Peston Harold Pinter Philip Pullman Lord Raglan Claire Rayner Martin Rowson Joan Ruddock MP Joan Smith Dr. David Starkey
Lord Taverne QC Polly Toynbee Baroness Turner of Camden Gore Vidal Prof. Lord Wedderburn of Charlton QC
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It is particularly unacceptable when that same organisation presents itself, on its website for example, as being all about inclusion, e.g. 'open to all' - <http://www.scouts.org.uk/aboutus/community.htm> and 'inclusive' - <http://www.scouts.org.uk/report/pdf07/diverse.pdf> . If Mike Goodison's comment that one of your purposes was for Scouts to grow in a "full expression of their faith" and the way you described the Scout Association to us more generally are accurate, then the reality is that the organisation is by almost any definition a religious one, even if policy determined by its religious leadership is perhaps not always implemented at grass roots level.

We very much regret your refusal to accept our offer to seek to establish with some kind of poll or questionnaire whether Scouts want their organisation to continue to discriminate against their non-religious comrades. Frankly, we doubt that if asked in a neutral way Scouts would want to do so, and suspect your unwillingness to put it to the test suggests you may feel similarly. Most voluntary organisations are democratic and commendably keen to be responsive to their members' evolving attitudes. Should you wish to return to test this matter, we would be happy to co-operate with an independently monitored survey.

We invite you in the interests of transparency, and indeed of honesty, to make unambiguously clear in your communications that the organisation is a religious one and to proscribe the Association and local groups from claiming to be open to all, inclusive, or committed to equal opportunities. We ask you to include an accurate description of the Association on websites and in promotional materials and, even more importantly, in communications with potential donors and public bodies making grants or making facilities available free or at a subsidy.

We stand by the points made in our Submission and in discussion and will not repeat them here. We regard this letter as an open one.

Yours sincerely,

Yours sincerely,

Keith Porteous Wood
Executive Director
National Secular Society

Hanne Stinson
Chief Executive
British Humanist Association

A copy of the Submission referred to above follows below

Scouting and Good Citizenship

The way ahead

The purpose of Scouting is to contribute to the development of young people in achieving their full physical, intellectual, social and spiritual potentials, as individuals, as responsible citizens and as members of their local, national and international communities.

Contents

	Page
1. Introduction and history	3
2. Good Citizenship and discrimination	3
3. Problems with discrimination	4
4. Good Citizenship, The Way Ahead	6
Appendix 1	9

1. Introduction and history

Almost one hundred years ago Baden-Powell wrote *Scouting for Boys*, or to give it its full title:

Scouting for boys *A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship*

With this handbook the Scouts have grown into a large and successful organisation bringing instruction in Good Citizenship to youngsters all over the world. Many have the opportunity to practice Good Citizenship in their packs, patrols and the wider community.

The Scouts have, we contend, been successful because they have changed. They have changed to reflect, and sometimes lead, societies' views on what constitutes Good Citizenship. Scouting for Boys has a very strong emphasis on nationalism and empire. 'Patriotism: You belong to the Great British Empire, one of the greatest empires that has ever existed in the world.'¹ Similarly much was written on the skills necessary for war. Scouts were 'ready to fight and die for the King'. Woodcraft concentrated on military style campaigning.² All these were seen as elements of Good Citizenship at the time.

We note that, after the First World War there was a major shift in societies' views of Good Citizenship towards peace and internationalism. In 1918 Baden-Powell and the Scout movement showed courage and foresight in amending its rules in line with these changes. Making a Promise to 'do one's duty to the King'³ became irrelevant to countries without a monarchy and, in those cases, was dropped. Strong nationalistic rhetoric was abandoned.

The Scout Association's current 'Purpose of Scouting' statement largely reflects the above changes. It is discussed in more detail below.

Sometimes some apparently small changes have been difficult. Removing the Scouting for Boys requirements to wear a 'flat brimmed hat' and 'trousers cut short at the knee'⁴ prompted much opposition and some hostility as traditionalists argued with those wanting rules which reflected their current society. One wonders what the Scout membership numbers would be today if the Scout Association had failed to respond positively to changes in society.

Similarly, after the Second World War, there were major developments in our views of Good Citizenship with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Over the last decades its principles of equal opportunity and removing discrimination between human beings have been accepted and implemented in most progressive societies. Again the Scouts are to be commended for embracing this change, allowing females into the Association, adapting the Promise to different religions, courageously ending discrimination against gays and lesbians, and developing an equal opportunities policy.

2. Good Citizenship and discrimination.

Sadly, however, there is one area where the Scout Association has failed to embrace progressive societies' view of Good Citizenship, and that is in *discrimination in relation to*

¹ Baden- Powell p26

² Baden- Powell p20

³ Baden- Powell p36

⁴ Baden- Powell p39

religion or belief. The policy and rules of the Association are that it should and will practise such discrimination.

In relation to youth membership 'The Religious Policy of the Association prohibits Membership to anyone who denies...the existence of a spiritual power greater than any human being'.⁵ Scout rules require that Beaver Scouts, Cub Scouts, Scouts, Explorer Scouts, members of the Scout Network and those adults with warranted appointments be Full Members of the Scout Association. Full Members must make the Scout Promise, including a Promise to God(s) ['God(s)' are taken to include Dharma, Allah and the existence of a spiritual power greater than any human being.] Forms of the Scout Promise, in this country, do not include provision for atheists, humanists and those with no religious beliefs. Hence these groups are excluded from the above membership based on their religion or belief.

In relation to adults, the Religious Policy is even more discriminatory, 'a person would not be suitable as a Leader if he or she were an atheist: believed that religious belief and spiritual development did not matter, although were willing to make the Promise; were a humanist...'⁶

All too often we experience or read of our societies being damaged by fundamentalism and intolerance founded on religions and beliefs. Discrimination against one or more religious or belief groups is an example of this intolerance. None of this makes for good or responsible citizens. We are saddened that the Scout Association has chosen to practise discrimination in relation to religion or belief. This practice is totally contrary to its basic aim to instruct in Good Citizenship and the Association's 'Purpose of Scouting'.

3. Problems with discrimination

The Scout Association's discrimination policy not only acts against its basic aims: it results in some other significant problems.

3.1 It demeans many human beings.

The clear implication of the Scout Association's Religious Policy is that humanists and those with non-religious beliefs do not make responsible and good citizens and cannot 'contribute to the development of young people in achieving their full physical, intellectual, social and spiritual potentials'. This is as insulting as it is untrue. A 2005 survey for The Tablet shows that 24% of the population have no religious belief. 36% of people in the 18 -34 age group in Britain define themselves to be atheist or agnostic.⁷ A 2004 report for the DFES on 12-19 year olds stated that 65% were not religious.⁸ There is a huge amount of evidence of such people running youth groups, working for charities and the like. A Government survey found that the non-religious spend at least as much time as religious people on voluntary activities to the benefit of our community. To suggest that such a large part of our community are not and cannot be good and responsible citizens is shameful and the Scouts and Guides are virtually alone in making any such claim.

3.2 It is associated with less than honourable behaviour by Scout officials.

⁵ Scout Association: Equal opportunities policy, Religious Belief; 'Restrictions to youth membership on the basis of religious belief' item 3 para 2

⁶ Scout Association, Equal Opportunities Policy, Young People: Religious Belief, item 3.

⁷ Mori poll (4,270 respondents) for The Tablet 20/5/05.

⁸ <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR564.pdf>

Scouts have always placed a high emphasis on honour. 'Scouts' honour is to be trusted. If a Scout were to break his honour by telling a lie...he would cease to be a Scout...'9 We are deeply disturbed by a number of instances of this honour being called into question. Here are some examples.

A woman with non-religious beliefs wanted to lead a cub pack. She was concerned about the discrimination policy. In response she was asked to lie about her beliefs by a District Commissioner. This letter is attached in an appendix 1. Such action is dishonourable and, coming from a District Commissioner, it brings dishonour on the Scout Movement.

A member of the Scout Association Council responded to questions from public bodies about the Association's discrimination policy by saying:

'Individuals may join either as a full Member, if they choose to take the Scout Promise, or as an Associate Member if they prefer not to take the Scout Promise'.*10

The Scout Association totally failed to mention that Beaver Scouts, Cub Scouts, Scouts, Explorer Scouts, members of the Scout Network and those adults with warranted appointments cannot be Associate Members; hence atheist and humanists are excluded from membership of these groups. This is so 'economical with the truth' as to be misleading to the point of not being honourable.

A senior diversity adviser was accurately quoted by a national newspaper saying: 'Scouting is about developing young people and each group should *reflect the community* which it serves,' *

This adviser went on to say the views are 'those of The Scout Association'.* The adviser knows that by excluding youngsters with non-religious beliefs it is impossible for Scouts to *reflect the community*. Saying, in public, that The Scout Association are supporting an aim while, at the same time, actively supporting policies that preclude its achievement is not honourable, either.

3.3 Scouting is not inclusive.

Some of these examples indicate another problem. About a third to two thirds of youngsters and many committed adults are being excluded from participating in scouting unless they are willing hypocritically to make the Promise. This is again contrary to the aims of scouting. Scouting cannot 'contribute to the development of young people in achieving their full physical, intellectual, social and spiritual potentials, as individuals, as responsible citizens and as members of their local, national and international communities' unless young people are able to join those communities and unless there are enough adults to help them.11

It is absolutely clear that Baden-Powell wanted the Scouts to be an inclusive organisation. He wrote 'I suppose **every** British boy wants to help his country in some way or another. There is a way, by which he can do so easily, and that is by being a Scout'.12 That is simply not possible with the Association's current policy.

9 Baden- Powell p44

10 Where there is an * we can provide documentary evidence.

11 Scouting is denying itself access to a large pool of very suitable adults by maintaining its discrimination. As our population becomes increasingly non-religious, generation on generation, this can only lead to a crisis of recruitment.

12 Baden- Powell p13

Baden-Powell went on to say 'A Scout is a Friend to All. A Scout accepts the other man as he finds him'.¹³ He did not say A Scout is a Friend to All, except those with non-religious beliefs. He did not say a Scout will check on a man's religion or belief before he accepts him. Yet that is what Scouts are saying today.

Scout Association discrimination policies insult a large proportion of our citizenry, they tend to cause even its senior officials to act less than honourably and they exclude many members of our society who would benefit from the Scouts' instruction in Good Citizenship. It is time to change this policy.

4. Good Citizenship, The Way Ahead

We recognise that to change an important aspect of policy is not always easy. It will require the courage and foresight shown by Baden-Powell in 1918 and, more recently, ending discrimination against gays and lesbians. Some traditionalists will not want change as with 'trousers cut short at the knee', some will see the aims of the Scout movement to be to sustain or foster religion(s), international scouting agreements may appear to limit scope for action.

4.1 Common values

Many non-religious people fully support the purpose of Scouting.

'The purpose of Scouting is to contribute to the development of young people in achieving their full physical, intellectual, social and spiritual potentials, as individuals, as responsible citizens and as members of their local, national and international communities.'

Disagreement over particular Gods or the truth of sacred texts ranks high among the causes of conflict in the world. However, there is a high level of agreement about our common human morality:

"He should treat all beings as he himself should be treated. The essence of right conduct is not to injure anyone." (JAINISM - from The Suta-Kritanga, about 550 BCE*)

"Do not do to others what you would not like for yourself." (CONFUCIANISM - from The Analects of Confucius, about 500 BCE)

"Treat other people as you'd want to be treated in their situation; don't do things you wouldn't want to have done to you." (British Humanist Association, 1999 CE)

We hope that the Scout Association would agree with this morality. For example, would its members want to be treated in the way that they treat humanists? Would members want their children and grandchildren to be denied membership of the Scouts because they have a particular religion or belief?

4.2 Religion

Baden-Powell wrote at length about chivalry and honour, values relating to the behaviour between human beings, not telling a lie, helping others and so on. (He actually said very little about religion. There is a short paragraph towards the end of the book (p316) where he says the organisation should 'bring its members to a *knowledge* of religion'. We, of course, fully support youngsters having knowledge of religion (and preferably other life-stances such as humanism). Young people cannot fully develop as responsible citizens and as members of

their local, national and international communities unless they have knowledge and the opportunity to mix (camp, hike...) with young people with other religions and beliefs.

The Scout Association states 'The Scout Movement is NOT a religious organisation'; Scouting Principles.¹⁴ Why, therefore, does it consider it appropriate for it to behave as *though* it were a religious organisation? The public support, financial and moral, which Scouting receives relies to some extent on its claim to be inclusive, but Scouting in fact excludes many, and the proportion of the public it excludes will only increase as our society becomes less and less religious – in this way, its public support can only likewise decrease and claims of unjustified discrimination mount.

4.3 'Spiritual' potential

Some people may consider that only those who believe in God(s) have any spiritual potential and only those who believe in God(s) can contribute to the development of spiritual potential in others. Some people may consider that *religious* spiritual potential is the only valid or relevant form of spiritual potential.

The Scout Association Equal Opportunities Policy asserts that '... a humanist [does] not believe in a spiritual aspect to human beings'¹⁵. This is an assertion very much dependent on definitions. One definition used for young people, for example, defines 'spiritual development' as that which 'relates to that aspect of inner life through which pupils acquire insights into their personal existence which are of enduring worth. It is characterised by reflection, the attribution of meaning to experience, valuing a non-material dimension to life and intimations of an enduring reality. "Spiritual" is not synonymous with "religious".'¹⁶ Does the Association really assert that no humanist or person without a religious belief is able to demonstrate any of the capacity for awe and wonder, the cultivation of a meaningful inner life, appreciation of beauty? Can the Association honestly assert that Benjamin Britten's War Requiem; the novels of George Eliot & Virginia Woolf, Picasso's Guernica or Basil Spence's Coventry Cathedral do not demonstrate a belief in a 'spiritual' aspect to human beings? Yet, none had religious beliefs. We call upon the Association to correct this misunderstanding.

Many hundreds of non-religious (not 'faith') schools include the spiritual development of their pupils in their mission statements or their aims. Yet the DfES, County Councils and School Governors do not require those responsible (Heads, teachers and assistants) for this spiritual development to believe in God(s). A belief in God(s) is not necessary in order to contribute to the development of spiritual potential in others.

Belief in God(s) *may* be necessary to the development of *religious faith*. However, the Scout Association is NOT a religious organisation and the development of religious faith is NOT a purpose of Scouting. The development of spirituality and of religious faith should not be confused.

4.4 World Organisation of Scouting Movements (WOSM)

The Scout movement became international from 1918 and was clearly a secular, not religious, organisation. From 1924 WOSM has always allowed some countries to have secular forms of Promise, for example.¹⁷ The words in brackets below are optional. The

¹⁴ Scout Association, Equal Opportunities Policy, Religious Belief, Restrictions on adult Membership on the basis of religious belief, item 2

¹⁵ Scout Association, Equal Opportunities Policy, Religious Belief, Restrictions on adult Membership on the basis of religious belief, item 3

¹⁶ Ofsted, *Handbook for the Inspection of Schools*, 1994

¹⁷ See proceedings of WOSM Third International Conference 1924

optional words echo the alternative affirmation now recognised in courts and in Parliament etc., hard-won in stages over centuries before which only members of the Established Church were able to swear and others were excluded to their huge disadvantage.

'Scouting Nederland': I promise to do my best (with the help of God) to be a good Scout, to help everybody whenever I can and to follow the Scout Law. You can count on me.

Czech Republic, 'Junák': On my honour I promise that I will do my best, to serve the highest Truth and Love faithfully at all times, to fulfil my own duties and to observe the Scout/Guide laws, to be prepared to help my country and my neighbours with all my soul and body. (May God help me so.)

In 1932 it sought to limit the number of countries having secular forms of Promise. However, even since 1932 secular forms of Promise have been accepted. For example:

'Hitachdut Hatsofim Ve Hatsofot Be Israel': I promise to do my best to fulfil my duties to my people, my country and my land, to help others at all times and to obey the Scout Law.

'Swiss Guide and Scout Movement': (With the help of God) with your help and happily I promise to do my best: to study in detail the values of our Scout Law; to search for the meaning of my life; to be involved in the community where I live.

WOSM is headquartered in Switzerland and some flexibility by WOSM in relation to forms of Promise seems to be suggested by the above. Nonetheless, we do recognise the possible problems for the Association's relationship with WOSM should the Association decide to take what we consider to be the morally correct path in this matter.

4.5 Ways ahead

We seek to work with the Scout Association in a positive and constructive way to overcome the problems caused by its policy of discrimination. We hope that the Scout Association will respond in a positive and constructive way.

We consider that it is important to bring these matters to the attention of Council, staff and leaders throughout the Scout Association and that we seek their positive input to resolving the problems in an open and democratic way.

The problems that relate to the Scout Association also relate to WOSM. Similarly, we consider that it is important to bring these matters to the attention of WOSM and that we seek their positive input to resolving the problems.

Our aim is to *end discrimination based on religion or belief* in both the Scout Association and in WOSM and so maintaining and strengthening 'the purpose of Scouting'.

Meanwhile, we would want to help explore with you the basis of the Swiss promise above and develop a similar version for non-religious people in the UK or any other non-religious version acceptable to you and WOSM.

Baden-Powell wrote *Scouting for Boys* almost a century ago. It would be a wonderful tribute to him and to almost a century of Scouting progress for the Scout Movement to end discrimination and to truly become the fully inclusive organisation he envisaged.

Appendix 1

Letter from a female primary teacher in Lancashire.

My son joined Beavers in May 2005, I helped out on numerous occasions and we were welcomed and treated equally to the Christian members of the group.

That summer the Beaver Leader moved out of the area and asked me to take on the group. She was aware of my training and experience as a primary teacher and a Wildlife Watch group leader for the Wildlife Trust. I knew the children and parents well.

I agreed to do this and had several offers of support from parents. At this stage I pointed out again, that I was not a religious person, and I did not attend church. I was told that this did not matter. I proceeded to take over the running of the group. However, when I received the paperwork I became aware that the application form states that although the Scout movement welcomes children from all religions, if you are not practising any religion it would not be possible to become a leader.

Being very confused, I took this issue up with the District Commissioner. I was shocked and disgusted by the response I got. I was firstly asked to lie about my beliefs and state that I was a Christian; in return, I would not be questioned on this in my interview. I told her I was unable to be dishonest and I questioned the ethics of this policy. She explained being non-religious made me unsuitable as a leader, as being non-religious showed a clear absence of morals. In addition I would not be able to offer spiritual guidance to the children. Actually, I have taught children of many faiths in various faith schools, I have a sound basic knowledge of the main religions and expressed my intention to support children of any faith within the group and not to abuse my power and express my own beliefs, just as I would expect a leader with religious beliefs to do.

Other members of the district pleaded with me to be dishonest about my own personal beliefs, as it became rapidly apparent that if I did not the group would be forced to close, as no-one else could be found to lead the group. The group closed and the area is now without a Beaver group, furthermore the Cubs and Scouts are being threatened with closure as they no longer have groups that 'feed' into them.

Obviously this is a very sad outcome for the area, and in this day and age it is completely unacceptable that such discrimination such occur. I have no doubt that had I been discriminated against on the basis of gender or race I could have successfully challenged it. As a parent and a teacher it greatly distresses me that such appalling examples are being set to children – the negation of honesty, tolerance and acceptance. I felt personally attacked, and treated as a second-rate citizen due to my non-religious beliefs. I know I could have made a significant difference in this role yet my contribution was rejected in a wholly unjustified manner. This cannot be acceptable if we are to achieve a fully integrated society.