

# Challenge to collective worship law in Lords?

## Challenge to collective worship law in Lords?

The most comprehensive debate on collective worship in England for many years took place this week in the House of Lords. Peers were debating amendments to the Education Bill relating to collective worship, most of which were tabled by Lord Avebury at the request of the NSS. Speaking in support of our amendments were five honorary associates. At one stage there were no less than three bishops in the chamber, led by the chairman of the Church of England Board of Education.

Lord Avebury provided statistics demonstrating low levels of belief and church attendance. Acts of worship were "grossly out of step with the attitudes of the majority of the population", and despite being mandatory, were often not observed. In an ideal world he would prefer the amendment tabled by Baroness Massey (another Honorary Associate) to replace the requirement to conduct collective worship with a requirement to hold assemblies that would further the "spiritual, moral, social and cultural education" of children. Instead, he hoped the Government would permit acts of worship to become optional in community schools. He found it offensive to require any pupil of any age to take part, so wanted attendance to be optional. At the very least, pupils of fifteen or older should be permitted to withdraw themselves – an incremental change, supported by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, on the NSS's 2006 achievement of self-withdrawal for 6th formers.

He concluded: "The noble Lord the Leader of the House told me that this House is the only legislature in the world which includes ex officio representation of clerics, and that may be one reason why Britain is the only democracy in the western world to prescribe a mandatory act of worship in non-religious publicly funded schools, and [in England and Wales] a daily one at that. I certainly hope that we can put that right in this Bill, and that where such an act is retained by a school, after consultation with parents and pupils, attendance should be a voluntary option."

Tellingly, the Church's education bishop wanted community schools to be as religious as church schools: "That is a common myth: that we would have religious schools and non-religious schools." He was challenged on his assertion that "It is unnecessary to change the law, which seems to be working well." The bishop was of course determined to resist the changes in society over many decades: "As we are legally charged with promoting the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and society, experience matters, and the candle, the singing, the prayer, the stillness and the silence, which are so often present, are all part of the experience of the spiritual, which is part of what we are required to provide." Baroness Massey was blunt: "The law is outdated. Why keep it?" Baroness Turner advocated the amendments as "an ideal opportunity to modernise an outdated and overly prescriptive law".

The Bishop of Lichfield came close to saying that "if we want a cohesive community, if we want tolerance, truth and honesty" it comes from God – and that he was "against those who say that Christianity is just one of our religions."

Such a debate could not take place without labelling secularists as "aggressive", and we have Lord McAvoy of Rutherglen to thank for that in what was the most aggressive, and indeed illogical, intervention in the whole debate, in which he described these proposals as "authoritarian".

Lord Avebury wound up by quoting St Augustine at the bishops: "this is going to happen in the end" ... "whether they like it or not, it is going to come. Sooner or later we shall get rid of the act of compulsory worship in schools, and the sooner the better."

[Read the Grand Committee \(Hansard\) transcript](#)

[Watch the video of the debate](#) starts at 15min 30 secs.