

Judges call for one secular oath for all

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Magistrates are considering proposals to replace religious oaths and affirmations with a single oath for all defendants and witnesses.

At present, witnesses giving evidence in court either take a religious oath relevant to their particular religious beliefs, or a secular affirmation where the witness simply affirms that they will tell the truth.

A proposal to be debated at this year's Magistrates' Association AGM calls for all those giving evidence in court to make the same pledge. Supporters say this approach would make it fairer and more relevant for people to help them understand the importance of what they are saying.

Senior figures in the Church of England have criticised the proposal, claiming it represents another attempt to chip away at the country's Christian foundations.

The National Secular Society, however, has welcomed the move.

Stephen Evans, NSS campaigns manager, said: "Multiple religious and non-religious oaths unnecessarily make an issue out of a witness's religiosity in the courtroom. A single oath for all would protect witness of all religions and beliefs, including non-believers, from the potential religious prejudices of jurors. All witnesses should be on an equal footing, with cases decided on the evidence heard rather than the prejudices of those hearing it.

"Britain is not the Christian country it perhaps once was, so it is right that our institutions change to reflect this. Justice being done is the most important consideration, and this is a case where I'm sure most people of faith would be happy to swear the same oath as others, rather than insist that the legal system accommodate their religious preferences."

If the proposal is voted through at its October AGM, the Magistrates' Association will draw up plans to be sent to the Ministry of Justice. However, a Ministry of Justice spokesperson said: "We have no plans to change the arrangements for swearing an oath or making an affirmation in court, which have worked well for many years and still does."

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