

NSS accuses Welby of 'cynical abuse of religious privilege' over Lords education debate

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The National Secular Society has criticised the "cynical abuse of religious privilege" on display at a House of Lords debate initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Lord Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby used his opening speech for the debate on "Role of education in building a flourishing and skilled society" to promote the Church of England's educational agenda, while attacking secularism and non-religious schools.

He started by expressing gratitude to the "usual channels" for arranging for him to lead a debate in the House of Lords, commenting that it has become "something of a tradition" for an Archbishop to do so in early December.

The Archbishop went on to congratulate his own institution on its role in British education: "As in so many areas of our public life, if you'll excuse me a little bit of trumpet-blowing, it was the churches that pioneered the idea of a universal system of education free for all."

But later in his speech, despite being keen to remind the Lords that his five children went to "both church and non-church" schools, the Archbishop held religiously-neutral schools in contempt.

"We have a world of unguided and competing narratives, where the only common factor is the inviolability of personal choice," he said.

"This means that, for schools that are not of a religious character, confidence in any personal sense of ultimate values has diminished. Utilitarianism rules."

Approximately two thirds of all schools in the UK have no religious character.

Archbishop Welby also attacked secularism's challenge to the privileged position of the Church of England.

"The challenge is the weak, secular and functional narrative that successive governments have sought to insert in the place of our historic Christian-based understanding, whether explicitly or implicitly," he stated.

The Archbishop's speech also referred to the "wide and widening schools network" of the Church, saying that "The Church of England's educational offer to our nation is church schools that are in its own words 'deeply Christian'".

The debate gave the opportunity for members of the House of Lords, including three bishops and Rabbi Lord Sacks, to express their support for religion in schools.

The NSS has condemned Archbishop Welby for using the House of Lords as a platform to promote the Church of England's agenda of expansion within the UK education system.

"Today's debate in the Lords was an appalling and cynical abuse of religious privilege from Justin Welby and the established Church," said Stephen Evans, CEO of the NSS. "The Archbishop of Canterbury's self-serving debate was used to promote the Church's own brand of faith schools at the expense of community schooling.

"Welby is absolutely wrong to attack community schools over their lack of transmission of values. Non-faith-based schools actively promote the same universal values as church schools. By promoting these values as uniquely "Christian", it's church schools that give their pupils a skewed and very poor understanding of ethics. The way in which the Church is increasingly using its schools to intensively promote its faith also undermines young people's religious and intellectual freedom.

"With the Church of England in seemingly terminal decline, it's not hard to see why it puts schools at the very centre of its mission. The whole debate smacked of self-interest and is another reminder of why the time has come to remove the automatic privileged right of Church of England bishops to sit in the House of Lords."

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