

Why it's important to add your voice to the Scout's consultation on non-believers

Posted: Thu, 06 Dec 2012 by [Keith Porteous Wood](#)

It was nearly five years ago that I went with a colleague to speak to Derek Twine, the chief executive of the Scouts, and his senior colleagues, to discuss the possibility of the Scouts being opened up to the non-religious. Accommodating non-believers would not affect the religious oath at all – that would still be available for those who wanted it.

We pointed out, for example, how few young people these days regard themselves as being religious, how the assertion, repeated recently, that Scouts are "open to all", is simply not true, and how the absence of a non-religious oath forces Scouts into making a false promise – something I admitted on the *Sunrise* programme on Sky News on Wednesday that I had done at the age of eight (see picture, right).

We even suggested something quite similar to the consultation process which has been announced this week.

Mr Twine was particularly courteous when I first wrote to him and at the meeting, but we did get the impression they realised they were very much under fire. Whatever the internal politics, he and his senior colleagues put up a united front and told us then that there was no prospect of any change on the mandatory religious promise in the foreseeable future, nor — bizarrely — did they accept that the current policy was discriminatory.

However, although the meeting did not end up with any positive result, in the short term anyway, I hope that it had started a process of questioning and re-evaluation for them.

Yet, even when just two months ago, the brave 11-year-old George Pratt from Somerset refused to take a religious oath because he is an atheist, the response from the Scout Association was totally uncompromising and there was no clue of the change apparently in the pipeline.

Now, five years on from the deputation to Derek Twine, I'll be the first to give him credit for his part in initiating this consultation and [writing in the Telegraph](#): "No other group aside from non-believers is excluded from the Scouts on the grounds of religion or belief. ... What's the point of making some people feel hypocritical or dishonest if they take a Promise with which they fundamentally disagree?"

My only gripe, and it is a minor one, is a tendency to concentrate on the word "atheist" and often not add "non-believer" or a similar term. Studies show that most non-believers do not define themselves as atheists and I suspect even fewer young people will do.

As you can imagine, Mr Twine's article attracted a huge number of comments, most of them positive. I thought this one was particularly telling:

Let's cut to the chase here. I am the chair of my local scout group and my husband is the cub leader. We are both atheists. We both took up our positions because no-one else would come forward despite there being plenty of religious parents throughout the group. We both raised the issue of our atheism with our district and were told it was not a problem as the group would not be able to continue without the support of atheists.

Well you know what? We're tired of being told we are second-class scout members, lacking in morals etc, and literally being lumped in with paedophiles in the scouting literature as the sort of person who cannot serve.

If you won't change the promise to acknowledge our existence and value our contribution then we are going to stop doing what we do. Who will be the losers then?

Seriously, stop treating atheists like second-class citizens – we've had enough.

This is a vivid example of the complaint we hear all too often, that "the non-religious are the only group left that can be abused or discriminated against with impunity" in much same way as non-religious contributors are excluded from *Thought for the Day*.

But at least, to their credit, the Scouts are inviting everyone to submit their views to their consultation and the NSS is asking you to [submit yours](#).

Wayne Bulpitt, the chief commissioner announcing the consultation, reinforces the Scouts' determination to remain — quite rightly — a values-based organisation. I hope you will make clear (if you agree) that that is what you want too, but there is no reason to assume that non-believers are any less keen to do this than anyone else. Again, if you agree, you may wish to make the point, in your own words, that those without a religious faith — probably the majority — should be enabled to make their promise honestly and not be excluded either as full Scouts or from making their contribution to the community as adult volunteers. It will be wonderful if "scouting for all" actually became scouting for ALL.

Even Baden Powell, albeit no fan of atheism, penned an Outlander Promise, and indeed this consultation is a very fitting way of marking its centenary:

On my honour, I promise that I will do my best,
To render service to my country;
To help other people,
And to keep the Scout Law.

I conclude with a word of caution. Despite the hype in the press, this is not a done deal. Everyone is entitled to their beliefs, the Scouts have not identified themselves as a religious organisation, yet there are many in the ranks, senior echelons and international leadership of the Scouts that appear to regard the Scouts as a platform for evangelism. A phrase spoken by one of Mr Twine's colleagues at that meeting five years ago has stuck in my mind: Scouts should be encouraged to make a "full expression of their faith". And maybe it is just a coincidence that the person they chose to be Chief Scout, Bear Grylls, has marketed the Alpha Course. Scouting is not a democratic organisation where elections are likely to produce candidates more representative of the population as a whole.

This is why it is so very important for us all to make our contribution to the consultation, and I hope you will encourage as many people as possible, both inside and outside scouting, to respond. And,

remember we are not calling for the withdrawal of a religious oath but for the reinstatement of an additional one for non-believers.

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Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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