

Why the time has come to end compulsory worship in schools

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With the launch of a new petition calling on political parties to make the removal of the collective worship requirement part of their education policy, NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans explains why the time has come to relieve schools of the obligation to provide worship.

This September, many young children starting school will have their first encounter with religion. As part of their state education some will be compelled to put their hands together and pray to a God they have little or no concept of.

This has long been problematic for parents who feel they should be the ones to decide what religious upbringing their children receive.

Christian worship has been compulsory in our state schools since 1944. The law requires all schools, even non-faith schools, to hold an act of collective worship every day, which must be 'broadly Christian' in character.

The law as it stands is an anachronism; the legacy of a bygone era, unrecognisable from the diverse and pluralistic Britain of today where we hold a wide variety of religious beliefs, including no religious belief. Indeed, the 2013 British Social Attitudes survey revealed that a [majority of the population](#) now claim to have no religion.

It is becoming increasingly clear that a law requiring a compulsory act of predominantly Christian worship in schools is out of date and out of step with the attitudes of the majority of British people. The unpopularity of the requirement was highlighted in a [ComRes survey](#) in 2011 which found that just 30% of parents thought the law should be enforced.

And of course in many cases, it isn't. 64% of parents said that their child does not attend a daily act of collective worship. As the National Governors' Association [points out](#), few schools can or do meet the current legislative requirement for a daily act of collective worship, partly because there isn't space in most schools to gather students together, and often staff are unable or unwilling to lead a collective worship session.

As long ago as 2004, David Bell, the then head of Ofsted, abandoned asking inspectors to take provisions for worship into account in their reports after running into a "[firestorm of protest](#)" from schools over the issue. At the time, he claimed 76% of secondary schools were failing to provide for daily worship.

But where acts of worship are imposed, it causes real anger and frustration for parents who are dismayed by acts of worship being imposed on their children. Parents that do not want a Christian upbringing (or any other faith upbringing) for their children should have that choice respected. Instead, they find worship in the form of prayers and songs permeating through their children's assemblies. They find vicars and priests lecturing their children in community schools about how 'Jesus walked on water'. Their children come home carrying bibles with stories about God making us and everything in the world in 7 days. These examples all come from genuine calls to the

National Secular Society from parents, angered and exasperated by non-religious schools fulfilling their legal duties. This isn't education, it's evangelisation.

The legal obligation coupled with a lack of willingness from teachers to lead worship provides an ideal environment for evangelicals to exploit, and increasingly, schools are 'contracting out' their legal obligations to external evangelical Christian organisations and clergy people who are more than [willing to step in](#).

Provisions have also been introduced to allow schools to apply for a determination which allows school governors to replace the Christian element of the worship with that of another faith.

Governors at Park View Academy in Birmingham took advantage of this and introduced an Islamic form of 'collective worship'. Suddenly, when its Islamic worship we're talking about, people start to see how using publicly funded schools to impose faith on children might not be such a great idea. But regardless of the faith, the principle remains the same.

To be clear, removing the collective worship requirement is not a call to jettison all trace of religion from schools. Particularly in a religiously diverse society such as ours, children need to learn about and explore a variety of religious, non-religious and secular philosophies and worldviews. That's all part of education. But worship is something different.

Legally imposing a daily act of worship, in which pupils by law are required to "[take part](#)", goes beyond the legitimate function of the state and violates the human right of freedom of belief for children and young people.

Other than sixth-form pupils, children and young people are not permitted to excuse themselves from acts of worship. But under both Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 14.1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child children do have a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Anyone with a firm commitment to religious freedom must surely recognise that it can't be right for the state to impose worship on children, regardless of whether the school they are attending has a religious ethos or not.

Even with the legal requirement to hold acts of worship removed, schools, particularly faith schools, may still opt to hold acts of worship. Where this is the case, the right to withdrawal must be extended to make attendance at worship optional for pupils themselves.

The Government has argued that the parental right to withdraw is sufficient to protect fundamental freedoms. It is not. Despite such little enthusiasm for acts of worship in schools, very few parents exercise this right. Parents are naturally reluctant to ask for their children to be singled out and separated from their school friends. I still recall the way in which Muslim and Jehovah's Witness pupils who were withdrawn from my school assemblies were ostracised by their peers. Few parents, myself included, would willingly subject their children to that.

Parents that do express a wish to withdraw are often treated as "difficult" by head teachers. I've spoken to parents who were told that they would have to come in and supervise their children themselves if they withdrew. In other cases, withdrawn children have been told to clean the classroom or sit outside the headmaster's office. In one community school I'm aware of Christian prayers are said four times a day - before assembly, after assembly, before lunch and at the end of the school day - making withdrawal completely impractical.

The last opportunity to remove this obligation on schools came during the passage of the Education Act in 2011. An amendment put down by Lord Avebury, a Buddhist and NSS honorary

associate, would have given schools with no religious character the freedom to decide for themselves whether or not to hold acts of religious worship.

Even that modest proposal was rejected out of hand by the Government and Church of England bishops in the Lords.

The Church of England at least appears to have softened its stance. Realising how unreasonable compulsory worship is, the Bishop of Oxford, the Rt Rev John Pritchard, has [suggested](#) replacing it with a legal obligation on schools to make time for "spiritual reflection" containing elements of Christianity and the other major religions. But of course, this fallback position would still provide a legal justification for those seeking to use schools, including those without a religious character, to impose their religious beliefs on others.

Those left still supporting the status quo resort to [straw man arguments](#) to make their case. They say a removal of the requirement would deprive students "opportunity for quiet" or a "period of reflection in a busy day". But of course it wouldn't. If an educational case can be made for such periods of reflection, head teachers are at liberty to make space for them. They don't need to be legally imposed.

Schools have ample opportunities through the curriculum to promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of their pupils. Explicit opportunities are provided in religious education and the non-statutory framework for personal, social and health education (PSHE) and citizenship.

School assemblies can also provide an ideal time to reflect and consider moral and ethical values, but let schools do so in a way that is inclusive of the whole school community.

Political parties are busy working out their manifestos for 2015. For the sake of schools, parents and pupils, let's urge them to commit to removing the worship requirement. A petition has been set up asking them to do just that. Whatever your beliefs, if you want a state education system with no compulsion to worship, please [sign the petition](#) calling for an end to compulsory worship in schools.

In the words of Lord Avebury: "Sooner or later we shall get rid of the act of compulsory worship in schools, and the sooner the better."

This article was originally published at [Huffington Post](#).

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