

A new, sharper focus for the NSS — Let the debate begin

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Terry Sanderson

The Pope's fears about "aggressive secularism" are, of course, entirely ill-founded. Secularism is not about destroying religion. It is not about oppressing believers. It is not the instrument by which atheism will be imposed on an unwilling population.

Secularism is the structure that would permit all of us, from whatever creed or none, to have the same rights in the society we must share. In a truly democratic, secular society, religion has its place – not in parliament – or the corridors of political power but in places of worship and in the homes of the faithful.

Religious believers are citizens with the same rights as anyone else in a democratic society. If they want to bring their religious values with them into political life, that is fine. But if the electorate don't share their values or don't like their philosophy, they must accept that they can be rejected at the ballot box.

Secularism is not about controlling religious organisations or telling them what to do or say, it is about ensuring that they cannot bring disadvantage to those who do not agree with them.

No one can be permitted to use the law or the state to impose their view of life onto others unless it has been democratically agreed. The law must remain impartial, democratically formulated and applicable equally to all. There can be no parallel legal systems that are not answerable to democratic control.

Similarly, there can be no established church. The right to freedom of religion should always be tempered by the right to be free from religion.

Human rights should be the ultimate test; religious exemptions should be limited to the absolute and justifiable minimum. Religious bodies must understand that human rights are to protect individuals, not religious groups or ideas.

In a secular society, religions would only have access to public money for the common good, not to promote their particular view of life. There would be no taxpayer funding for "faith schools"; there would be no hijacking of public events – such as Remembrance Day – so that they become the property of any particular religion. Publicly- funded welfare and medical services would be resolutely secular and open to all without question and without religious demands, even if they are being run by religious organisations. Nor could there be any religious employment discrimination in services funded by the taxpayer but run by religious bodies.

On the other hand, the state would have no power to interfere with the internal decision-making of religious bodies. As long as they obey the law, religious bodies would be free to pursue their own interpretation of their holy scriptures and arrange their own internal structures without question.

The NSS Council has worked together to produce a [Secular Charter](#) which we think can provide a new focus for the NSS's work in the twenty-first century. It seeks to be fair to everyone, to be achievable and to be benign.

I want the NSS to adopt this Charter as the basis of its ambition to create a properly secular society. I would like us to position ourselves as a purely secularist organisation with a focused objective, that will not only champion human rights above religious demands, but will also accept that religion has a place in society for those who want it, but on terms of equality, not privilege.

We will leave humanism for the humanist groups, atheism to the atheist groups and fix our sights uniquely on secularism.

The NSS must be at the forefront of the big debate about the place of religion in society. We must be ready to fight the myriad battles that will lead to the kind of society that we want. A society that is fair for all – religious people included.

Secularism protects the rights of everyone, religious and non-religious alike. Let the debate begin.

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