

Rethinking religion and belief in public life: a manifesto for change

Vast swathes of the population are simply not interested in religion, it doesn't play a part in their lives, but the state refuses to recognise this.

Britain is now one of the most religiously diverse and, at the same time, non-religious nations in the world. Rather than burying its head in the sand, the state needs to respond to these fundamental cultural changes. Our report sets out constructive and specific proposals to fundamentally reform the role of religion in public life to ensure that every citizen can be treated fairly and valued equally, irrespective of their religious outlook.

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Britain is drifting away from Christianity. Meanwhile religion is becoming more personalised, minority religions are on the rise and non-religiosity is increasing. This demands a long term, sustainable settlement on religion's relationship with the State.

Rethinking religion and belief in public life: a manifesto for change, calls for Britain to evolve into a secular democracy. There should be a clear separation between religion and state. The manifesto argues that the prevailing multi-faithist approach is "at odds with the increasing religious indifference" in Britain.

The NSS has sent the booklet to all MPs. This is part of a major drive to encourage policymakers and citizens of all faiths and none to find common cause in promoting secularist principles.

Recommendations

A complete list of recommendations from our manifesto for change.

Our changing society – Multiculturalism, secularism and group identity

1. The Government should continue to move away from multiculturalism and instead emphasise individual rights and social cohesion. A multi-faith approach should be avoided.
2. The UK is a secularised society which upholds freedom of and from religion. We urge politicians to consider this, and refrain from using "Christian country" rhetoric.

The role of religion in schools

Faith schools

3. There should be a moratorium on the opening of any new publicly funded faith schools.
4. Government policy should ultimately move towards a truly inclusive secular education system in which religious organisations play no formal role in the state education system.
5. Religion should be approached in schools like politics: with neutrality, in a way that informs impartially and does not teach views.
6. Ultimately, no publicly funded school should be statutorily permitted, as they currently are, to promote a particular religious position or seek to inculcate pupils into a particular faith.
7. In the meantime, pupils should have a statutory entitlement to education in a non-religiously affiliated school.
8. No publicly funded school should be permitted to prioritise pupils in admissions on the basis of baptism, religious affiliation or the religious activities of a child's parent(s).
9. Schools should not be able to discriminate against staff on the basis of religion or belief, sexual orientation or any other protected characteristics.

Religious education

10. Faith schools should lose their ability to teach about religion from their own exclusive viewpoint and the law should be amended to reflect this.
11. The Government should undertake a review of Religious Education with a view to reforming the way religion and belief is taught in all schools.
12. The teaching of religion should not be prioritised over the teaching of non-religious worldviews, and secular philosophical approaches.
13. The Government should consider making religion and belief education a constituent part of another area of the curriculum or consider a new national subject for all pupils that ensures all pupils study of a broad range of religious and non-religious worldviews, possibly including basic philosophy.
14. The way in which the RE curriculum is constructed by Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) is unique, and seriously outdated. The construction and content of any subject covering religion or belief should be determined by the same process as other subjects after consultation with teachers, subject communities, academics, employers, higher education institutions and other interested parties (who should have no undue influence or veto).

Sex and relationships education

15. All children and young people, including pupils at faith schools, should have a statutory entitlement to impartial and age-appropriate sex and relationships education, from which they cannot be withdrawn.

Collective worship

16. The legal requirement on schools to provide Collective Worship should be abolished.
17. The Equality Act exception related to school worship should be repealed. Schools should be under a duty to ensure that all aspects of the school day are inclusive.
18. Both the law and guidance should be clear that under no circumstances should pupils be compelled to worship and children's right to religious freedom should be fully respected by all schools.
19. Where schools do hold acts of worship pupils should themselves be free to choose not to take part.
20. If there are concerns that the abolition of the duty to provide collective worship would signal the end of assemblies, the Government may wish to consider replacing the requirement to provide worship with a requirement to hold inclusive assemblies that further pupils' 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural education'.

Independent schooling

21. All schools should be registered with the Department for Education and as a condition of registration must meet standards set out in regulations.
22. Government must ensure that councils are identifying suspected illegal, unregistered religious schools so that Ofsted can inspect them. The state must have an accurate register of where every child is being educated.

Freedom of expression - Freedom of expression, blasphemy and the media

23. Any judicial or administrative attempt to further restrict free expression on the grounds of 'combatting extremism' should be resisted. Threatening behaviour and incitement to violence is already prohibited by law. Further measures would be an illiberal restriction of others' right to freedom of expression. They are also likely to be counterproductive by insulating extremist views from the most effective deterrents: counterargument and criticism.
24. Proscriptions of "blasphemy" must not be introduced by stealth, legislation, fear or on the spurious grounds of 'offence'. There can be no right to be protected from offence in an open and free secular society.
25. The fundamental value of free speech should be instilled throughout the education system and in all schools.
26. Universities and other further education bodies should be reminded of their statutory obligations to protect freedom of expression under the Education (No 2) Act 1986.

Religion and the law

Civil rights, 'conscience clauses' and religious freedom

27. We are opposed in principle to the creation of a 'conscience clause' which would permit discrimination against (primarily) LGBT people. This is of particular concern in Northern Ireland.
28. Religious freedom must not be taken to mean or include a right to discriminate. Businesses providing goods and services, regardless of owners' religious views, must obey the law.

29. Equality legislation must not be rolled back in order to appease a minority of religious believers whose views are out-of-touch with the majority of the general public and their co-religionists.

30. The UK Government should impose changes on the rest of the UK in order to comply with Human Rights obligations. Every endeavour should be made by to extend same sex marriage and abortion access to Northern Ireland.

Conscience 'opt-outs' in healthcare

31. Efforts to unreasonably extend the legal concept of 'reasonable accommodation' and conscience to give greater protection in healthcare to those expressing a (normally religious) objection should be resisted.

32. Conscience opt-outs should not be granted where their operation impinges adversely on the rights of others.

33. Pharmacists' codes should not permit conscience opt outs for pharmacists that result in denial of service, as this may cause harm. NHS contracts should reflect this.

34. Consideration should be given to legislative changes to enforce the changes to pharmacists codes recommended above.

The use of tribunals by religious minorities

35. The legal system must not be undermined. Action must be taken to ensure that none of the councils currently in operation misrepresent themselves as sources of legal authority.

36. Work should be undertaken by local authorities to identify sharia councils, and official figures should be made available to measure the number of sharia councils in the UK to help understand the extent of their influence.

37. There needs to be a continuing review by the Government of the extent to which religious 'law', including religious marriage without civil marriage, is undermining human rights and/or becoming de facto law. The Government must be proactive in proposing solutions to ensure all citizens are able to access their legal rights.

38. All schools should promote understanding of citizenship and legal rights under UK law so that people – particularly Muslim women and girls – are aware of and able to access their legal rights and do not regard religious 'courts' as sources of genuine legal authority.

Religious exemptions from animal welfare laws

39. Laws intended to minimise animal suffering should not be the subject of religious exemptions. Non-stun slaughter should be prohibited and existing welfare at slaughter legislation should apply without exception.

40. For as long as non-stun slaughter is permitted, all meat and meat products derived from animals killed under the religious exemption should be obliged to show the method of slaughter.

41. In public institutions it should be unlawful not to provide a stunned alternative to non-stun meat produce.

Religion and public services

Social action by religious organisations

42. The Equality Act should be amended to suspend the exemptions for religious groups when they are working under public contract on behalf of the state.
43. Legislation should be introduced so that contractors delivering general public services on behalf of a public authority are defined as public authorities explicitly for those activities, making them subject to the Human Rights Act legislation.
44. It should be mandatory for all contracts with religious providers of publicly-funded services to have unambiguous equality, non-discrimination and non-proselytising clauses in them.
45. Public records of contracts with religious groups should be maintained and appropriate measures for monitoring their compliance with equality and human rights legislation should be put in place.
46. There should be an enforcement mechanism for the above, which would for example receive and adjudicate on complaints without complainants having to take legal action.

Hospital chaplaincy

47. Religious care should not be funded through NHS budgets.
48. No NHS post should be conditional on the patronage of religious authorities, nor subject directly or indirectly to discriminatory provisions, for example on sexual orientation or marital status.
49. Alternative funding, such as via a charitable trust, could be explored if religions wish to retain their representation in hospitals.
50. Hospitals wishing to employ staff to provide pastoral, emotional and spiritual care for patients, families and staff should do so within a secular context.

Institutions and public ceremonies

Disestablishment

51. The Church of England should be disestablished
52. The Bishops' Bench should be removed from the House of Lords. Any future Second Chamber should have no representation for religion whether ex-officio or appointed, whether of Christian denominations or any other faith. This does not amount to a ban on clerics; they would be eligible for selection on the same basis as others.

Remembrance

53. The Remembrance Day commemoration ceremony at the Cenotaph should become secular in character. Ceremonies should be led by national or civic leaders and there should be a period of silence for participants to remember the fallen in their own way, be that religious or not.

Monarchy and religion

54. The ceremony to mark the accession of a new head of state should take place in the seat of representative secular democracy, such as in Westminster Hall and should not be religious.

55. The monarch should no longer be required to be in communion with the Church of England nor ex officio be Supreme Governor of the Church of England, and the title "Defender of the Faith" should not be retained.

Parliamentary prayers

56. We believe Parliament should reflect the country as it is today and remove acts of worship from the formal business of the House.

Local democracy and religious observance

57. Acts of religious worship should play no part in the formal business of parliamentary or local authority meetings.

Public broadcasting, the BBC and religion

58. The BBC should rename Thought for the Day 'Religious thought for the day' and move it away from Radio 4's flagship news programme and into a more suitable timeslot reflecting its niche status. Alternatively it could reform it and open it up to non-religious contributors.

59. The extent and nature of religious programming should reflect the religion and belief demographics of the UK.

Agree with these recommendations?

If you support these recommendations, you can help put them into action by sharing this page, or formally endorsing the Manifesto for Change.

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