

challenging religious privilege

17 April 2012

Bear Grylls, Chief Scout  
The Scout Association  
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CC Wayne Bulpitt, Chief Commissioner  
Tim Kid, English Chief Commissioner

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Dear Mr Grylls,

While we welcome the sentiment of your recent statement in the media about scouting being for everyone "no matter their religion, ethnicity or belief", we do however question its basis in fact.

In recent media reports about the launch of the new uniform designed especially for Muslim girls, you expressed pride that the Scouts offer "an environment for people of all backgrounds to come together and enjoy themselves." Chris Foster, the spokesman for the Scout Association stated, "It doesn't matter who you are, what you are or what colour your skin is or what faith you are."

As you will be aware, the religious oath in the Scout Promise acts as a barrier to the non-religious. They either have to make a hypocritical and dishonest statement or risk being refused full membership of the Scouts.

Furthermore, the Scout Association's Equal Opportunities Policy makes clear that "the avowed absence of religious belief is a bar to appointment to a leadership position".

Previous calls from the National Secular Society to make the religious oath optional have been resisted by the Scout Association. Instead, the organisation lobbied for a specific exemption from equality legislation which enabled it to retain the ability to only accept members who have religious beliefs or are prepared to make a promise to a god.

Such outdated, unfair and discriminatory policies completely contradict claims that the Scout Movement is an open and inclusive organisation.

The Scout Association is widely regarded as an excellent organisation that does brilliant work. However, the refusal to make the religious element of the oath optional deprives many young people of an honest access to scouting activities and deprives the Scouts of people who would be good leaders working in that organisation as volunteers.

Independent research has revealed that two thirds of 12–19 year olds do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion. If your aspiration really is to ensure the scouting movement is inclusive and welcoming to all, I urge you to consider introducing a secular option of the promise, opening up scouting to all young people, regardless of their religious beliefs, or indeed lack of them.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts on this matter and consider this an open letter.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Evans  
Campaigns Manager



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Mr Stephen Evans  
Campaigns Manager  
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Dear Mr Evans

Thank you for your letter of today's date which you have addressed to me, the Chief Scout and the Chief Commissioner for England and which you have chosen to publish wider as "an open letter". This response is on our collective behalf.

Scouting is open to anyone who feels able to make their personal commitment to the Scout Promise, which includes "to do my duty to God" (or other wording according to age or specific faith). We are part of the World Scout Movement that shares this common fundamental premise. Scouting is a voluntary organisation for all who wish to share that Promise whether Christian, Muslim, Jew, Sikh or of another faith.

We are a membership organisation not just an activity programme, and share a basis of association by common belief. Similarly if a person does not wish to make the Promise and share that common association with people of similar beliefs, then that is a respectable personal choice.

Although this may be disappointing to you with regards to availability, there may well be other membership or volunteering opportunities provided by local branches of other voluntary organisations (such as the Woodcraft Folk, who enjoy some similar activities such as camping and international networks) where the basis of shared-belief is not an expectation of membership or participation. Indeed, Scouting frequently works alongside other providers of youth-work in very collaborative ways, each of us with our distinctive contribution into the total provision for young people and their communities.

With kind regards

Yours sincerely

Wayne Bulpitt  
UK Chief Commissioner

**The Scout Association**

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