

13 November 2017



Sir Theodore Agnew
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

25 Red Lion Square
London WC1R 4RL
TEL: 020 7404 3126
FAX: 0870 762 8971
EMAIL: enquiries@secularism.org.uk
WEB: www.secularism.org.uk

Dear Sir Theodore,

Oasis Academies' Religious Ethos

We are writing to urge the Department to clear up the confusion surrounding the religious character of schools in the Oasis academy chain.

Specifically, we request that the Department addresses the inconsistencies between the classifications of Oasis Academies according to the Department for Education's register for schools, and the statements on the Oasis Academies' websites.

While the majority of Oasis Academies are listed as "None" or "Does not apply" under "Religious Character" and "Religious Ethos", every Oasis Academy website makes direct reference to the Christian ethos of the schools. Each website's FAQ page states, "*The academies are 'schools of religious character'*", and their ethos page says that their ethos is "*Inspired by the life, message and example of Jesus Christ.*" The only exception is Oasis Academy Broadoak, which opened in September and whose website is still branded as the former school, Broadoak Primary School (which was non-religious).

Other references to the schools' Christian ethos can be found in other details on the sites. Many of the sites include an "Education Charter," in which the word "Christ" appears 16 times. This Charter includes the following passage:

"The following statements represent a few examples of Oasis' core beliefs:

- *Each individual is made in the image of the God who created all of us, making us all equal and different.*
- *God is love. Love is not simply one of God's attributes, but rather the very essence of his nature. This love pervades the universe and is unconditional rather than earned.*
- *God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. He came to where we are. He shared our experience of life. He felt joy and pain. He engages with us and understands us.*
- *Jesus served others rather than expecting to be served and willingly sacrificed his life through the cross.*
- *Jesus rose from the dead. Death is not the end. There is resurrection and hope."*

A number of Oasis Academy websites mention the school's link with local churches, including Christian assemblies delivered by members of the church. Several had posted specifications for a Chaplaincy role in the school, which said, *"There is an occupational requirement for applicants to actively embrace the Christian ethos and values of Oasis."* **Can you please clarify on what legal basis schools without a formal religious designation may apply a religious selection criteria in recruiting staff?**

The importance of the Christian ethos was also stated in a number of other job specifications for Oasis Academies, from teaching staff to receptionists, including a specification for volunteers which required volunteers to respond to the question, *"As an organisation motivated by our Christian faith, our ethos and values are important to us. Do you feel happy to agree to demonstrate these in your work?"*

On one of the websites, for Oasis Academy Skinner Street, the admissions policy emphasises: *"We welcome applications from Christian families, and those of other faiths or none. We ask all parents applying for a place at our Academy to respect our ethos and its importance to the whole Academy community."*

This appears to suggest a hierarchy of preference. We regard this wording as a *prima facie* attempt to discourage non-Christian families from applying to the school. This is particularly concerning in a school which cannot legally impose a religious selection criteria in admissions. **Does the Department consider this wording to be compliant with the Admissions Code?**

As every Oasis Academy is clearly and openly Christian in its ethos, to classify them as "None" or "Does not apply" rather than "Christian" under "Religious Character" or "Religious Ethos" in the DfE's register is misleading. This inconsistency is detrimental to the rights of parents to choose a non-religious school for their children, as they are not receiving the accurate information they need to make an informed choice. Additionally, it results in inaccurate statistics regarding the number of faith-ethos schools in England, and the diversity of school choice within specific areas.

I urge the Department for Education to address these inconsistencies. If the Oasis Academies cannot commit themselves to following a non-religious school ethos, their schools must be listed as "Christian" under "Religious Character" or "Religious Ethos" in order to guarantee truthfulness, transparency and parental choice.

On a broader point, our own research into academisation and experience of casework in support of parents/pupils continually demonstrates that there is confusion over schools' religious ethos where the MAT/sponsor is a faith based organisation, but the schools do not have their own religious designation/faith ethos. **Can the DfE clarify which of the current list of MATs are faith based organisations, and why this information is not directly accessible?**

Thank you for your time on this matter. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Evans
Campaigns Director