

Response to Girlguides Promise consultation

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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

The Consultation

We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Girlguides consultation on Promise. We very much welcome Girlguiding's decision to review its Promise with the aim of ensuring girls and young women can believe in the commitment they make.

To 'Love My God'?

Question 9: Which aspect(s) of the Promise do you feel needs most consideration?

Girlguiding describes the Promise as a core expression of Girl Guides values and "the common standard that brings us all together." In a religiously diverse society in which a significant number of people, and especially young people, have no religious beliefs, the inclusion of a reference to 'Love my God' is clearly inimical to this aim. Furthermore, requiring Girl Guides to promise to 'love God' is wholly incompatible with the Girlguides equality and diversity policy statement of being "fair, open and inclusive."

From the large volume of correspondence we have received from our own members, and members of the public, we are convinced that the religious element of the Promise acts as a barrier to the non-religious joining the Girl Guides.

When non-religious girls do get involved, and wish to become fully-fledged Brownies or Guides by taking the Promise, they are currently expected to make a hypocritical and dishonest statement. To force young people to make a promise that they don't mean appears to us to be the antithesis of Girlguiding principles. We appreciate that the promise has evolved to allow another name to be substituted for God for members with different religious beliefs, but we regard it as unacceptable that atheists are still expected to simply forget they have a conscience.

As stated in the rationale for launching the consultation, a significant number of girls and Leaders struggle with the wording of the Promise, and interpreting what it means to girls today. This is hardly surprising given the changing landscape of religion and belief in the UK. Independent research has revealed that two thirds of 12–19 year olds do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion¹.

A report published by the Church of England in 2010² found young people to be "indifferent" to religion. One of the report's authors said: "For the majority, religion and spirituality was irrelevant

¹ <http://fairplayforchildren.org/pdf/1224545128.pdf>

² *The Faith of Generation Y* ("Generation Y" is defined for the purposes of the book as those born from 1982 onwards). This built on research published in the 2006 book *Making Sense of Generation Y*.

for day-to-day living". However, the research found that despite having little interest in religion, young people were far from unconcerned with ethical issues.

Girlguiding aims to provide girls and young women with a framework to support the development of their personal values. We maintain that there is absolutely no need to contextualise this in a religious framework, indeed, doing so is likely to be unhelpful.

Girlguiding's Chief Executive has stated publicly that the Girlguides is the "ultimate feminist organisation". If that is the aspiration, then a requirement to 'love God' would seem somewhat incongruent, given the patriarchal structure of most organised religions and their far from progressive attitudes gender equality.

Despite the fact that Girlguiding has never been a Christian organisation, the reference to God in the promise gives the clear impression that it is. Removing the inherently Christian reference to 'Love my God' may also be helpful in attracting people from different backgrounds into Guiding – something we very much believe should be encouraged.

We therefore strongly support the removal of the religious reference in the Promise and believe its removal will make Girlguiding more relevant to today's girls and young women.

One Secular promise for all

Question 10: How important do you think it is that Girlguiding has just one Promise that all members make, rather than an alternative option(s)?

Girlguiding provides an excellent opportunity to bring people from different parts of our communities together. The focus should therefore be on common values, rather than on issues such as religion that have the potential to highlight difference and cause division. Girlguiding itself does not subscribe to any particular faith or religion. If it were to introduce alternative options, Girlguiding would unnecessarily force girls, young women and adult volunteers into subscribing to a religion, or position of non-belief. If the organisation wishes to provide an open environment for young girls to explore their faith and beliefs, the introduction of alternative options requiring young girls to 'pigeon-hole' themselves into certain faith positions would seem inimical to this aim.

Furthermore, studies show that many nonbelievers do not self-identify as atheists and we consider it likely that even fewer young people will do. Therefore, the introduction of an 'atheist' alternative may not make prove to be a suitable alternative to the religiously unconcerned and other nonbelievers.

Not only are younger people far more likely to be non-religious, they also appear to be more likely to adopt a secular outlook on life. Girlguiding UK's own research into the attitudes and opinions of girls aged 7 to 21 across the UK found a massive 70% of them agree that religious belief should be personal, and should not affect public issues such as education or politics.³

This clearly shows that a secular Promise, without reference to religion and belief, and relevant to all young girls and potential leaders, is the most appropriate way forward.

³ http://girlsattitudes.girlguiding.org.uk/pdf/SOCIETY_CULTURE_AND_COMMUNITY.pdf

Question 11: 'Essence of spirituality' aspect of the Promise.

Out of the options offered we would recommend 'Search for the meaning in my life', or 'Be true to myself'.

Question 12: 'Essence of citizenship' aspect of the Promise

To be fully inclusive this aspect should not contain any reference to the Monarch. We regard expressions such as 'Serve my community' and 'Be useful to my country' as being far more appropriate expressions of citizenship.

Question 13: 'Commitment to others' and Question 14 concerns 'Guide law'.

We do not wish to express any preference

Question 15. Please tell us whether the Promise matters to you as a non-member and why

The National Secular Society is Britain's only organisation working exclusively towards a secular society. We promote secularism as the best means to create a society in which people of all religions or none can live together fairly and cohesively. We see secularism as an essential element in promoting equality between all citizens.

As the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, it is vitally important that the organisation is true to its commitment of being 'fair, open and inclusive'.

By taking a secular approach to the wording of the Promise, Girlguiding has a perfect opportunity to make itself truly inclusive of young people without a religious belief, and the organisation will show itself to be relevant to the reality of 21st century Britain.
