

challenging religious privilege

17 April 2012

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Such outdated, unfair and discriminatory policies completely contradict claims that the Scout Movement is an open and inclusive organisation.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