

What is Secularism?

The principles of secularism which protect and underpin many of the freedoms we enjoy are:

1. **Separation** of religious institutions from state institutions and a public sphere where religion may participate, but not dominate.
2. **Freedom** to practice one's faith or belief without harming others, or to change it or not have one, according to one's own conscience.
3. **Equality** so that our religious beliefs or lack of them doesn't put any of us at an advantage or a disadvantage.

Secularism raises core questions in all of the humanities, about how we balance freedom of, and from, religion with other rights.

[Check out our range of free educational resources, worksheets, presentations and exercises.](#)

Separation of religion from state

The separation of religion and state is the foundation of secularism. It ensures religious groups don't interfere in affairs of state, and the state doesn't interfere in religious affairs.

In the United Kingdom there are officially two state recognised Christian denominations – the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. The Queen is both head of state and Supreme Governor of the Church of England. There is no established church in Northern Ireland or Wales. But the 26 unelected bishops of the Church of England who sit in the House of Lords influence laws that affect the whole of the UK.

Christianity is one major influence among many that shape our current ways of life. We are a nation of many denominations and religions. Large sectors of the population do not hold, or practise, religious beliefs.

If Britain were truly a secular democracy, political structures would reflect the reality of changing times by separating religion from the state.

Secularism protects both believers and non-believers

Secularism seeks to ensure and protect freedom of religious belief and practice for all citizens. Secularists want freedoms of thought and conscience to apply equally to all – believers and non-believers alike. They do not wish to curtail religious freedoms.

Religious Freedom

Secularism seeks to defend the absolute freedom of religious and other belief, and protect the right to manifest religious belief insofar as it does not impinge on the rights and freedoms of others. Secularism ensures that the right of individuals to freedom of religion is always balanced by the right to be free *from* religion.

Secularism is about democracy and fairness

In a secular democracy all citizens are equal before the law and parliament. No religious or political affiliation gives advantages or disadvantages and religious believers are citizens with the same rights and obligations as anyone else.

Secularism champions universal human rights above religious demands. It upholds equality laws that protect women, LGBT people and minorities from religious discrimination. These equality laws ensure that non-believers have the same rights as those who identify with a religious or philosophical belief.

Equal access to public services

We all share hospitals, schools, the police and the services of local authorities. It is essential that these public services are secular at the point of use, so no-one is disadvantaged or denied access on grounds of religious belief (or non-belief). All state-funded schools should be non-religious in character, with children being educated together regardless of their parents' religion. When a public body grants a contract for the provision of services to an organisation affiliated to a particular religion or belief, such services must be delivered neutrally, with no attempt to promote the ideas of that faith group.

Secularism is not atheism

Atheism is a lack of belief in gods. Secularism simply provides a framework for a democratic society. Atheists have an obvious interest in supporting secularism, but secularism itself does not seek to challenge the tenets of any particular religion or belief, neither does it seek to impose atheism on anyone.

Secularism is simply a framework for ensuring equality throughout society – in politics, education, the law and elsewhere – for believers and non-believers alike.

Secularism protects free speech and expression

Religious people have the right to express their beliefs publicly but so do those who oppose or question those beliefs. Religious beliefs, ideas and organisations must not enjoy privileged protection from the right to freedom of expression. In a democracy, all ideas and beliefs must be open to discussion. Individuals have rights; ideas do not.

Secularism is the best chance we have to create a society in which people of all religions or none can live together fairly and peacefully.

[Watch our 90 second video on secularism.](#)

[Do you think religion is a personal matter for individuals and something that should never be imposed on people? Share this 90 second what is secularism explanation.](#)

[Click to tweet](#)

Secularism in quotes

A collection of quotes on the topic of secularism.

Democracy demands that the religiously motivated must translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific values. Their proposals must be subject to argument and reason, and should not be accorded any undue automatic respect.

President Barack Obama

See a [collection of quotes](#) on the topic of secularism.

Religious privilege

We believe that individuals/groups should neither be accorded privilege nor disadvantaged because of their religion, belief or non-belief.

Privilege is a key concept in modern sociology and social justice. The Oxford Dictionary [defines](#) privilege as: "A special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group."

Hierarchies of religious privilege may exist within different groups. For example, a religious leader could be a member of a marginalised group but exercise great control over their own group. Individuals/groups may experience the harm of other's religious privilege while experiencing the benefit of their own religious privilege. Individuals can be marginalised in other ways while still maintaining religious privilege. Religious privilege can act as a proxy for other forms of privilege including class, race or gender.

How we should respond to different forms or examples of privilege also differs. Some forms of privilege are clearly intolerable and must be responded to through changing or enforcing the law to better protect human rights. Some forms of privilege need to be responded to by changing social attitudes. And some vestiges of religious privilege we can expect to simply fall by the wayside.

When a group is accustomed to being privileged, or has incorporated an assumption of privilege into their sense of identity, then losing privileges can seem threatening. But many religious people realise that by rejecting privilege they gain more personal religious freedom.

Privilege blindness

Privilege blindness refers to being unaware of privilege because of being so accustomed to something being treated specially.

Privileged groups often views the imposition of their values as natural or normal. Because religious privilege is so normalised many people have difficulty identifying it. For example, someone who enjoys school prayer may not see the problem with it being imposed on others. Equally, someone who is never going to have to be singled out by withdrawing from compulsory school prayer may not see the problem with making a non-religious child have to opt out.

As the UK has become increasingly majority non-religious many forms of religious privilege have fallen by the wayside e.g. few people now seriously suggest atheists or non-Christians can't serve on juries. But others have continued, mainstream politicians still think accusing all atheists of being immoral is acceptable.

To get around privilege blindness we need empathy. If you are ok with one form of religion being imposed, imagine how you would feel if it was [another](#) religion or belief system.

Examples

Examples of religious privilege.

Not every example of religious privilege applies to everyone and not all forms of religious privilege are equally harmful. Believing that religion is a good thing or should be encouraged isn't privilege, but thinking it should have special entitlements is. Religious privilege can be applied to someone because of their professed or assumed religious belief or identity and is characterised the assumption or belief that:

- Religious belief or identity necessarily gives one special moral insight or expertise.
- Your religious activities or proselytizing are a public good and should receive special support or prominence in the public sphere.
- Members of your or other religious group should follow or give special consideration of your religious rules or customs.
- Your religious beliefs or rules should have special input into forming generally applicable laws or policies, either within your religious in-group or wider society.
- Your religious beliefs or identity should grant you special exemptions or alternatives to generally applicable laws or policies.
- Those with a higher religious status (e.g. 'community' or religious leaders) have a special ability to represent their group or society.
- Certain religious groups should have special credit for the actions of others/should be able to rewrite its history.
- Criticising your religious belief or identity should have some sort of societal taboo.
- Adults' religious views should prevail over any independent freedom of religion or belief or other rights of children.

Is Britain a 'Christian nation'?

Politicians often make this claim, but does it really mean anything?

While normally a platitude without any great meaning, this claim can come in a number of forms – descriptive and normative.

As a descriptive claim it is somewhat true. Christianity has been one of the principal cultural influences in the evolution of modern Britain. But its influence is neither unique nor absolute. It is true that Britain retains many vestiges of official state religion, but Christianity's influence in the civic life of the nation is declining and increasingly diffuse. Even taking all Christian denominations

together, Christianity is a minority religion in an increasingly diverse and non-religious nation. Even if Christianity were to recover to a majority position, there would be no reason to assume those Christians would want their nation to be based on or privilege any form of Christianity.

The claim could also be considered an example of a [deepity](#) in that to the extent that it is true it is trivial, and to the extent that it makes a meaningful claim it is either false or meaningless. Politicians making the claim are often using the (very loosely accurate) descriptive claim to sneak in the normative claim that Britain SHOULD be a Christian nation – whatever that means. This is then used to justify religious privileges in a 'just because' or a 'because I said so' way.

Politicians making this claim are normally arguing for Christianity to be given special treatment, for their own policy ideas, or against secularism. But as anyone can have their own version of Christianity, a Christian secularist could argue that a 'real Christian nation' would be a secular democracy with human rights for all, while a Christian theocrat could argue that a 'real Christian nation' would be the opposite.

When people claim that 'British values' are based on 'Christian principles', they are really only claiming that what they perceive to be (or think should be) British values are in line with what they perceive to be Christian values.

Privileged groups of all type try and claim exclusive or excessive credit for lots of things. The laws of the United Kingdom have evolved in a context where most people have been Christian and influenced by their own versions of Christianity. But as two High Court judges succinctly put it "The aphorism that "Christianity is part of the common law of England" is mere rhetoric."

Britain isn't a perfectly secular democracy, but neither are we a mono-faith theocracy. If we are to be a nation that welcomes and protects people of all faiths and none, we must continue along the path of secularism and pluralism, rather than harking back to an imagined Christian past.

While you're here

Secularism is a pretty simple concept, and most people are more or less secular-ish. A huge part of our work is countering the misconceptions, and deliberate misrepresentations, of Secularism. You can help this work by sharing this page or supporting the Society.

- [Donate](#)
- [Join](#)