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SECULARISM

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“A SECULAR SOCIETY
SHOULD NOT
PREVENT PEOPLE
FROM ACTING ON
THEIR RELIGIOUS
BELIEFS”**

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In the past few generations, Britain - like much of Europe - has undergone a process of 'secularisation' [Ref: Encyclopedia.com]. While it was once a largely Christian country, church membership and attendances have fallen steadily, and people now tend to see religion as a matter of individual choice rather than public morality or political import. At the same time, immigration has brought significant numbers of Muslims, Hindus and other religious communities into the country, making religion a marker of group identity rather than something that binds the nation together [Ref: Evening Standard]. In this context, some worry there is a lack of public affirmation or even support for the 'secular liberal' values that underlie mainstream politics and culture today, and in recent months such concerns have come to the fore. The Equality Act, which received Royal Assent in April [Ref: ePolitix]; the case of Gary Macfarlane, the sex therapist sacked after he refused to advise gay couples on the grounds of religious conscience [Ref: BBC News]; the Pope's pronouncement that equality legislation is contrary to natural law [Ref: BBC News], and the Belgium Parliament's banning of the burqa in public places have all contrived to make the debate about religious freedom and its place within a secular society a deeply important one. In particular, discussions that preceded the passing of the Equality Bill in April saw profound disagreement on the question of whether religious groups and individuals should be exempt from equality legislation that would otherwise require them to go against their religious beliefs. Some argued that the principle of equality must come first and be applied universally, but others insist faith groups should be free to act on their beliefs even if others disapprove. Some Christians as well as Muslims protest that a 'militant' secularism makes society increasingly hostile to religious belief, and arguments rage about religious attitudes and practices, from wearing particular symbols to educating children in 'faith schools' [Ref: Guardian]. So should the state compel people to conform with secular values they do not share?



SECULARISM:

"A secular society should not prevent people from acting on their religious beliefs"



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THE SECULARISM DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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What is a secular society?

A secular society is one in which the state and official bodies are neutral with respect to religion, and religious belief is a matter for individuals, families and self-selecting communities rather than the whole society as such. Although the Church of England is 'established' – officially part of the state – Britain is generally considered to be a secular society because its citizens hold many different faiths and none, and religion does not have a prominent role in public life [Ref: [University of Botswana](#)]. By way of comparison, France is a more strictly secular society [Ref: [BBC News](#)], and the USA is secular in that there is a constitutional separation of church and state [Ref: [Religioustolerance.org](#)], but Christianity is a prominent part of the culture and the US is therefore often considered less secular than the UK [Ref: [Social Affairs Unit](#)]. Secularism should not be confused with atheism, however, as individuals in a secular society can still be religious. [Ref: [BBC](#)]

Is secularism in conflict with religion?

Religion is sometimes controversial in secular societies. In France, the government has banned the wearing of Muslim headscarves or any other 'religious symbols' in state schools [Ref: [BBC News](#)], and some have called for a similar law in the UK, where there has also been controversy about Christian and other religious symbols at school or at work [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Some advocates of secularism worry that faith groups are pushing their beliefs on the rest of society, and argue that religion has no place in public life [Ref: [National Secular Society](#)], but others argue that such symbols are harmless and people should be free to express their beliefs [Ref: [The Samosa](#)]. What

is at stake is not just whether people should be allowed to wear particular symbols, but what kind of society we live in. Britain is often described as a 'multicultural' society, but there is disagreement about whether the celebration of diversity should extend to beliefs and values, or whether everyone should subscribe to core, 'secular liberal' values [Ref: [BBC News](#)].

Religious exemptions from equality legislation

One particularly controversial question is whether religious groups and individuals should be exempt from rules against discrimination, a debate that caused considerable disagreement in the passing of the Equality Bill [Ref: [Equalities Office](#)]. In general employers are not allowed to discriminate on the grounds of religion, but religious groups can insist that applicants for specifically religious jobs, like being a priest, are of the appropriate faith [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. More controversial was the question of whether such institutions should be allowed to discriminate when it comes to other jobs, like cleaners or accountants, and in particular teachers in faith schools. In the original proposal for the bill, government were pushing to narrow the freedom of religious institutions to have employment rules in line with their teachings, but eventually conceded following amendments proposed by the House of Lords. Most controversial of all was whether religious institutions should be allowed to discriminate against gays and lesbians, not just when employing people, but when providing services on the grounds that their religious teachings condemn homosexuality [Ref: [Pink News](#)].



Beyond the letter of the law, some have expressed disquiet at what has been deemed a growing 'climate of intolerance' towards religious belief. Most recently there was an outcry amongst the liberal press when Conservative MP Chris Grayling suggested that Christian B&B owners should be allowed to act upon their conscience over giving double beds to same-sex couples, a reaction that some lambasted as 'hysterical' [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. Similarly there have been a number of cases where religious individuals have declined to do certain aspects of their jobs, such as a registrar Lillian Ladele who refuses to perform same-sex civil partnerships, and have been sacked as a consequence [Ref: [Christian Institute](#)]. Whilst the Act will allow for religious exemptions some have voiced concern at its wider repercussions. For example, many more have expressed unease at the lack of cultural support for the universal political principles of freedom of conscience and freedom of association, reflected throughout this debate in recent months [Ref: [spiked](#)].

Tolerance of intolerance?

The question of religious exemptions, or 'conscience clauses', involves a clash of values [Ref: [Christian Institute](#)]. On the one hand, equality legislation is meant to ensure that individuals do not suffer discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality, or indeed religion. On the other, in a secular society it is generally held that people are entitled to believe whatever they like, and should not be compelled to go against those beliefs. Some people even argue that coercive equality legislation is fundamentally unjust and undemocratic [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Equality, they argue, is something that is achieved by the political struggles that take place within society, not by

government legislation. More generally, supporters of religious exemptions insist that the conscience of the individual must be respected [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], but critics object that religious belief should not be a special case: after all racists are not allowed to discriminate against ethnic minorities in the name of their 'conscience' [Ref: [Ekklesia](#)]. In part, then, this is a debate about what constitutes a legitimate belief: should religious beliefs be protected in a way that other beliefs are not, perhaps on the grounds that religion is a wider social good? Or does the state have a responsibility to ensure equal treatment whatever people's reasons for discriminating?



ESSENTIAL READING

The Big Question: What is equality legislation and why is the Pope so concerned about it?

Andy McSmith *Independent* 3 February 2010

The Question: Does faith trump equality?

Guardian 1 February 2010

FOR

A little bit of religious bigotry is tolerable in a healthy society

Henry Porter *Observer* 2 May 2010

The pope is right about the threat to freedom

Jonathan Sacks *The Times* 3 February 2010

On the Equality Bill, the pope has a point

Tim Black *spiked* 3 February 2010

The crusade against faith schools is an attack on our freedom

Benedict Brogan *Daily Telegraph* 14 January 2010

Religious freedom is under attack in Britain

Neil Addison *Catholic Herald* 12 June 2009

AGAINST

All of us deserve equality

Martin Pendergast *Guardian* 2 February 2010

Pope Benedict XVI misses the point in his attack on UK equality law

Ruth Gledhill *The Times* 1 February 2010

Let's fight the church on equality

Terry Sanderson *Guardian* 26 January 2010

Services must stay secular

Andrew Copson *Guardian* 5 December 2007

Believers are away with the fairies

A C Grayling *Telegraph* 26 March 2007

IN DEPTH

The religious lobby and women's rights

Rahila Gupta *openDemocracy* 19 April 2010

Liberty is equality's intractable opposite

Julian Glover *Guardian* 24 February 2010

Why this ruling should make us cross

Neil Addison *spiked* 21 December 2009

Britain could never debate the burka like France

Agnes Poirier *The Times* 24 June 2009

On neutral ground

Paul Kelly *New Humanist* July 2008

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BACKGROUNDEERS

The Equality Bill is a license to discriminate
Jan Davies *Social Affairs Unit* 3 March 2010

Comparing US and UK Courts' Approaches to Racial and Religious Preferences
Vikram David Amar and Alan Brownstein *FindLaw* 15 January 2010

Is Islamophobia real?
Andrew Brown *Guardian* 12 January 2010

Archbishop of York Would Not Qualify as Clergy under Labour's Equality Bill
LifeSiteNews 7 January 2010

Equality Bill could increase squeeze on UK Christians
Christian Institute 5 January 2010

What the new Equality Bill means for employers
BBC News 23 December 2009

Atheism is the new fundamentalism
Intelligence Squared 29 November 2009

The Impact of Faith Schools on Teachers
Keith Porteous Wood *National Secular Society* 1 November 2009

British Humanist Association Briefing: Clause 61, Coroners and Justice Bill
British Humanist Association 7 July 2009

UK Parliamentary seminar examines religious freedom
One Country July 2009

Institute of Ideas secularism debates
Institute of Ideas 2008

School and religious symbol cases
BBC News 29 July 2008

Myth-busting: The Equality Bill and Religion Explaining the Equality Act 2010
Government Equalities Office

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ORGANISATIONS

- Accord Coalition for inclusive schools
- British Humanist Association
- Equality and Human Rights Commission
- Liberty
- Muslim Council of Britain
- National Secular Society
- The Christian Institute



IN THE NEWS

Church's call for religious judges is rejected by Court of Appeal
Independent 30 April 2010

Christian sex therapist Gary McFarlane loses appeal bid
BBC News 29 April 2010

Harman's Equality Bill passes in Parliament
Christian Institute 9 April 2010

Grayling suggests B&Bs should be able to bar gay guests
BBC News 4 April 2010

Judges fuelling fears over Christian's unfair treatment
Telegraph 3 April 2010

Christian BA worker appeals against cross ruling
BBC News 19 January 2010

UKIP woos white working class with call for total ban on burkas
The Times 16 January 2010

Equality Bill 'dangerously' trying to force religious belief behind closed doors, bishops warn

Daily Telegraph 15 January 2010

Teacher suspended in prayer row
BBC News 20 December 2009

Jewish school loses appeal
Guardian 16 December 2009

Court rejects appeal in Christian registrar case
Christian Institute 15 December 2009

Coalition opposes wide religious exemptions from the Equality Bill
Ekklesia 14 December 2009

Exemptions allowing churches to refuse to employ gays to be scrapped following pressure from EU

Pink News 22 November 2009

Decision that belief in climate change is protected by discrimination legislation is upheld

Human Resources 9 November 2009

Shock as head quits to remarry
Star (South Yorkshire) 22 July 2009

Nurse suspended for prayer offer
BBC News 1 February 2009

RC Fireman wins 'landmark' case
Christian Institute 20 January 2009

Religion now more divisive than race, says public
Evening Standard 20 January 2009

Worker loses case against store
BBC News 28 October 2008

Sikh girl wins bangle law battle
BBC News 29 July 2008

Woman loses fight to wear cross
BBC News 20 November 2006

'Chastity ring' girl loses case
BBC News 16 July 2006

Smacking ban challenge rejected
BBC News 24 February 2005

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