

**AUGUST 2015**

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**RELIGIOUS  
BELIEFS**

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**NADIA BUTT**



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**DEBATING MATTERS**  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

**MOTION:**

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

## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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# CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Key terms**

**The religious beliefs debate in context**

**Essential reading**

**Backgrounders**

**Audio/Visual**

**In the news**

## KEY TERMS

[laïcité](#)

[Secularism](#)

# INTRODUCTION

**1 of 6**

# NOTES

**1** British society looks very different to what it did half a century ago.

**1** Once considered a ‘Christian country’, Britain is now undergoing a process of ‘secularisation’ [Ref: [National Secular Society](#)]. Church attendance has halved in the last 30 years to 1.5% of English

**2** residents [Ref: [Church Times](#)], and increasing immigration has led to a flourishing of other religious communities including Hindu,

**4** Jewish and Islamic. That’s not to say that the number of people holding religious beliefs has declined, rather, the state and society’s

**5** identification with the Church of England has weakened, and been

**6** replaced with ‘liberal’ values such as tolerance and equality. In light of this, the high profile ‘Gay cake’ incident brought the potential

**6** clash between religious conscience and secular values into the headlines this year [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. A court ruled that Ashers Baking Company in Northern Ireland discriminated against homosexuals by refusing to make a cake with a pro-gay marriage slogan - opinion was divided about whether it was a triumph for equality, or a blow to freedom of religious conscience [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. This incident is one of many – with the scope of controversies surrounding religion and secular society ranging from adorning religious clothing/ symbols [Ref: [New York Times](#)], banning kosher and halal meat [Ref: [Time](#)], preventing gay couples from adopting [Ref: [BBC News](#)], and educating children in faith schools [Ref: [Catholic Herald](#)]. Advocates of secular values have insisted that equality should come first – it’s an “all or nothing concept” [Ref: [Rights NI](#)], but others argue that in a supposedly tolerant society, religious groups should be free to act on their beliefs, even if the rest of society disapproves. More pertinently, would exemptions from equality legislation be acceptable if the legislation goes against an individual’s moral conscience? Should the state compel people to conform to secular values that they don’t share?



# THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS DEBATE IN CONTEXT

2 of 6

NOTES

## What is secular society?

A secular society is one in which there is a separation of religion from the state, insofar as its official bodies are neutral to religion and it doesn't promote one religion over another [Ref: [National Secular Society](#)]. The most commonly cited example of a secular state is France which officially observes laïcité, the absence of involvement of government in religious affairs [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. The USA constitutionally promotes the separation of state and church, but in reality, is arguably a deeply Christian country. A secular state's legislation may not promote any one religion over another, but is this "aggressive" secularism, as one critic calls it, contributing to the persecution of those with religious convictions [Ref: [Guardian](#)]? As secular and liberal values appear to hold sway in Britain, are social powers playing a coercive role in preventing individuals from acting on their religious beliefs, automatically labelling anyone who fails to conform to the 'established liberal norms' a bigot or 'backward'?

## Whose rights?

Does a limit to freedom of religion exist, particularly within the workplace or in public? If it does, where do you draw that line between freedom of conscience and equality legislation? Recently in Indiana the Religious Freedom Restoration Act was signed into law to prevent the state and local government from actually or potentially "substantially burdening" a person's exercise of freedom of religion [Ref: [USA Today](#)]. In Northern Ireland there have been attempts at a 'Freedom of Conscience' bill that would mean individuals would be exempt from "Endorsing, promoting and facilitating behaviour or beliefs

which conflict with their strongly held religious convictions" [Ref: [Equality Commission NI](#)]. Both of these have attracted considerable attention on both sides of the debate. Some argue that for freedom of conscience to be meaningful, society has to have a level of tolerance for religious thought and action [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Although acknowledging the difficulties of reconciling religious thought in a secular age, writer Tim Stanley notes that culturally, Western Europe does not respect religion, and its "audacity to be different – its refusal to bend to fashion". And suggests that: "The problem with a lot of debates about faith schools, conflicts over sexuality and abortion, or debates about religious dress, is that a lot of citizens don't get where the religious folk are coming from, and frankly, don't care." [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] However, others have insisted that religious views should not be considered special grounds for discrimination any more than any other beliefs - otherwise, by the same logic, we should give special exemptions to racists to discriminate against certain ethnic groups in line with their moral conscience [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. 'Cakegate' has brought freedom of conscience into context: Was it an act of discrimination against the gay couple, because of their sexual orientation? Or have the bakery owners been discriminated against because they weren't allowed act on their religious and moral conscience? Whose rights matter most – the religious or the secular?

## Tolerating the intolerant

Traditionally, secular societies are open to difference in accepting people of all genders, sexual orientations and races, tolerating a variety of religious opinion - but what happens when religious believers defy secular liberal convention by disagreeing with this



## THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

3 of 6

NOTES

definition? In France for instance, it is against the law for women to wear a full face veil [Ref: [CNN](#)], as part of “an unapologetic effort to keep religious expression private” [Ref: [Economist](#)]. This, publicly at least, challenges the ability of individuals to express their religious beliefs, and supporters claim that this creates an atmosphere of “sophisticated tolerance” which Britain could learn from [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. In this context, critics argue that legislating against religious conscience runs the risk of creating a divide between those supporting an official set of liberal sanctioned beliefs, and others holding “backward” religious beliefs which the state prosecutes you for acting on [Ref: [spiked](#)]. They go on to argue that secular society is then transformed into a ‘liberal’ and politically correct tyranny of the majority, embodied in legislation and wider society, intolerant of the ‘intolerant’ - with one commentator observing that: “If freedom of conscience, the right to follow one’s own beliefs in matters of religion and morality means anything, people have to be able to act on their beliefs as they see fit.” [Ref: [spiked](#)] It’s also suggested that as a liberal society, we should be working to provide an inclusive space for all, not shunning those whose values differ from the “enlightened... post-traditional elite” [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. However, in the end, do we risk making a mockery of secular values if we make too many concessions to religious conscience? And if religious exemptions are the solution, from what exactly can believers be exempt in order for them to live with free and clear consciences - exemption from officiating in same-sex marriages [Ref: [Forbes](#)], or at the most extreme end of the spectrum, exemption from murder charges for killing someone who depicts the Prophet Mohammed [Ref: [Washington Post](#)]? Where do we draw the line? Should a secular society prevent people from acting on their religious beliefs – and if so, what broader effect does this have on tolerance?



## ESSENTIAL READING

4 of 6

NOTES

### FOR

[Ireland's 'tolerant' elite now demonise anyone who opposes gay marriage](#)

Brendan O'Neill *Spectator* 19 May 2015

[Charlie Hebdo: secularism is not the solution but the problem](#)

Tim Stanley *Telegraph* 9 January 2015

[Gay cake: why we should be free to bake what we want](#)

Jason Smith *spiked* 11 July 2014

[Cakegate leaves a funny taste. Is this really the way for gay campaigners to fight for tolerance?](#)

Janet Street Porter *Independent* 11 July 2014

### AGAINST

[What the 'religious freedom' argument against marriage equality really means](#)

Rodney Croome *Guardian* 16 July 2015

[The 'gay cake' ruling is a victory for equality in Northern Ireland](#)

Joshua Rozenberg *Guardian* 20 May 2015

[Rights come before religious freedom for secular business](#)

Wendy Kaminer *spiked* 7 April 2015

[Why equality doesn't need a conscience](#)

Kevin Hearty *Rights NI* 9 February 2015



## BACKGROUNDEERS

[Make them bake cakes? The gay marriage cause goes too far](#)

Jacob Sullum *New York Post* 18 August 2015

[The plot to eradicate faith schools](#)

Quentin de la Bedoyere *Catholic Herald* 30 July 2015

[Will IRS force gay marriage on conservative churches?](#)

Peter J. Reilly *Forbes* 9 July 2015

[Will the burqa be banned in Berlin?](#)

Anna Sauerbrey *New York Times* 6 July 2015

[Marriage equality Vs. religious freedom: ready, set, go!](#)

Jennifer Knapp *Huffington Post* 29 June 2015

[The moral of the gay wedding cake row: the law can't create tolerance](#)

Simon Jenkins *Guardian* 20 May 2015

[Will Ireland make history and vote for same sex marriage?](#)

Aoife Moriarty *New Statesman* 20 May 2015

[The gay cake ruling could lead to even more discrimination](#)

Padraig Reidy *Telegraph* 19 May 2015

[What makes Indiana's Religious-Freedom law different?](#)

Garrett Epps *Atlantic* 30 March 2015

[We cannot avoid the battle over blasphemy](#)

Michael Nazir-Ali *Standpoint* March 2015

[Response to Private Members Bill on Freedom of Conscience Bill](#)

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland February 2015

[France's much vaunted secularism is not the neutral space it claims to be](#)

Giles Fraser *Guardian* 16 January 2015

5 of 6

NOTES

[Down with Laicite – to beat Islam we need a secularism that encourages religion](#)

Ed Husain & Peter Welby *Spectator* 16 January 2015

[France's Burqa ban is a victory for tolerance](#)

William Langley *Telegraph* 21 October 2014

[Why the French are so strict about religious coverings](#)

*Economist* 6 July 2014

[Religious exemptions – a guide for the confused](#)

Eugene Volokh *Washington Post* 24 March 2014

[Should Christian bakers be allowed to refuse wedding cakes to gays?](#)

Conor Friedersdorf *Atlantic* 25 February 2014

[Aggressive secularisation: the new tyranny](#)

Dean Burnett *Guardian* 30 March 2013

[This equality obsession is mad, bad and very dangerous](#)

Charles Moore *Telegraph* 1 February 2013



## IN THE NEWS

[Conservative Christians are still fighting gay marriage, but it's an uphill battle against the court](#)  
*Huffington Post* 19 August 2015

[Denmark bans Kosher and Halal animal slaughter](#)  
*Time Magazine* 28 July 2015

[States weigh gay marriage, rights and cake](#)  
*New York Times* 7 July 2015

[Patrick Stewart backs baker in 'gay cake' court battle](#)  
*Independent* 5 June 2015

[Colorado baker cannot refuse wedding cake for gay couples, commission rules](#)  
*Guardian* 30 May 2015

[Gay cake row: Judge rules against bakery](#)  
*BBC News* 19 May 2015

[Indiana House ok's controversial religious freedom bill](#)  
*USA Today* 23 March 2015

[Catholic Church cuts links with adoption service over same sex ruling](#)  
*BBC News* 5 December 2014

[Church of England attendance statistics slope still points downwards](#)  
*Church Times* 14 November 2014

[Ashers Baking Company: 'Gay cake row' could end up in court](#)  
*BBC News* 8 July 2014

[French Senate approves Burqa ban](#)  
*CNN* 15 September 2010

[Official figures show that Britain is rapidly secularising](#)  
*National Secular Society* 15 January 2010

6 of 6

NOTES

## AUDIO/VISUAL

[The Gay Cake affair](#)  
*BBC Radio 4* 23 March 2015

[MORAL MAZE: Gay marriage](#)  
*BBC Radio 4* 17 March 2012

[MORAL MAZE: Conflict between religious belief and human rights law](#)  
*BBC Radio 4* 29 January 2011





## ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

### FOR STUDENTS

#### READ EVERYTHING .....

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

#### STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

#### BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

#### DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

#### DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

### FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, [www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

### FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX  
WORLD REQUIRES  
THE CAPACITY  
TO MARSHALL  
CHALLENGING IDEAS  
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH  
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**