

1.08 How do secularists think about decisions? (Part 3) – You’re the town council

BACKGROUND	This stimulus and exercise take three simplified fictional examples involving religion and politics, designed to get students thinking about the application of basic secularist principles –explored in previous resources or introduced here – and their view on them. Students consider how in a democratic society people of different religions or beliefs can come together to make fair decisions.
SUBJECTS	Politics Religion & Belief Education Citizenship SMSC
KEY QUESTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do secularists think about decisions? • What are religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?
LEARNING OUTCOMES	<p>Basic</p> <p>Students should demonstrate they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand how a range of viewpoints are informed by how people think about decisions involving religion and the rights of others. • Categorise, compare and contrast these viewpoints with their own. <p>Advanced</p> <p>In addition to the basic learning outcomes, students should demonstrate they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critically reflect on how a range of viewpoints are informed by how people think about decisions involving religion and the rights of others. • Extrapolate how secularist and non-secularist reasoning impacts other decisions involving religion and the rights of others.
LINKS	Resource page: ExploringSecularism.org/108-how-do-secularists-think-abo
STIMULUS	<p><i>Stimulus #1 (An introduction to Bradlaughton)</i></p> <p>The town of Bradlaughton has several major religious groups. Bradlaughtonians generally get on well together, but in the past there has been conflict with some in the various groups wanting the town run along their religious views. The town council want everyone to be able to live, work and participate in Bradlaughton without anyone’s religion being imposed or restricted. There are three contentious issues on the agenda of tonight’s meeting involving religion and the town. Each of the votes have been tied 3 vs 3. You have been asked to cast the deciding votes.</p> <p>Listen to the arguments of your fellow councillors, decide if they are secularist or not, which you agree with, and how you’ll vote.</p> <p><i>Stimulus #2 (Agenda items)</i></p> <p>Agenda item 1: Speed limits</p> <p>The Church of the One True Speed (COTS) has a large number of followers in Bradlaughton. They believe one of their gods wants everyone to drive at 26.5 mph and have led a long campaign for the speed limits in the town to be changed. They have produced a report arguing for the health and safety benefits of the 26.5 mph speed. The vote is “yes” to change the limit or “no” to keep it the same.</p> <p>The councillors’ viewpoints</p> <p>Councillor Scarlet (votes yes): “I am not a member of the Church of the One True Speed, but the COTS have been involved in our town for a long time, they are the largest religious group in Bradlaughton and are very active in charity activities. It would be undemocratic not to set the speed limit to 26.5 mph as they ask.”</p> <p>Councillor Mustard (votes yes): “I don’t have much time for the Church of the One True Speed, but this argument isn’t about their religious beliefs. The report we’ve heard about doesn’t make any purely religious arguments. It is concerned with health and safety and makes a secular argument for a 26.5 mph speed limit.”</p> <p>Councillor White (votes yes): “I am a long-standing member of the Church of the One True Speed. To say that we can’t drive at the speed God intended is an attack on our religious freedom. As our prophet clearly said, ‘sinners drive their automobiles at 20 mph, though the righteous speed at 26.5’. Don’t force us into sin.”</p>

Councillor Green (votes no): “I have tried to set my membership of the Church of the One True Speed aside, though it does inform my morality. I feel it is wrong to force my beliefs on others without a good reason. The prophet’s words on driving speed are open to interpretation and could be speaking of a metaphorical speed. In any case I don’t think it is the town council’s job to legislate against sin.”

Councillor Peacock (votes no): “I take issue with the report really being a religiously neutral argument. Although it tries dressing up the arguments for a 26.5 mph speed limit in language about health and safety, the underlying arguments are all basically religious. Investigators not coming from a religious perspective agree that 26.5 mph is far too fast and unsafe for a town like Bradlaughton.”

Councillor Plum (votes no): “The reason we shouldn’t make the speed limit 26.5 mph is because it is supported by the Church of the One True Speed, whose religion was stated by the fraudster Speedy Gonzales when he was caught driving over the limit. Obviously, the speed limit should be 20 mph; all other religions agree on that.”

Agenda item 2: School teaching

The Temple of Teifi are a small group in the town of Bradlaughton, whose members have a history of being discriminated against. One of their theological beliefs is that the moon is made of Teifi cheese and that they will one day travel there to share the bounty among all humankind. For both observing and non-observing members of the Temple, Teifi cheese has an important role in social gatherings and ceremonies. Representatives of the Temple have argued for the “Teifi Theory” to be taught alongside the theory that the moon is made of rock in science classes. Vote “yes” to teach this alternative theory or vote “no” to keep things as they are.

The councillors’ viewpoints

Councillor Scarlet (votes yes): “The Temple of Teifi are a marginalised group; we shouldn’t be further marginalising them by unfairly excluding their theory of the moon from science classes. To exclude their belief simply because it is religious is to privilege the majority’s view of what should and should not be taught.”

Councillor Mustard (votes yes): “As a member of the Temple of Teifi’s science committee I have studied the real scientific evidence on the moon and can indeed confirm it is made of cheese. The atheistic bias towards liking rocks explains their misconstruing the evidence to argue for their theory. Let the students learn both ideas and make up their own minds.”

Councillor White (votes no): “The Temple of Teifi just want their ridiculous moon theory taught so they can promote their foreign ideology of excessive cheese eating. This will undermine the moral fabric of our town.”

Councillor Green (votes yes): “The division between science and religion is put up by those that want to drive religion out of society. If we start saying that the Temple can’t have their views taught in schools, then they might be forced out of schools along with everyone else that wants to practise their religion. The moon being made of cheese is true for children from Temple families.”

Councillor Peacock (votes no): “Many cultures and religious groups have their own myths about how the moon was formed, and it is right that these should be covered in RE lessons, but these are not science and we shouldn’t give in to religious demands for their beliefs to be taught as if they were.”

Councillor Plum (votes no): “Schools should absolutely not teach anything about the moon being made of cheese as it is clearly false. Furthermore, schools should actively teach how harmful this nonsense is and the Temple of Teifi’s after-school class should be shut down if they continue to teach this cheesy claptrap.”

Agenda item 3: Birthdays

The Church of Birthdays believes in rebirth and that everyone should celebrate every day as their birthday. You can’t enter the church without a birthday hat on and some followers insist on only eating birthday cake. They want to make birthday hats a mandatory part of the school uniform. Vote “yes” to make this change; vote “no” to oppose it.

The councillors' viewpoints

Councillor Scarlet (votes no): "I am a member of the Church of Birthdays and practise it in my own way. I don't need church elders or the town council telling me what to wear to show I am living a moral life according to the teachings of my faith."

Councillor Mustard (votes no): "In the Temple of Teifi we celebrate birthdays with cheese on toast. I don't want another religion being forced on our children. We should ban birthday hats completely from public places."

Councillor White (votes yes): "Religious freedom means that sometimes accommodations have to be made; as long as these do not burden the running of the school, or harm the rights of others then they should be made."

Councillor Green (votes no): "I always wear a birthday hat when visiting their church out of respect, but that's their space where they get to decide the rules. A school needs to be inclusive for everyone with the rules based on common principles."

Councillor Peacock (votes yes): "No matter your religion or belief, there are good reasons to make birthday hats part of the school uniform that are entirely unrelated to their religious significance."

Councillor Plum (votes yes): "I'm not a member of the Church, but I really like birthdays. They're my happiest day of the year and if they make people happier then why not make them part of the school uniform?"

Stimulus #3 (A secularist viewpoint)

A secularist viewpoint (Agenda item 1: Speed limits)

Councillor Scarlet's viewpoint could be seen as secularist as they are not arguing on religious grounds but are making a majority argument. However, it isn't very secularist to argue that just because a big religion says something it should get its way, we don't know that all members of the Church support this belief, and we don't know what effect it will have on other people's rights. **Councillor Mustard** is making a secularist argument because they are saying the decision should be based on the evidence, not on the religious beliefs or identities of different people. **Councillor White** is definitely not making a secularist argument because their argument is based just on their religious beliefs. These may be okay for them, but what about others who don't share these beliefs? **Councillor Green** seems to be making a secularist argument; they have their beliefs but draw a line between religious rules they follow and rules that everyone should follow. Our personal beliefs inform our morality and how we look at all sorts of questions. But can we really look beyond our own personal views? **Councillor Peacock** is making a secularist argument very similar to **Councillor Mustard's**. But they disagree over whether the evidence really does justify the new speed limit, or whether the evidence is being twisted to suit someone's pre-existing belief. **Councillor Plum's** argument doesn't seem very secularist; they are making their view of the religion the core of the argument. Should the town council be in the business of arguing about religious beliefs? Is arguing that a religious belief is wrong different from saying that it should be set aside to focus on secular (not related to religion) arguments?

A secularist viewpoint (Agenda item 2: School teaching)

Councillor Scarlet's view isn't very secular. Secularists seek to include all groups including marginalised groups by making sure they have the same rights, not by treating their beliefs as special. If the Temple's view was being excluded because it was religious that wouldn't be secularist, but in reality, it is being excluded from a science class because it isn't scientific, and those arguing for its inclusion are doing so because it is religious. **Councillor Mustard** seems to be making a secular argument claiming to be based on science, not religion. But is this really the case? **Councillor White** isn't making a secularist argument as their opposition to the cheese theory being taught is based on who is proposing it and their religious identity. **Councillor Green** isn't making a very secular argument as they're saying religious views should be taught because they are religious. Green's view also assumes that members of the Temple and children from Temple backgrounds will share the same views. **Councillor Peacock** is making a secular argument as they are treating different religious ideas equally but saying they shouldn't be given any special weight, such as being equated with scientific ideas. **Councillor Plum's** views are complicated; they don't want a false belief being taught in science classes, but should schools actively challenge religious beliefs, and what about religious organisations teaching about their own beliefs?

A secularist viewpoint (Agenda item 3: Birthdays)

Councillor Scarlet is making a secularist argument. When the demands of religious leaders are privileged it can shut down debate and disagreement within that religion. **Councillor Mustard**'s argument is mixed. Not wanting a religion forced on you is very secularist but wanting religious practices that don't harm you or others banned, isn't. **Councillor White**'s argument is also complicated; different secularists might disagree over the extent to which accommodations need to be made to balance freedom of and from religion, but they don't acknowledge the difference between an optional accommodation and the compulsory uniform. **Councillor Green** is making a classic secularist argument based on the idea that groups should be able to set their own internal rules but not force them on others. **Councillor Peacock**'s argument is complicated; it seems to be secularist in that it seems to apply to everyone equally regardless of their religious belief, but they don't provide any detail to justify this. **Councillor Plum**'s argument is complicated; it isn't based on religion, but they seem to be arguing on the basis of what they'd personally like, rather than why this should apply to everyone else.

EXERCISE

- **Review Stimulus #1 (An introduction to Bradlaughton).** Read the introduction to the class before splitting into groups, each to go over one or two of the examples (Agenda items) depending on time.
- Groups **review Stimulus #2 (Agenda items).**
- Instruct the groups to discuss their example(s) and the first four questions.
- **Q1.** Are each of the Councillor's arguments secularist or not?
- **Q2.** Why or why not?
- **Q3.** How would you cast the deciding vote?
- **Q4.** Why?
- Ensure sufficient time is left for feedback and discussion.
- Give students the secularist viewpoint handout and give the groups time to discuss the final questions.
- Groups **review Stimulus #3 (A secularist viewpoint).**
- **Q5.** Does the secularist viewpoint change your view on either the best way to vote, or the views of the Councillors?
- **Q6.** Why or why not?
- If there is time, you can conduct a final class vote on each of the examples.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Create your own decision for Bradlaughton Town Council. Write the background and think of a range of both secularist and non-secularist arguments for the councillors to make.
- Create a short roleplay to act out one of the discussions or your own example.
- Write a news story for the *Bradlaughton Gazette* covering the events above. It should feature quotes from the different councillors and residents.