

Lesson Plan – Exploring Secularism

KS4 lesson 1 What is Secularism?

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| Background | <p>This lesson looks in more depth at the secular principles of separation, freedom and equality.</p> <p>Students unpick seven statements about the key principles of secularism which helps them develop a deeper understanding of what secularism is, and importantly, what secularism isn't.</p> |
| Subjects | Religious Education Citizenship |
| Curriculum Links/objectives | <p>From the AQA Religious Education GCSE Specification - students should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• develop their knowledge and understanding of religions and non-religious beliefs, such as atheism and humanism• develop their ability to construct well-argued, well-informed, balanced and structured written arguments, demonstrating their depth and breadth of understanding of the subject• reflect on and develop their own values, belief, meaning, purpose, truth and their influence on human life• reflect on and develop their own values, beliefs and attitudes in the light of what they have learnt and contribute to their preparation for adult life in a pluralistic society and global community. |
| Key Question | What is Secularism? |
| Learning Outcomes | <p>Expected:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I can explain the key principles of secularism</i>• <i>I can explain how secularism might benefit all stakeholders in a pluralistic society.</i> <p>Greater Depth:</p> <p>In addition to the above,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I can explain my own beliefs about the principles of secularism and give real life examples.</i> |
| Links to previous learning at KS3 | In the equivalent lesson at KS3 students study at a range of viewpoints that explore the three main principles of secularism. |

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| | <p>Before this lesson, elicit the students' existing knowledge and revise if necessary.</p> <p>The principles of secularism are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">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. |
| Stimulus | <p>Discuss the following statement with the students:</p> <p>'Secularism ensures religious groups don't interfere in affairs of state, and the state doesn't interfere in religious affairs.'</p> <p>A key principle of secularism is that religion and government should function as separate entities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Ask students to come up with ideas about why this separation of religion and state might be a beneficial approach for government in a modern, pluralistic society.</i>• <i>What problems could be caused by the state and religion being allied?</i>• <i>Can they think of any reasons why people with certain beliefs or specific groups might disagree with the separation of religion and state?</i> <p>When you think of a Bishop, you probably think of a man (or woman) saying prayers in a church, not being involved in the laws that govern all of us. But there are Bishops today who sit in the House of Lords with an automatic right to vote on the Lords which affect us all.</p> <p>Due to historical links between the Church of England and Parliament, dating back to the 14th Century, there are 26 unelected Bishops who are automatically given seats in the House of Lords.</p> <p>The House of Lords still has real power in the UK and can delay Bills and force the Commons to reconsider their decisions.</p> |

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| | <p>Questions to discuss and respond to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Can the 26 Bishops belonging to the Church of England (The Lords Spiritual) effectively represent the beliefs and opinions of the Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, Humanists or the many other beliefs/non-beliefs of the UK?</i>• <i>How might this over-representation of one specific form of Christianity influence decisions made in the House of Lords?</i>• <i>Do religious organisations tend to have any particular beliefs that might disadvantage certain sectors of society? Can you give any examples?</i>• <i>Can you think of any justification for the continuation of the Bishop's Bench in 21st Century Britain?</i> |
| Exercise | <p>Let the students read through, discuss and take notes on each of the 7 paragraphs. When they have discussed each one, stop and let them feedback on the question prompts for each paragraph.</p> <p>1. Separation of religion from state</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>The British monarch, as well as being Head of State, also holds the title 'Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England'. Under current laws, the monarch is required to "join in communion" with the Church of England and take on the role of Supreme Governor, promoting Anglicanism in Britain.</p> |

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Q) In the UK, the position of head of state is reserved for members of The Church of England only. In modern, multi-cultural and multi-faith Britain, should the monarch be free to follow their own personal faith or no faith at all?

Q) If the monarch is officially aligned to, and responsible for advancing the Church of England's interests, can he/she effectively represent everyone in one of the least religious and most religiously diverse countries in the world?

2. 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.

Q) What could be the benefits to society (made up of religious and non-religious people) of treating everyone the same – no advantages for the religious or non-religious, no state religion or religion involved in law making?

3. 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.

Q) Can you think of any examples where the religious or religious groups seek to curtail the rights or freedoms of others?

4. 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.

Q) Why might minority groups need protection from religious groups?

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Q) Why might it be important for law-making to be independent from religious belief?

5. 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.

Q) What are the pros and cons of state-funded faith schools?

Q) Do you think segregated faith schools are a problem for social cohesion in the UK? Can you think of any examples?

6. 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.

Q) Why might many atheists and humanists also support secularism?

7. 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.

Q) Can you think of real-life examples where religious belief may seek to limit the right to freedom of expression?

Ask students to construct a well-argued, well-informed, balanced and structured written argument, demonstrating their depth and breadth of understanding of secularism. Deciding on their viewpoint they can choose between the following essay titles:

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why the UK would be a more inclusive and progressive state if it were fully secular.• Why the UK is better off staying as it is with an established church and the monarch as its head |
| Take it Further | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read the extract below which is from an interview with Chancellor Rishi Sunak - BBC News (13 November 2020) <p><i>'The chancellor also defended the government's ambition of lifting lockdown before Christmas, despite accusations that other faith celebrations such as Diwali had been overlooked.</i></p> <p><i>"Of course, this is a secular country. But Christmas is also a national time when regardless of whether you're going to midnight Mass or to church, it's a time when most people have time off work, we have holidays, state holidays, it is a time when everyone hangs out.</i></p> <p><i>"I mean, I'm Hindu, but I'm also equally going to be tucking into my Christmas meal - the kids are excited about that."</i></p> <p>Q) Should religious groups be given special dispensation to meet when it comes to universal challenges such as the global pandemic?</p> <p>Q) Do you agree with Rishi Sunak that 'this is a secular country'?</p> <p>Q) What factors could you point to that might suggest that the UK is not fully secular?</p> <p>Q) Do you agree that all religions in the UK should be treated exactly the same or is the UK still a 'Christian country'? You could research data from the Census 2021 to provide statistical backup for your argument.</p> |