

Lesson Plan – Exploring Secularism

KS4 Lesson 2 - Viewpoints on religion and secularism – Obama, Abraham and Isaac

Background	<p>This stimulus in this lesson looks at an extract from Barack Obama’s 2006 keynote speech on faith and politics (delivered at the Call to Renewal’s Building a Covenant for a New America conference) on the topic of religion in politics.</p> <p>The exercise encourages students to reflect on how people with different religious views can live and make decisions together in a democratic society.</p>
Subjects	Religious Education Citizenship
Curriculum Links	<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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do secularists think about decisions?• Why do people support or oppose secularism?
Learning Outcomes	<p>Expected:</p> <p>Students should demonstrate they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand how a longer political argument seeks to address the concerns of a range of listeners based on their viewpoints on secularist principles.• Compare and contrast their own views with the arguments of the source material.

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	<p>Greater Depth:</p> <p>In addition to the expected learning outcomes, students should demonstrate they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extrapolate how others might view the content of a political argument, based on their viewpoints on key secularist principles.• Critically reflect on the arguments of the source material, comparing them to their own.• Reflect on how the secularist principles expressed in the stimulus would relate to decision-making and key social debates, drawing on a range of outside knowledge.
Links to previous learning at KS3	
Stimulus	<p>There is a shorter and longer extract of the speech, but the discussion questions work with either.</p> <p>For the “take it further” activities, or your own interest, you might want to read or watch the full speech.</p> <p>Stimulus 1</p> <p>This is an extract from Barack Obama’s 2006 keynote speech on faith and politics (delivered at the Call to Renewal’s Building a Covenant for a New America conference) on the topic of religion in politics.</p> <p><i>This brings me to my second point. Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God’s will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all. Now this is going to be difficult for some who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as many evangelicals do. But in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice. Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what’s possible. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It’s the art of the impossible. If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God’s edicts, regardless of the</i></p>

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consequences. To base one's life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, but to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing. And if you doubt that, let me give you an example.

We all know the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham is ordered by God to offer up his only son, and without argument, he takes Isaac to the mountaintop, binds him to an altar, and raises his knife, prepared to act as God has commanded. Of course, in the end God sends down an angel to intercede at the very last minute, and Abraham passes God's test of devotion. But it's fair to say that if any of us leaving this church saw Abraham on a roof of a building raising his knife, we would, at the very least, call the police and expect the Department of Children and Family Services to take Isaac away from Abraham. We would do so because we do not hear what Abraham hears, do not see what Abraham sees, true as those experiences may be. So, the best we can do is act in accordance with those things that we all see, and that we all hear, be it common laws or basic reason.

Stimulus 2

Finally, any reconciliation between faith and democratic pluralism requires some sense of proportion. This goes for both sides. Even those who claim the Bible's inerrancy make distinctions between scriptural edicts, sensing that some passages – the Ten Commandments, say, or a belief in Christ's divinity – are central to Christian faith, while others are more culturally specific and may be modified to accommodate modern life. The American people intuitively understand this, which is why the majority of Catholics practise birth control and some of those opposed to gay marriage nevertheless are opposed to a constitutional amendment to ban it. Religious leadership need not accept such wisdom in counselling their flocks, but they should recognize this wisdom in their politics. But a sense of proportion should also guide those who police the boundaries between church and state. Not every mention of God in public is a breach to the wall of separation – context matters. It is doubtful that children reciting the Pledge of Allegiance feel oppressed or brainwashed as a consequence of muttering the phrase "under God." I didn't. Having voluntary student prayer groups use school property to meet should not be a threat, any more than its use by the high school Republicans should threaten Democrats. And one can envision certain faith-based programs – targeting ex-offenders or substance abusers – that offer a uniquely powerful way of solving problems. So we all have some work to do here. But I am hopeful that we can bridge the gaps that exist and overcome the prejudices each of us bring to this debate. And I have faith that millions of believing Americans want that to happen. No matter how religious they may or may not be, people are tired of seeing faith used as a tool of attack.

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	<p><i>They don't want faith used to belittle or to divide. They're tired of hearing folks deliver more screech than sermon. Because in the end, that's not how they think about faith in their own lives.</i></p>
Exercise	<p>The following questions relate to Stimulus 1 - Discuss in pairs, small groups or as a whole class.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <i>'the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values'</i> Can you explain what this means giving a real-life example?2. Can religion specific concerns also be universal? Can you give an example?3. What is a pluralistic democracy? What is its opposite?4. Obama says, <i>'religion does not allow for compromise'</i>, why could this be problematic if religion has an active role in the state or government?5. Is a religious person ever justified to say, 'I did it because God/Gods told me to do it...' when they break the law?6. Should religions be given special dispensation by the law – for example be allowed to gather and worship during a global pandemic?7. What does Obama use the story of of Abraham and Isaac to argue for?8. <i>'...we do not hear what Abraham hears, do not see what Abraham sees, true as those experiences may be...'</i> this is respectful to the religious believer, but it makes its point. Why might Obama feel it important treat the person essentially about to commit the murder of a child with such respect? <p>The following questions relate to Stimulus 2 - Discuss in pairs, small groups or as a whole class.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What does Obama believe about most religious people in the US? What examples does he make to illustrate this belief?2. This is a very balanced speech – he uses a personal example to illustrate this pragmatism when he says saying the pledge didn't make him feel oppressed. Can you come up with examples in the UK where religion and the state/government are linked in some way?

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	<p>3. Have you personally experienced a time when religious practice has entered a supposedly nonreligious setting? If so, how did this feel?</p> <p>4. Can you summarise Obama’s message in stimulus 2 – feedback your summary to the class and invite discussion. What is the crux of his speech?</p>
Take it Further	<p>For these activities you should read or watch the full speech.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imagine you are giving a speech on the role of religion in politics. Half of the audience will be members of the “Religion Should Govern’ party and half will be members of the ‘No to Religion in Politics’ party What will your speech be and how will it address the concerns of both groups?• Try to find three examples of speeches addressing the theme of religion in politics. At least one should be from a secularist perspective and at least two should come from the UK. Compare these speeches to the extract. What are the similarities and differences?• Find contemporary news coverage of this speech. What were some of the positive and negative responses?• Find examples of UK opinion polls on the role of religion in politics. Write a short report or news story on your findings.