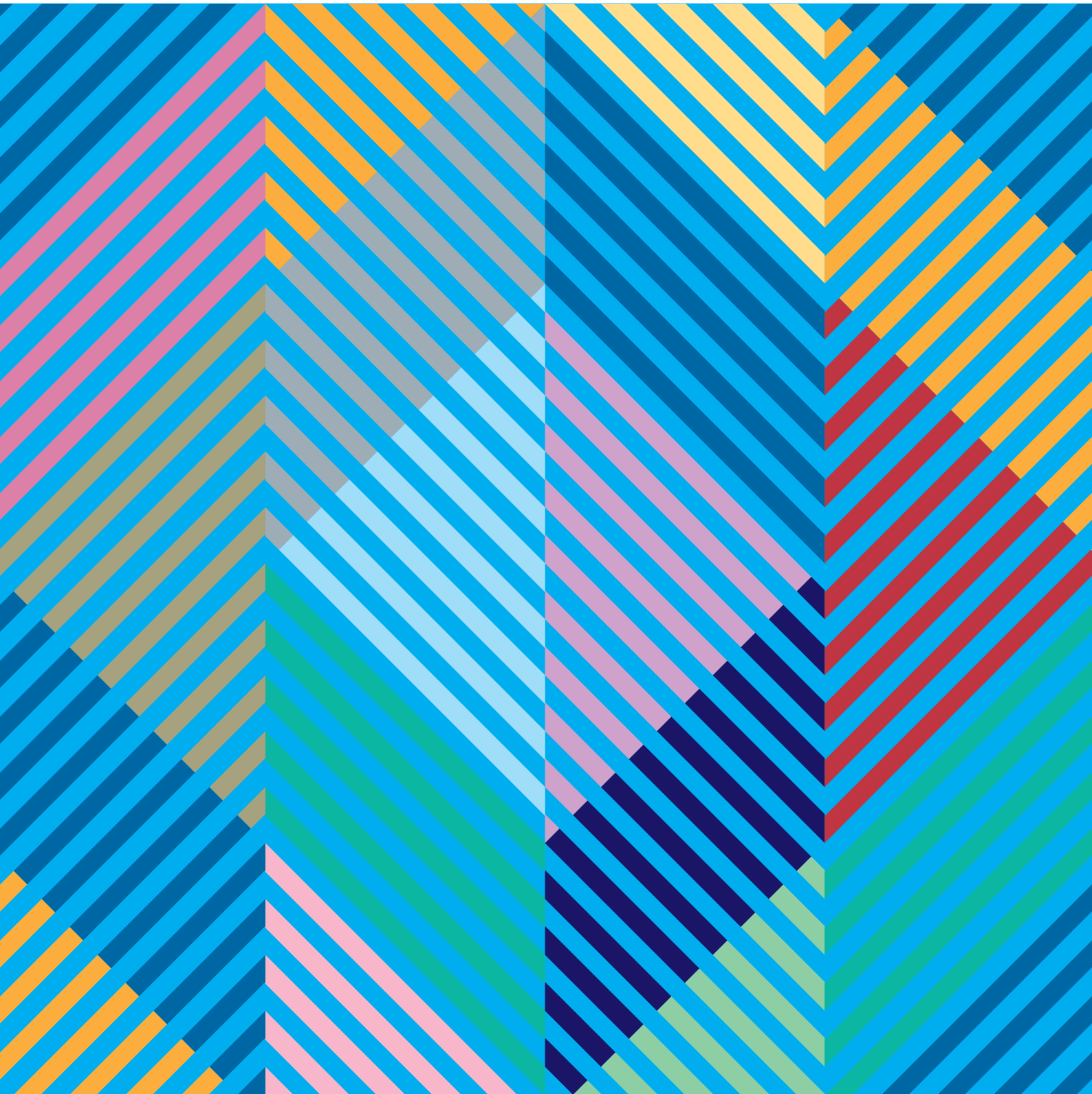


# EXPLORING SECULARISM

A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS



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# 1 Introduction

The principles of secularism which protect and underpin many of the freedoms we enjoy are:

1. **Separation** of religious institutions from state institutions, and a public sphere where religion may participate, but not dominate.
2. **Freedom** to practise 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 does not put any of us at an advantage or disadvantage.

Secularism raises core question about how we balance freedom of, *and from*, religion with other rights. These are some of the most important questions which arise in all of the humanities, from religious and belief education to citizenship, and from the arts to history.

*Exploring Secularism* advocates the asking of these questions; it is not a manifesto of answers. It is for students to explore a range of answers to these questions and come to some of their own.

The Commission on Religious Education has recognised secularism as a key concept in the study of religion and worldviews. In *Exploring Secularism*, you and your students will be joining a long tradition of people from all faiths and none, of artists and authors, of politicians and philosophers, judges and theologians, all of whom have grappled with these debates.

As secularists we have a particular viewpoint on these questions, but however secularist or non-secularist your approach these questions are relevant to anyone with an interest in religion and belief.

In most of the Western world religion is both diversifying and diminishing, but people's worldviews continue to influence their lives and those around them. On a daily basis students will encounter conflicts over religious, non-religious and irreligious beliefs, along with competing claims over how the practices of these beliefs influence their rights. Debates over the exact nature of religion, and limits to freedom of and from it, pervade almost every area of social life from school to the workplace and communities.

We do not think it appropriate for schools to promote a positive or negative view of religion (i.e. they should not be religiously or irreligious directive). By not taking any particular theological position on religious beliefs, but by focusing on how religious *practices* affect people's rights, a study of secularism provides students with a new avenue to explore these issues.

*Exploring Secularism* is divided into six themes, each of which contains resources to help explore some of the key questions (see sections 2 and 4.1). Each resource can be used independently to supplement other lessons or combined into a lesson plan.

To discuss how you can promote understanding of secularism in schools, and enrich discussions on this topic with resources covering both theoretical and real life examples, please contact [education@secularism.org.uk](mailto:education@secularism.org.uk), visit [secularism.org.uk/exploring](http://secularism.org.uk/exploring) or follow *Exploring Secularism* on Twitter @NSS\_Education.

## 1.1 Principles

The following principles underpin all our *Exploring Secularism* resources. Education about secularism should be student led, teacher mediated and built on shared values, and should be transparent, promoting balance and critical reflection.

These principles are also useful for exploring many other topics related to the practice and freedom of and from religion and belief. Each of these principles interacts with the others: e.g. the principle of teacher mediation helps ensure balance and that ensures students are being encouraged to reflect critically, so that their learning can be increasingly self-led.

### Student led

Resources are designed around open questions which students can explore individually or in groups. "Take it further" activities encourage independent learning where students can look in more depth at the areas they are most interested in. Students are encouraged to learn not by being taught rote facts, but through their own exploration.

### Teacher mediated

As with any external resource, teachers have an important role in mediating the resources and ensuring they are used in an appropriate and balanced way. Your mediation ensures that students are able to explore and critically reflect on secularist views, rather than simply following a single viewpoint.

The flexibility of the resources helps you make decisions on how best to utilise them. You may select a whole worksheet or single exercise. You might take the exercises from one resource and use them with different stimulus material, or you might take one resource for use in RE or adapt it for use in citizenship or politics lessons.

Because many questions are open-ended, they can easily be adapted for different age groups with older students expected to answer the question and explore the themes in greater depth.

Issues of religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination can invoke passionate disagreement. While the resources encourage respectful discussion, your professional mediation might be necessary to keep the conversation on topic and productive. It can be a good idea to get students to set some ground rules. A useful maxim might be, “No people beneath dignity. No ideas above criticism.”

### Built on shared values

People will have a range of views on all sorts of secularist issues, including the limits of rights like freedom of speech and of belief, or on how best to practice tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs. By exploring how different people interpret these shared values, these resources help students gain a deeper understanding. This directly relates to the ‘fundamental British values’ that schools have a duty to promote:

**Democracy:** The resources help students explore and appreciate the role of freedom of and from religion in our democratic system (as well as other democratic and non-democratic systems) and why democracy goes beyond simple majority rule.

**The rule of law:** Secularism is about the balance of the rule of law and individual liberty with other rights. By improving students’ understanding of equality law, through real life examples, the resources help students understand how the rule of law impacts how we practise our beliefs and respect the rights of others.

**Individual liberty:** These resources help students – in both a theoretical and example led way – explore the relationship and importance of

individual liberty to other rights with a focus on the individual (as opposed to group) freedom of and from religion.

**Mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs:** Secularism promotes freedom of belief, and the qualified freedom to manifest beliefs subject to the rights of others. These resources deal with real contemporary examples of different beliefs coming into conflict and helps students explore how to resolve such conflicts in a way that respects the rights of all involved.

### Balance and critical reflection

These resources encourage students to critically reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to the core questions secularism raises – while predominantly focussing on the broad swathe of mainstream British secularism – and a range of viewpoints on the key questions.

Balance does not mean giving equal times to all views. For example, schools should balance the attention given to a range of views about how best to build mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs; they do not have to give equal attention to views that are discriminatory or anti-basic values.

### Transparent

These educational resources are freely available. If anyone has concerns over their contents or use, we encourage teachers to have an open and frank conversation about their concerns. You can also contact [education@secularism.org.uk](mailto:education@secularism.org.uk) to discuss any concerns or feedback or to be put in touch with other teachers using the resources.

## 2 What is secularism?

Theme 1 (Core principles) of *Exploring Secularism* addresses what secularism is, and the questions which arise most directly from that. These are explored below.

In Section 5 a secularist viewpoint is given on the questions in other themes.

### What is secularism?

Secularism refers to a range of different ideas and practices which seek to balance freedom of (and from) religion with other rights. In its broadest sense secularism is the idea that religious beliefs and identities should not be privileged or discriminated against. From this the sociologist of secularism and religion Jean Baubérot argues that three key principles emerge:

1. **Separation** of religious institutions from state institutions, and a public sphere where religion may participate, but not dominate.
2. **Freedom** to practise 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 does not put any of us at an advantage or disadvantage.

Since states have traditionally been the most able to either privilege or discriminate, secularists have long believed that the state should not interfere in religion and that religion should not interfere in the state.

Historically the essence of secularism has been seen as the separation of church and state institutions, such that religions are not involved in governmental activities, and governments are not involved in religious or ecclesiastical affairs. But the consequences of this separation go far beyond just institutional arrangements.

Allowing individuals to be free to believe whatever they wish without interference from the state or dogmatic imposition by religious authority has been a powerful force for progress. It has created an open marketplace of ideas in which anybody is at liberty to advocate whatever claims about reality they believe to be true, and anybody else is equally at liberty to criticise, challenge or reject these claims. In this way good ideas and bad ideas can be clearly distinguished from each other on the basis of evidence and reasoned argument.

This culture of free debate underpins the huge advances in human understanding and technological capacity which have been made in the last two hundred years.

Secularists are anxious to safeguard this precious openness in society and have constantly sought to challenge religious and ideological privilege in social

structures while at the same time defending the right of believers in religious and non-religious worldviews to be free of discrimination against them.

Secularists may differ in their perceptions of privilege, tolerance and discrimination, or in their view of which other rights should be prioritised over issues of freedom of or freedom from religion. What matters ultimately is the open discussion involved and the decision-making based on rational argument. The resources below endeavour to engage students and students in exactly this kind of reasoned discussion.

Freedom of religion is the freedom to practise your religion. Freedom from religion is the freedom from others' religion being imposed on you. (See 5.3.)

Secularism derives from 'secular' – a contested term which comes from the Latin word *saecularis* or *saeculum* meaning 'the world', 'generation' or 'age'. Many religious traditions draw a distinction between the temporal and the divine, or the worldly and the spiritual, considering that both have their place.

'Secular' means religiously neutral or unrelated to religion, e.g. brushing your teeth is a secular activity.

### Is secularism a religion?

No. Secularism is an approach to religion and to issues where religion interacts with the rights of others. It involves no theological or supernatural claims and has no holy books, priesthood or commandments. Secularism is consistent with a variety of religious, non-religious and irreligious traditions.

As an analogy, feminism is an approach to gender and to issues where gender interacts with the rights of others, but is not itself a gender. Similarly, both supporters and critics of feminism can be of different genders and secularists could be of any religion or none. Just as feminism is a core but not definitive concept in the study of gender, secularism is a core but not definitive concept in the study of religion and beliefs.

### Is secularism a form of atheism, agnosticism or humanism?

No. Many people who identify as atheist or humanist are also secularists, although secularism does not require someone to accept atheism or humanism.

Traditionally 'humanist' has been a label applied to people or worldviews that are primarily concerned with the ethical value and agency of human beings, or that emphasise reason over dogma in decision making. Although many religious traditions have strong histories of humanist thought, the label normally applies to people or worldviews which are non-religious.



Atheism is the lack of a belief in a god or gods, and therefore an atheist is someone who does not have a belief in any gods. Atheists might follow the practices of a religion for cultural or spiritual reasons. Some religions which do not include a belief in gods might have atheist members.

Agnosticism is a position on knowledge; an agnostic may not know whether a god or gods exist or they might believe it is not possible to know for sure whether gods exist.

### Who is a secularist?

In a sense most people are at least somewhat secularist, in that few people support outright theocracy (rule by a religious class or by religious dogma) and most people place at least some importance on freedom of and from religion. Despite disagreements, most people at least broadly accept that “because my religion says so” isn’t a good enough reason on its own to compel others.

People who describe themselves as secularists may be of any different faith or non-religious, and are likely to have a worldview which values core secularist principles. However, people don’t need to describe themselves as secularists to value such principles.

### How do secularists think about religion?

Secularists hold a range of views on religion. They may hold a positive or negative view of religion in general, or of specific religions. Secularists are generally very aware of the potential for religion to be manipulated as a force for harm, and are sceptical of unchecked religious power. Secularists view religious decisions as personal – meaning freedom of religious belief is seen as absolute, but freedom of religious practice needs to be balanced against other freedoms. Secularists do not believe religion should be privileged over irreligious worldviews or vice versa.

### How do secularists think about decisions?

Secularists draw a distinction between decisions which affect the individual, which most believe only need to be justified in terms of their own moral code, preferences or worldview – and decisions which affect the rights of others, which they believe must be justified in terms of rational, shared principles.

This manifests itself most clearly in terms of religion, as secularism was a reaction to religious rule and inter-religious conflict. Secularists do not believe religious claims are sufficient justification to make rules which affect the rights of others. The way in which secularists think about decisions is also often influenced by their desire to avoid an entanglement of religion and state, and often by a desire to protect the rights of the individual.

### Why do people support or oppose secularism?

Arguments for and against secularism are diverse; they might be either principled or practical. Proponents of secularism view it as the best guarantor of religious freedom and the best means to foster a fair and open society, in which people of all religions and none can live together as equal citizens. Generally people oppose secularism because they believe there are good reasons to privilege religion, they do not recognise religious privilege or they think secularism unfairly restricts religion.

Through exploring different viewpoints both for and against secularism, these resources help students to make up their own mind.

### Where does secularism come from?

This is a controversial question. All major religious traditions (as well as non-religious philosophical traditions such as humanism) have their own history of secularist thought. People in most societies have had thoughts about the role or appropriate sphere of authority of either god(s) or religious authorities.

*“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” — Matthew 22:21*

Some people trace secularism to the Judeo-Christian European tradition where a need for religious tolerance emerged from centuries of religious conflict and the rise of the nation state. Others point to the Enlightenment and the emergence of scientific rationalism. The critical and analytical approach at the foundations of secularism was first formalised, in part as opposition to excessive state control, by the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers.

### What different types of secularism are there?

There are many different approaches to secularism and they can be characterised in different ways. Some approaches focus more on either freedom of or freedom from religion, some have different ideas about what spheres of life freedom of or freedom from religion belongs in and what other rights or interests need to be balanced against it.

### What are religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?

Privilege, tolerance and discrimination are key concepts within sociology and social justice. They are also key to secularism, and to arguments for or against a secularist approach.

**Privilege** describes the benefits and advantages held by one group relative to another, which are the result of power dynamics.

Privileged groups often view the imposition of their values as natural or normal. Because religious privilege is so normalised, many people have difficulty



identifying it. To get around such ‘privilege blindness’ we need empathy. If you are comfortable with one form of religion being imposed, imagine how you would feel if it was another religion or belief system.

*“When you’re accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.”* — Anonymous

**Tolerance** is the ability or willingness to allow practices or opinions that one differs from, dislikes or disagrees with. Synonyms include: forbearance, toleration, sufferance, liberality, open-mindedness, lack of prejudice, lack of bias, broad-mindedness, liberalism and pluralism. In terms of religion, tolerance is the ability to practise your religion or belief without interference without impinging on the rights of others; in this way tolerance is not and cannot be absolute.

Schools have a duty to promote tolerance for those of other religions or beliefs, but this is open to a wide degree of interpretation. A study of secularism can help students decide where they think the boundaries of privilege, tolerance and discrimination lie.

**Discrimination** is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people. Religious discrimination would be laws or practices which treat people unfairly or restrict their freedom because of religion or belief – either the religion or belief of the person being treated unfairly, or that of the person practising the unfair treatment.

Privilege and discrimination can be seen as a horseshoe, as privilege for one group or idea inevitably means discrimination for alternative groups and ideas that are relatively disadvantaged by not receiving this privilege. For example, privileging group A in school admissions discriminates against group B as they are moved towards the back of the line.

## 2.1 The Secular Charter

The National Secular Society’s Secular Charter reflects the mainstream model of and approach to secularism in Britain. But there are different models and secularists will disagree on how such principles should be applied.

The charter promotes a secular democracy, where:

1. There is no established state religion.
2. Everyone is equal before the law, regardless of religion, belief or non-belief.
3. The judicial process is not hindered or replaced by religious codes or processes.
4. Freedom of expression is not restricted by religious considerations.
5. Religion plays no role in state-funded education, whether through religious affiliation of schools, curriculum setting, organised worship, religious instruction, student selection or employment practices.
6. The state does not express religious beliefs or preferences and does not intervene in the setting of religious doctrine.
7. The state does not engage in, fund or promote religious activities or practices.
8. There is freedom of belief, non-belief and to renounce or change religion.
9. Public and publicly-funded service provision does not discriminate on grounds of religion, belief or non-belief.
10. Individuals and groups are neither accorded privilege nor disadvantaged because of their religion, belief or non-belief.



### 3 Secularism in the curriculum

Turn to Appendix 1 for more a detailed breakdown of how secularism relates to different subject areas.

<b>SMSC</b>	<b>Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development</b> Secularism directly relates to discussions relating to spirituality, morality and culture. It also relates to the promotion of 'British values' in the context of SMSC.
<b>RE</b>	<b>Religion and belief education</b> Learning about secularism, and comparing secularism to other models such as theocracy, enables children to examine the interaction between religion and politics and explore the practical issues generated when people of different beliefs share the same society.
<b>Ctz</b>	<b>Citizenship studies</b> Exploring secularism enables children to think about the nature of the society in which they live. It also encourages them to think critically and engage in debates about competing rights. Secularism is relevant to debates over what citizenship is based on, and the nature of equal citizenship.
<b>Pol</b>	<b>Politics</b> Secularism is a principle that shapes how a society is governed. Discussing secularism invariably means discussing other basic political principles, such as liberal democracy, the rule of law and their alternatives.
<b>Art</b>	<b>Arts</b> Ideas regarding blasphemy, censorship and freedom of expression may arise in expressive, creative subjects such as like arts, design or music.
<b>Eng</b>	<b>English Literature</b> Human rights, freedom of expression and the influence of religion are all themes that literature can explore.
<b>FBV</b>	<b>Fundamental British Values</b> 'Fundamental British Values' raises questions directly related to secularism (see above).
<b>Geo</b>	<b>Geography</b> Discussions about culture, religion and human rights in different countries can often arise in geography lessons. Different countries employ a variety of secularist and non-secularist approaches to the relationship between religion and society.
<b>Hst</b>	<b>History</b> The development of secular thought, and related concepts like rationalism, atheism, freethought and equality, play an essential role in the history of many nations including the UK. Many historical conflicts have been driven by different ideas of the role of religion in the state.
<b>Phil</b>	<b>Philosophy</b> Discussing secularism, and its related issues (democracy, human rights, freedom of speech etc.), helps to teach students to think critically and how to express their views in a discursive context. Including a secularist perspective on topical debates in the media can encourage students to connect deeper philosophical questions about morality to contemporary issues. Many resources lend themselves to a 'philosophy for children' approach.
<b>PSHE</b>	<b>Personal, social, health and economic education</b> Many personal issues, from sex and relationships to interacting online, may be influenced by religious ideas and raise questions about the freedom of and from these ideas.
<b>Other</b>	<b>Other subjects</b> Secularism also has the potential to be explored in other foundation subject areas in a more minor capacity. Freedom of expression and extremism are major issues regarding the internet in ICT. It could be discussed in the target language in Modern Foreign Languages; specifically, secularism ( <i>laïcité</i> ) is an important principle in understanding French society. Secularism addresses the issues that arise when religious teachings conflict with Science.



## 4 Using the *Exploring Secularism* resources

All *Exploring Secularism* content (including additional content for all themes) can be found at [secularism.org.uk/exploring](http://secularism.org.uk/exploring)

*Exploring Secularism* is divided into six themes, each of which contains resources to help explore some of the key questions (see 4.1). Each resource can be used independently to supplement other lessons or combined into a lesson plan.

In each theme you will find a teachers' guide, which goes through the main resources.\*

- **Theme 1. Core principles**
- **Theme 2. Freedom of expression**
- **Theme 3. Equality and human rights**
- **Theme 4. Secularism, religion and society: key debates**
- **Theme 5. Secularism, art and literature**
- **Theme 6. Secularism and history**

\*Additional resources have their own teacher guidance.

### 4.1 Questions

Each theme addresses one or more questions related to established subject areas. Questions are selected so they can be tied directly to contemporary issues which students are likely to encounter, for example in the media. Alternatively, questions can be raised in a more philosophical 'big picture' context. Section 5 gives an overview of a secularist viewpoint on these questions, while Appendix 1 shows how each of the key questions relates to established subject areas.

The most important questions are in bold.

#### Theme 1. Core principles

- **What is secularism?**
- **Is secularism a religion?**
- **Is secularism a form of atheism, agnosticism or humanism?**
- **Who is a secularist?**
- **How do secularists think about religion?**
- **How do secularists think about decisions?**
- **Why do people support or oppose secularism?**
- Where does secularism come from?
- What different types of secularism are there?
- What are religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?

#### Theme 2. Freedom of expression

- **What is free speech?**
- **What is blasphemy?**
- What is hate speech?
- Should there be limits to free speech?

#### Theme 3. Equality & human rights

- **What is freedom of and from religion?**
- **What is apostasy?**
- **Should freedom of and from religion have limits?**
- What are equality laws?
- What is direct and indirect discrimination?
- Should we have 'one law for all'?
- When can religions discriminate?
- What are your rights at work?
- What are 'children's rights'?
- What are 'reproductive rights'?
- What does religious discrimination look like?

#### Theme 4. Secularism, religion and society: key debates

- **What is a secular democracy?**
- **What is a theocracy?**
- **Are secularism and pluralism in conflict?**
- Are we a 'Christian Country'?
- Should we have a state church?
- Should religion influence government?
- What is secularisation?
- Should government ceremonies be Christian?
- Should religions be exempt from animal welfare laws?
- Should religions run public services?
- What about social action by religious groups?
- What role should religion have in schools?
- What role should worship have in schools?
- What are 'British Values'?
- What role should religion have in healthcare?
- How should Religious Education be taught?

## Theme 5. Secularism, art and literature

- How does art challenge religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?
- How does literature challenge religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?

## Theme 6. Secularism and history

- What role has secularism played in British history?
- What has secularism looked like in different historical settings?

### 4.2 Making the resources appropriate for key stages

The language in *Exploring Secularism* is designed to be suitable for most students at a key stage 3 reading level and above. There will be some terms and vocabulary – particularly in the stimulus material – which students might not be familiar with, although there should not be anything particularly esoteric and key terms are defined either within the stimulus or teachers' guides.

*Exploring Secularism* (unless specifically stated) is aimed at secondary school students of key stages 3-5, although the general ideas and simpler stimuli may be suitable for younger age groups.

Resources have been designed with flexibility in mind and in keeping with our principle of being teacher mediated (see above). Most questions are open-ended and activities are structured around discussions. These do not change based on students' age (though your selection of resources might), but the type of answers should.

Older and more able students should be prompted to provide more detailed answers to the question that show they are able to draw on wider perspectives and critiques. The 'learning outcomes' section should help you facilitate this and tailor resources for different ages.

For example, when reviewing a secularist viewpoint a KS3 student should be able to demonstrate their understanding by restating the viewpoint in their own words and be able to give a basic critique of the view. At KS4 students should be able to go beyond this, expanding on the viewpoint and critique by drawing on other relevant knowledge. A KS5 student looking at the same viewpoint should be able to give a nuanced explanation of the view and its critique, linking it to other big philosophical and contemporary issues they have discussed elsewhere.

### 4.3 Teachers' guide

The *Exploring Secularism* resources take the form of printouts, slideshows and videos. Each theme comes with a teachers' guide to the main resources, which will help you plan how to use them. For ease of reference the left-hand column of each resource (teachers' version) marks out the different sections.

**Background:** This gives an overview of the exercise which (along with the other key information near the top) allows the teacher to plan how to use the resource.

**Subjects:** Most resources can be used for multiple subject areas (see Section 3 above). For quick reference these are signposted near the top of the resource.

**Key questions:** Most resources address one or two key questions. For quick reference these are signposted near the top of the resource.

**Learning outcomes:** The learning outcomes for different age groups are summarised near the top of the document. Some resources will be relevant for key stages three, four and five. Others will only have learning outcomes for a specific key stage (this is most likely when the topic is more in-depth and aimed at older students).

**Links:** Hyperlinks to any additional material (such as videos, slideshows, articles or other external sources) are marked near the start of the resource, so they can be prepared in advance.

**Stimulus:** Each resource has at least one stimulus that students will be responding to. This could be some factual information, a news story, a scenario or a range of viewpoints.

**Exercise:** Each resource has an exercise based on the stimulus. This might be questions for individual exploration or group discussion.

**Take it further activities:** These activities are more focussed on independent learning – although they can also be group projects. They are designed to explore the subject material in more depth. They could be anything from staging a debate to finding more examples, creating an art project to conducting an interview.

**Notes:** These provide additional support for the teacher on either how to set up the exercises or how to help guide discussions. They may show how specific parts of the resource link to others.

### 4.4 Additional content and support

Additional content (including case studies and stimulus material) for all Themes can be found at [secularism.org.uk/exploring](http://secularism.org.uk/exploring)

The *Exploring Secularism* Twitter account (@NSS\_Education) shares examples which are in the news and how they can be used for conversation about secularism and religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination in schools.

News stories concerning a clash of rights involving religion can be adapted into discussion resources. The National Secular Society's website has a large archive of news stories: [secularism.org.uk/news](https://secularism.org.uk/news)

Going back to November 2009, our daily media roundup has in excess of 16,000 articles from a range of sources and viewpoints covering issues related to secularism. You can find an example and subscribe at [secularism.org.uk/newsletters/view/daily-media-briefing](https://secularism.org.uk/newsletters/view/daily-media-briefing) or search the full archive at [secularism.org.uk/in-the-media](https://secularism.org.uk/in-the-media)

Most news sites have a religion section where issues involving religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination come up. Try the BBC, *Guardian* or *Telegraph*:

[bbc.co.uk/news/topics/cjnw18q4ny3t/religion](https://bbc.co.uk/news/topics/cjnw18q4ny3t/religion)  
[theguardian.com/world/religion](https://theguardian.com/world/religion)  
[telegraph.co.uk/religion/](https://telegraph.co.uk/religion/)

You can also use a news aggregator such as [newsnow.co.uk/h/Lifestyle/Religion](https://newsnow.co.uk/h/Lifestyle/Religion) or [news.google.com/](https://news.google.com/) to find a wider range of sources.

## 4.5 Beyond schools

These resources are designed primarily to be used in schools, but can be adapted for use in other settings, for example:

- **Parents and guardians** may wish to use them to explore these issues with their children or to introduce discussions about current affairs, particularly on religion in the media.
- **Students** interested in secularism may want to use these resources for further independent exploration and study.
- These resources are applicable for **teacher training**, giving experience in creating classroom discussions based on external resources, as well as conveying a basic understanding of a topic that can come up in many subject areas.
- Special interest **groups** (including secularist, faith and belief based, political, human rights or debate **groups**) may want to use these resources to spur group activities and discussions.

For advice and support using these resources beyond schools, please contact our education team: [education@secularism.org.uk](mailto:education@secularism.org.uk)

## 5 A secularist viewpoint on these questions

*Exploring Secularism* is all about questions which arise in a pluralist society where people have different beliefs. The resources advocate asking these questions; they are not a manifesto of answers. It is for students to explore a range of answers to these questions and come up with some of their own.

This section (along with 2.1) sets out a mainstream secularist viewpoint on these questions and you might find it useful for a range of discussions about secularism, freedom of and freedom from religion. There are some questions on which a greater or lesser degree of controversy and debate exists, and many on which people can come to broad agreement on whether or not they agree on other secularist perspectives.

It is usually a better idea to start with a general issue or question rather than a secularist (or non-secularist) viewpoint. Most resources will clearly signpost 'a secularist viewpoint'. It should be made clear to students the difference between presenting a viewpoint (or range of viewpoints) and presenting facts or definitive statements.

Different resources have different learning outcomes; however all resources aim for students to:

- Understand a secularist viewpoint and why some people might hold this or alternative viewpoints.
- Understand how this viewpoint (or alternatives) might influence others.
- Articulate their own opinion on this viewpoint.

At higher levels students should be expected to critically engage with the viewpoint and alternatives on a deeper level (see 4.2).

### 5.1 Core principles (Theme 1)

The key questions in this theme are addressed separately above (2.1).

### 5.2 Freedom of expression (Theme 2)

Freedom of expression is a key value in a pluralist society and in the development of secularism. Restrictions on free expression – both formal and informal – are common features of religious privilege and discrimination. The modern secularist movement in the UK first emerged in reaction to restrictions on critical speech about religion and the state.

#### What is free speech?

Article 10 of the Human Rights Act protects your freedom of expression:

“1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises.

“2. The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.”

Free speech is not a right to say whatever you want whenever you want without social consequences. It is the right to say what you want without threats of violence or being punished by the state.

Many private institutions have internal rules on speech, and absolute freedom of speech might be restricted in the commercial sphere – for example by restrictions on false advertising or requirements for disclaimers.

Free speech is not just a legal right, but a social value that supports the free, peaceful and meaningful exchange of ideas.

#### What is blasphemy?

Blasphemy is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as “something that you say or do that shows you do not respect God or a religion”. Generally the term is applied by different groups to describe beliefs or statements they have a theological disagreement with, because either they differ on interpretations of a religion or criticise religious ideas and institutions.

Almost by definition, secularists agree that there shouldn't be restrictions on blasphemous speech or ideas.

Some critics of religion reject the term blasphemy – arguing that gods cannot be offended either because they don't exist or don't take offence – while others embrace it in order to subvert the power of religion to restrict speech and thought.

#### What is hate speech?

Hateful and bigoted speech can have a detrimental effect on society, encouraging religious discrimination and privilege while discouraging tolerance.

Secularists generally believe that a vibrant civil society with robust freedom of expression is best placed to challenge hateful speech, discrimination and sectarian bigotry, and that free speech organisations have an important role in this.

Secularists have a range of views on what role the state should play in challenging hate speech. Certain forms of speech such as incitement to violence or harassment may not be worthy of protection. But secularists generally agree that restrictions on this need to be proportionate and not privilege or protect specific religious views from criticism.

### Should there be limits to free speech?

Secularists strongly support freedom of speech and the ability to exchange ideas and opinions without threat of repression or violence. Many secularists reject social restrictions on speech that are rooted in protecting religion's privileged place in society.

But freedom of speech is not absolute. Most people don't believe it extends to incitement to violence; most people support at least some protections against libel or false advertising and most recognise that institutions can set internal rules.

How to protect free expression when it comes into potential conflict with other rights is not always straightforward and different secularists have different views.

## 5.3 Equality and human rights (Theme 3)

Respect for equality and human rights are fundamental aspects of most forms of secularism. Increasingly, political and moral debates are framed around competing interpretations of equality and human rights.

### What is freedom of and from religion?

Freedom of religion is the freedom to practise your religion. Freedom from religion is the freedom from others' religion being imposed on you. While often shortened to freedom of *religion*, this right encompasses the protected characteristic of 'religion and belief'.

In the UK this is protected by various laws, most importantly Article 9 of the Human Rights Act:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

"Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the

interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

Balancing freedom of and from religion with other rights is a fundamental concern of secularism. However, different secularists have different interpretations of what this entails.

### Should freedom of and from religion have limits?

The right to hold a belief is unlimited, but the right to manifest a belief is qualified. Qualified rights might need to be balanced against other people's rights or the rights of the wider community to achieve a fair outcome. Secularists believe that freedom of and from religion need to be balanced with each other and with other fundamental rights, e.g. the right not to be discriminated against. How exactly these rights should be balanced is open to debate.

### What are equality laws?

The Equality Act came into force on 1 October 2010. It brought together over a hundred different statutes that had evolved over the 20th and 21st centuries to simplify the protection of equal rights for all and to create an equal society. The Act places strict limits on the ability of public and private bodies to discriminate and requires public bodies to actively promote equality between different groups in society. Secularists may have a range of views on equality laws, but almost all see them as having an important role in creating a tolerant society without religious privilege or discrimination.

### What is direct and indirect discrimination?

Protected characteristics are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Direct discrimination is when you are treated worse than another person or other people because of your protected characteristics, perceived protected characteristics or association with someone with a protected characteristic.

*E.g. Harry's Happy Hotel only hires men. This is direct discrimination on grounds of sex. Because there isn't an Equality Act exemption, this is probably unlawful direct discrimination.*

Indirect discrimination is when a policy applies to everyone, but disproportionately impacts on a group of people who share a protected characteristic and the policy is not justified and proportionate.

*E.g. Harry's Happy Hotel only hires people who are six feet tall. This policy doesn't mention sex, and it doesn't exclude all women or non-men, or include all men. But it proportionately disadvantages women. Unless Harry can show there is some good reason that*



*people need to be six feet tall to work in the hotel (i.e. that the policy is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate non-discriminatory aim) then this probably is unlawful indirect discrimination.*

Secularists strongly oppose discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, but might disagree over the boundaries of what counts as discrimination – particularly where it is indirect. This is particularly relevant to debates about how different religion or belief groups should be accommodated.

### Should we have ‘one law for all’?

Secularists believe in the rights of people to govern their own lives in accordance with their own beliefs. However, decisions which affect the rights of others should be based on common principles of justice. Secularists oppose the imposition of religious codes – either by the state or social coercion – and regard a common equally applied law as essential to a just and cohesive society.

### When can religions discriminate?

Secularists acknowledge that freedom of and from religion means that religious organisations should be generally free to set their own internal rules. Secularists do not believe this should extend to the provision of goods or services, or employment (unless there is a genuine occupational requirement, i.e. a certain religion is genuinely necessary for a job).

### What are your rights at work?

The place for religion in the workplace is highly contentious and regularly tested in the courts and employment tribunals. Everyone has the right to religious freedom, but there is no right to manifest religious beliefs in whatever way you wish, and in whatever setting, free from any consequences.

The UK has some of the most comprehensive anti-discrimination laws in the world and is lucky to be a generally tolerant secular society. Despite this many people continue to experience discrimination because of their (or others’) religion or belief. Secularists generally believe that with our existing equality laws, common sense and good will, this can be stopped.

By exploring religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination through these resources students will be better prepared to navigate these issues when they come up in adult life, including in the workplace. Examples that could come up are when workplace policies may indirectly discriminate against different religious/non-religious groups, and whether this can be resolved in a fair way.

### What are ‘children’s rights’?

The UK has many international and national laws which protect children’s rights such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children’s Rights

Act. Children’s rights are different from adults’ rights, because while children are developing the capacity to exercise their rights independently, they may be exercised by others in the children’s best interest.

Children’s rights interact with secularism as secularism defends the rights of all to have freedom of and from religion. Many rights are exercised by children’s parents in their best interest rather than directly, but there are big controversies around the limits to this. For example, secularists may disagree on the boundaries of the parental right to raise their children in accordance with their religion or belief, and the child’s independent right to freedom of belief, their right to an education or their right to bodily autonomy.

### What are ‘reproductive rights’?

Reproductive rights are the rights to control your own reproduction, including making decisions over contraceptives and abortion. Different secularists will disagree over the specific limits of these rights and how they are best balanced. Secularist movements have been deeply associated with the struggle to extend reproductive rights, and secularists believe that the religious views of others should not impose on such rights.

### What does religious discrimination look like?

Discrimination is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people. Religious discrimination would be laws or practices which treat people unfairly or restrict their freedom because of religion or belief – either the religion or belief of the person being treated unfairly, or that of the person practising the unfair treatment.

Religious discrimination looks different in different settings and secularists will take a range of views on specific examples. The resources explore a range of theoretical and topical examples of religious discrimination.

## 5.4 Secularism, religion and society: key debates (Theme 4)

People of all faiths and none and in all societies have considered how people’s beliefs impact on them and the rights of others. Secularism seeks to create a framework in which the rights of all in society are protected. Many pressing social issues concern different interpretations of religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination.

### What is a secular democracy?

A secular democracy is one where religious identities or organisations do not have a disproportionate or privileged influence in the governance of the nation and the state is not overly entangled in individuals’ religious concerns.



A secular democracy is a form of liberal democracy, i.e. a form of qualified democracy where simple majoritarianism is constrained by protections for human rights, and decisions which affect everyone need to be justified by more than just people's personal or religious preferences.

### What is a theocracy?

Theocracy is the opposite of secularism. The term can refer to a worldview that believes religious rules should govern most areas of life, or a system of government either where authority derives from religious positions, or a religious ideology or organisation runs the state. Theocracies can take different forms and different states may range from partial to total theocracies.

Secularists view theocracy as incompatible with the values of democracy (though some theocracies may incorporate aspects of restricted democracy), the rule of law (in theocracies laws are subject to religion), individual liberty (abuses of human rights are endemic in all theocracies) and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs (as theocracies have officially enforced faiths).

### Are secularism and pluralism in conflict?

No. Although it depends on your models of both secularism and pluralism.

In philosophy, pluralism is “a theory or system that recognises more than one ultimate principle” – secularism defends each individual's right to decide their own ultimate principles, as long as they are not imposed on others, and believe that the ability to act on those principles can be curtailed when it is necessary to protect the rights of others.

Pluralism can also be defined as “a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles, sources of authority, etc., coexist”. A core secularist principle is that religion and the state should not impinge on each other's spheres of authority. Secularists generally believe that anyone should be able to recognise a religious organisation's authority if they wish, and such organisations should have authority over their own affairs, but that such authority should not be imposed on others who do not opt in.

Secularists generally do not support what could be called artificial pluralism – where certain views or practices are supported or privileged to maintain a diversity of religious practices, for example state recognition of religious courts. Freedom of and from religion requires the ability for religious ideas to succeed or fail in the marketplace of ideas.

However, some forms of accommodationist secularism view the equal state support or funding of a range of religious organisations as a form of pluralism. Other forms of less liberal secularism prioritise other concerns over pluralism.

Many secularists view secularism as essential in the development of modern pluralistic societies through its undermining of religious privilege and support for individual rights. However, critics of secularism dispute these claims and may view secularism as imposing a form of religious neutrality which undermines pluralism. This could be because they view practices, which secularists view as religious privilege or discrimination, as forms of or necessary for religious tolerance.

### Are we a 'Christian Country'?

This claim can come in a number of forms – descriptive and normative. As a descriptive claim it is somewhat true: Christianity has been one of the principal cultural influences in the evolution of modern Britain. But its influence is neither unique nor absolute. It is true that Britain retains many vestiges of official state religion, but Christianity's influence in the civic life of the nation is declining. Christianity is becoming just one of a range of views in an increasingly diverse and non-religious nation. Even if Christianity were to recover to a majority position, there would be no reason to assume those Christians would want their nation to be based on or to privilege any form of Christianity.

When some claim that 'British values' are based on 'Christian principles', this generally means that what they perceive to be (or think should be) British values are in line with what they perceive to be Christian values.

The laws of the United Kingdom have evolved in a context where most people have been Christian and influenced by their own versions of Christianity. In the words of High Court judges Lord Justice Munby and Mr Justice Beatson: “The aphorism that 'Christianity is part of the common law of England' is mere rhetoric.”

Secularists believe that we should be a pluralistic nation that welcomes and protects people of all faiths and none, rather describing or advocating national values as being specifically Christian.

### Should we have a state church?

In the UK there are two official state denominations – the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. There is no established church in Northern Ireland or Wales but the 26 bishops of the Church of England who sit in the House of Lords influence laws that affect the whole of the UK.

Secularists do not believe that the state should express preference for any religious denomination over others or over the non-religious. States with official or preferred religions tend to have higher restrictions on religious freedom. No state can protect the rights of all freely and fairly while privileging an official religious institution. Establishment is increasingly incongruous with the British people's attitudes to religion;

adherence to the 'official' religion is reaching ever new lows, while religious belief continues to diversify and diminish.

### Should religion influence government?

Secularists do not believe the government should operate based on religious concerns. In a secular democracy, decisions which affect all of us need to be justified in terms of commonly held reasons and values, rather than simply religious preferences. In a pluralist society, different groups should not have special input into government and religious interest groups should have to put their case across on an equal footing to others.

### What is secularisation?

Secularisation is a label that has been applied to many historical and contemporary processes. It can refer to the transfer of religious assets to secular organisations, the trend of many western countries' populations to become less religious, the decline in religious interest or ideas, the removal of religious ideas or symbols from certain spheres or the disentanglement of religious concerns from everyday life.

Different secularists might support different forms of secularisation. Secularists generally see religion as something that people should be able to voluntarily opt into and interpret in their own way, rather than something that should affect others who do not opt in. Secularists therefore see features of secularisation including the decline of centralised religious authorities as improving freedom of belief and undermining religious privilege and discrimination.

### Should government ceremonies be Christian?

How different groups in society celebrate and commemorate events are important issues in discussing religion and beliefs. Many official national ceremonies are led by the established Church, despite growing religious diversity and irreligion. This is based on the idea that the established church 'speaks for the nation'. Secularists believe that civic ceremonies that invite people of all faiths and none to participate, on an equal basis without dominating or controlling, have a powerful potential to unite.

### Should religions be exempt from animal welfare laws?

Secularists might have a range of views on animal welfare standards unrelated to their secularism. The debate over what level animal welfare standards should be set at – whether they should be lowered, raised or even raised so far that the meat industry could not exist – is a separate discussion.

However, a core secularist principle is that public policy must be justified in terms of rational, shared principles that extend beyond simply personal or religious preference. Most secularists agree – whatever their view on animal welfare laws – that such laws should be based on evidence and apply equally regardless of religion or belief.

Animal welfare legislation requires all animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to minimise suffering. The only exemption is for religious communities to meet Jewish and Muslim religious dietary preferences.

### Should religions run public services?

There are a range of secularist perspectives on this. Some secularists believe that religious (or explicitly irreligious) organisations should have absolutely no involvement in public services because of the risks of entwining religion and government. Others don't mind religious organisations being involved in the delivery of public services as long as they aren't privileged and protections are in place to prevent potential harms – for example they might say organisations involved in delivering secular public services should be bound by equality law and restrictions on proselytisation.

Secularists generally believe that public services which are intended for the whole community, especially those funded by public money, should be provided in a secular context, open to all, without discriminating against anyone on grounds of religion/belief – either the people who are served or employed.

Secularists might welcome the contribution of faith groups to supporting public services, but not see it as the job of the state to build such capacity over or at the expense of secular (religiously neutral) organisations.

### What about social action by religious groups?

People are often motivated by their worldviews (whether religious, non-religious or irreligious) to participate in social action which they believe serves the common good. Almost all secularists welcome positive social action by groups regardless of their religious motivations. Secularists have also often been involved with challenging negative social action by religious groups.

One argument for secularism is that by keeping religion away from politics and the need to compete for religious power, it frees religious organisations to concentrate on social action.

While discrimination against or by religious groups may put up barriers to positive social action, most secularists don't think religious privilege is necessary or desirable for good works and don't think good works should be leveraged for social or legal privileges.

## What role should religion have in schools?

The role of religion in schools is one of the most important debates in secularism today – in our view education is the area of public life where a lack of secularism most impinges on the rights of most British citizens.

Secularists do not believe that state education should be organised around religious or irreligious identities or used to promote religious or irreligious worldviews. Most advocate inclusive, secular (religiously neutral) schools where children of all faith and belief backgrounds are educated together.

Secularists might disagree over what accommodations need or need not be made to best balance freedom of and from religion in schools.

## What role should worship have in schools?

Secularists believe that religious practices such as worship (or non-religious equivalents) should not be privileged or discriminated against. To protect freedom of and from religion, secularists generally believe that any worship should be voluntary rather than coerced. School authority or teacher-directed worship is inherently coercive. Secularists might disagree over what accommodations need to be made for voluntary worship.

## What are ‘British Values’?

All schools in England have a duty to promote ‘fundamental British values’, defined as “democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs”. These values are in line with schools’ public sector equality duty and the values of public education in a pluralist society. These values strongly align with secularist values, although they are not the exclusive domain of any particular political, national, religion or belief tradition. Different secularists might prefer different terminology or differ in how they interpret these values.

Secularists support liberal democracy (i.e. where simple majoritarianism is constrained by protections for human rights). Secularists believe in the rule of law as derived from public reasons and values, rather than imposed by religion. Secularists support religious tolerance and believe no one religion should be privileged or discriminated against.

‘Built on shared values’ is a key principle behind the *Exploring Secularism* resources, which relates to ‘fundamental British values’:

**Democracy:** The resources help students explore and appreciate the role of freedom of and from religion in our democratic system (as well as other democratic and non-democratic systems) and why democracy goes beyond simple majority rule.

**The rule of law:** Secularism is about the balance of the rule of law and individual liberty with other rights. By improving students’ understanding of equality law, through real life examples, the resources help students understand how the rule of law impacts how we practise our beliefs and respect the rights of others.

**Individual liberty:** These resources help students – in both a theoretical and example-led way – explore the relationship and importance of individual liberty to other rights with a focus on the individual (as opposed to group) freedom of and from religion.

**Mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs:** Secularism promotes freedom of belief, and the qualified freedom to manifest beliefs subject to the rights of others. These resources deal with real contemporary examples of different beliefs coming into conflict and helps students explore how to resolve such conflicts in a way that respects the rights of all involved.

## What role should religion have in healthcare?

Secularists believe that no one’s healthcare decisions should be restricted or imposed on by the religious views of others. Secularists generally believe that the secular nature of our health services is what allows them to serve people of all faiths and none equally. Many believe that secularism should be a professional standard so that patient care, not religious concerns, always comes first.

## How should Religious Education be taught?

Secularists have a range of views on how and what students should learn about religion and belief. Secularists believe that religion should neither be privileged nor discriminated against in education so generally believe that any form of religious instruction or promotion should be separated from state education. While views vary, secularists generally agree that students should learn something about the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews and how these influence people’s thinking on philosophical, moral and cultural issues.

The Commission on Religious Education has recognised secularism as a key concept in the study of religion and worldviews. Secularism raises core questions about how we balance freedom of and from religion with other rights. These are some of the most important questions which arise in all of the humanities, not just religious and belief education.



## 5.5 Secularism, art and literature (Theme 5)

The arts and literature have played an important role in every human rights and social change movement including secularism. Societal discussions such as the right balance between freedom of and from religion are often explored through the arts. Different arts and literature can both reinforce religious privilege and discrimination, and challenge it through providing expression for new ideas and promoting tolerance.

## 5.6 Secularism and history (Theme 6)

Some of the most important events and changes in British history have involved debates over the role of religion in the state and the lives of individuals. Our modern concepts of freedom of and from religion have evolved over time. Important changes have been secularisation and the evolving relationship between church and state.

## 6 A secularist viewpoint on wider educational issues

Secularists believe that state education systems should be inclusive and secular (religiously neutral) and equally respecting of the rights and freedoms of students of all backgrounds. They believe that state education should be neither religiously nor irreligiously directive.

The following section looks at how schools can help address religious privilege and discrimination. This represents the National Secular Society's (and the mainstream British secularist) viewpoint. Other secularists will have a range of views.

### 6.1 Evangelism and inculcation in schools

We do not believe that schools should be used for religious or irreligious evangelism or inculcation. External groups, including religious groups, can make a valuable educational contribution to schools, provided there is balance and boundaries are in place to prevent inappropriate proselytisation. That is why we believe that resources and visits from external groups should be mediated by teachers.

Helping parents challenge inappropriate evangelism in schools is a major part of our casework. We always recommend good communications with the school, and recognise that often schools fail to set appropriate boundaries where they have good intentions but have been naive or lack experience. An organisation might have policies in place to prevent evangelism; you might want to find out what they are, if they are sufficient and if they are being followed.

'Teacher mediated' is a key principle behind the *Exploring Secularism* resources. If you would like advice on effectively mediating or setting appropriate boundaries on external resources or visitors, please get in touch.

We believe schools should approach religious beliefs in the same way as political beliefs. Sections 406 and 407 of the Education Act 1996 (applying to England and Wales) require schools not to promote partisan political views, to treat political issues in a balanced way, and for staff not to direct partisan political activity in any official capacity.

Schools are very free to discuss political issues in a balanced age appropriate way. Schools can even promote political values that form the broad consensus in a free society: voting is good, being an informed citizen is a good idea, and people have human rights and responsibilities etc.

### 6.2 Religion and belief literacy

Religious literacy is an ambiguous term that can be used and interpreted in a variety of ways.

1. Theological literacy – a knowledge of the theological doctrine of different religious traditions and an appreciation of theological ways of thinking.
2. Worldview literacy – an understanding and familiarity with how a broad range of religious, non-religious and irreligious worldviews integrate with individuals' wider beliefs, cultural attitudes and practices, and an understanding of their importance to many people.
3. Religious positivity – the desire to present religion in a positive light to counter negative perceptions of religion, whether generated by religion's violent or regressive manifestations or by negative reporting, stereotyping and prejudice.

We consider the second form of religious literacy discussed above to be the most legitimate and useful definition. While almost all individuals and organisations promoting religious literacy pay lip service to this definition, we are concerned that an equivocation with the third definition is often in play. Some groups seek to use 'religious literacy' as a Trojan horse to advance an agenda of increasing religion's public role and profile, or as a justification for the imposition of religious rituals and practices on children and young people in schools.

One of the main drivers of good religious and belief literacy is meaningful interaction with people of other faiths and beliefs. Children who learn together, learn to live together.

This is particularly important if we want children and young people's religious literacy to remain contemporary. Whatever a child's religious views, they and their effect on their wider beliefs are likely to change and evolve from generation to generation, particularly through their formative years.

### 6.3 Inclusive secular assemblies and worship in schools

Many schools already hold inclusive secular assemblies that address moral and social issues without any formal worship or proselytising component. This is an excellent way to bring the school community together and to promote the SMSC development of students. We also welcome moves to replace worship led assemblies with more inclusive options such as 'Time for Reflection'.



Formal worship is neither necessary nor (where compelled) conducive to SMSC development or inclusion. Drawing on examples of **best practice** developed in Scotland, we recommend that schools adopt the following language and approach to worship and assemblies as well as making reasonable and proportionate provision for genuinely voluntary acts of worship if appropriate.

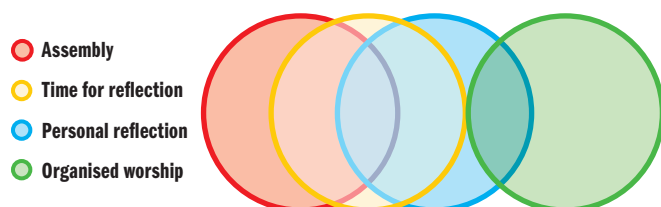
**Assembly:** A gathering of all or part of a school in order to communicate information and engage with themes relevant to the school community.

**Time for reflection (TfR):** A school community activity involving engagement with and reflection on a morally, socially or culturally relevant topic.

**Personal reflection:** Personal worship or belief reflection in response to moral, social or cultural issues. This can take place within TfR – for example at the end of an assembly students can be given silent time to reflect on the topic in a manner consistent with their own religion or belief.

**Organised worship:** An opt-in group or community activity involving the manifestation of religion or belief practices. It may be facilitated but not led by the school.

This approach respects students' individual freedom of religion and belief, while creating an inclusive school environment. This is considered in the following examples.



### Case study 1: Religious festival

A religious festival is upcoming. During the **assembly**, it is appropriate to discuss the religious and cultural significance of the upcoming festival for many people. At the end of the assembly students may engage in a **time for reflection** on the associated themes. This might include a **personal reflection** by students on how the discussed theme or the festival relates to them. During the festival, **organised worship** groups may meet for specific religious activities related to the festival or its theme. The school might need to differ from their normal arrangements for facilitating this, e.g. the group might want to book a larger room than usual.

### Case study 2: International Human Rights Day

The school has decided to mark International Human Rights Day. The **assembly** includes a presentation on the day and the importance of human rights. A **time for reflection** could take the form of a discussion of how human rights affect the school community. During this, students may engage in **personal reflection** where they think or pray about the role of human rights in their own personal beliefs or faith tradition. Students taking part in **organised worship** might wish to focus on the theme of human rights.

### Case study 3: School incident

The school has experienced a difficult significant incident. The **assembly** provides an opportunity for the school to come together and be brought up to speed. A **time for reflection** may be used to discuss the students' concerns and provide emotional support. All students might benefit from additional time set aside for **personal reflection** and some might want additional sessions of **organised worship** to respond to the incident within their faith tradition; they may be supported by external visitors.

### Case study 4: School celebration

It is exam results week. During **assembly**, successes are celebrated; perhaps some prizes are handed out or students singled out for special mention. All students may be encouraged to take **time for reflection** as they consider their successes and the future – something likely to lead to further **personal reflection**. Some students might seek out **organised worship** to give thanks for or to process their feelings regarding the end of exams.

In all four of these examples, the school is able to come together as a community (and community of communities) to receive support. Space is allowed for everyone's expression of religion and beliefs, but no one has their freedom of religion and belief undermined or is made to feel excluded by coerced worship.

Schools should always be clear with parents, students, staff and any guests what the purposes of assemblies are and any role that formal worship plays. Good maxims should be that worship is always opt-in and that any personal or group reflection leaves students free to respond in the manner most appropriate to them – religiously or non-religiously.

If you would like to discuss how to make your school's assemblies or collective worship or time for reflection more inclusive within the current confines and hear more examples of good practice, please contact [education@secularism.org.uk](mailto:education@secularism.org.uk)



You might want to reconsider any excessive involvement of religious representatives in assemblies. The involvement of such representatives can create confusion over the purpose of assemblies and undermines their educational function by conflating education *about*, and promotion *of*, religion.

In our view, representatives of religion and belief groups will often be an appropriate guest or complement to assemblies, however they should not lead it or conflate it with organised worship.

A greater emphasis should be placed on the involvement of religious representatives not compromising the educational and inclusive nature of assemblies and time for reflection, and any representative invited into schools should be well informed on the differences between time for reflection, personal reflection and organised worship.

## 6.4 The right to withdrawal

The right to withdraw from RE is a difficult area we deal with a lot in our casework. While it is obviously undesirable for students to be marked out or withdrawn from any part of the school day, many parents concerned with poor practice and biased teaching feel it remains necessary. If the subject were always preparing young people for life in modern Britain, then we would not want students missing out on that. But where the subject is confessional, directional or denominational (i.e. it seeks to promote a particular view of religion) we do not want parents forced to accept it.

We advocate comprehensive, non-partisan reform of religion and belief education and an end to compulsory worship in schools, so no one has to withdraw from any part of the school day.

However, successive governments' reluctance to end compulsory worship or to make meaningful RE reforms mean that changes might take some time. Parents and perhaps students might therefore want to consider the option of withdrawal.

### England and Wales

Parents have the statutory right under Section 71 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to withdraw their children from RE lessons and acts of collective worship at all maintained schools, including faith schools. Parents are not obliged to give a reason for requesting withdrawal.

The parental right to withdraw a child should be freely exercisable and the school must give effect to any such request.

Currently, very few parents exercise this right. Many parents are reluctant to separate their child from classmates. Also, while schools are supposed to keep worship separate from other elements of assembly, many schools fail to do this, and parents might not wish for their child to miss the entire assembly.

Before exercising any right of withdrawal, we would recommend parents discuss their concerns with the head teacher.

Requests for withdrawals are best made in writing; the simple text below should be perfectly adequate.

*As parents of [child's name] we formally request that **he/she** be withdrawn from **worship/RE** of any kind in future, without any detriment.*

The Department for Education says:

*"Parents have the right to withdraw their children from all or any part of religious education. They do not have to give a reason to the school and the school must comply with their request.*

*"Schools should ensure that parents who want to withdraw their children from religious education are aware of the religious education syllabus and that it is relevant to all students and respects their own personal beliefs. They should be given the opportunity to discuss this, if they wish. The school may also wish to review such a request each year, in discussion with the parents.*

*"The right of withdrawal does not extend to other areas of the curriculum when, as may happen on occasion, spontaneous questions on religious matters are raised by students or there are issues related to religion that arise in other subjects such as history or citizenship.*

*"It is the responsibility of the school to supervise children who are withdrawn from religious education, although they are not required to provide alternative activities. They are not expected to incur additional costs through providing supervision for the child."*

### Scotland

The law is covered in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. The Scottish Executive's policy on the provision of religious observance in Scottish schools is contained in Circular 1/2005.

Also relevant is the Scottish Executive's 2011 letter to the head teachers of all schools which includes reminding them of the right to withdraw and schools' responsibility to facilitate this.

On the subject, Citizens Advice (Scotland) notes:

*"If you do withdraw your child from religious observation or education, the school must make suitable arrangements for your child to take part in a worthwhile alternative activity. In no circumstances should a child be disadvantaged as a result of withdrawing from religious observation or education."*

### Academies

There is some specific guidance for academies in the free school application guide which states: "Your school must provide a meaningful alternative for students whose parents wish to withdraw them from RE, collective worship or other faith-related studies."



### Sixth Form Students

Sixth-form students at mainstream schools and maintained special schools are able to withdraw themselves from collective worship, without the need for a parent's permission. Section 55 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 amended section 71 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to ensure the right of sixth-form students to be excused from attendance at religious worship if they request so.

## 6.5 Avoiding religious privileging or discriminating language

Because of the pervasiveness of religious privilege in our society, religiosity is often framed as the default, or conflated with goodness. This can be problematic for students gaining a broad and balanced understanding of religious and non-religious worldviews and their effects.

Things to be mindful of include language that:

- Assumes everyone believes in a god or gods or has a religion, or that this is a default
- Frames certain forms of religion as more or less authentic
- Conflates religiosity with goodness
- Frames religion as good or bad by default
- Assumes people's religious beliefs based on their background
- Generalises about religion, religions or worldviews

## 6.6 Advice

For advice on these resources or on how you can tackle religious privilege and discrimination in your school, or to discuss a secularist viewpoint on education, please feel free to contact [education@secularism.org.uk](mailto:education@secularism.org.uk)

## Appendix 1: Key questions subject breakdown

	Question	Main subject area(s)	Other subject area(s)
<b>Theme 1. Core principles</b>	What is secularism?	Politics Religion and belief education	Citizenship SMSC Philosophy
	Is secularism a religion?	Politics Religion and belief education	Citizenship SMSC Philosophy
	Is secularism a form of atheism, agnosticism or humanism?	Religion and belief education	Politics
	Who is a secularist?	Politics Religion and belief education	Citizenship SMSC Philosophy
	How do secularists think about religion?	Religion and belief education	Politics Citizenship SMSC Philosophy
	How do secularists think about decisions?	Politics Religion and belief education Citizenship	SMSC Philosophy
	Why do people support or oppose secularism?	Politics Religion and belief education	Citizenship SMSC Philosophy
	Where does secularism come from?	Religion and belief education	Philosophy History
	What different types of secularism are there?	Politics Citizenship	Geography Religion and belief education
	What are religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?	Politics Religion and belief education Citizenship	SMSC Philosophy Fundamental British Values
<b>Theme 2. Freedom of expression</b>	What is free speech?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Religion and belief education Arts
	What is blasphemy?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values Religion and belief education	Arts SMSC
	What is hate speech?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Religion and belief education Art and design
	Should there be limits to free speech?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Religion and belief education Art and design Philosophy

<b>Theme 3. Equality &amp; human rights</b>	What is freedom of and from religion?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	What is apostasy?	Religion and belief education Citizenship Fundamental British Values	SMSC
	Should freedom of and from religion have limits?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	What are equality laws?	PSHE Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	What is direct and indirect discrimination?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	Should we have 'one law for all'?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	When can religions discriminate?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	What are your rights at work?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	What are 'children's rights'?	PSHE Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	What are "reproductive rights"?	PSHE Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	What does religious discrimination look like?	PSHE Citizenship Fundamental British Values SMSC	Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy

<b>Theme 4. Secularism, religion and society: key debates</b>	What is a secular democracy?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values Politics	SMSC Religion and belief education
	What is a theocracy?	Citizenship Fundamental British Values Politics	SMSC Religion and belief education Geography
	Are secularism and pluralism in conflict?	Citizenship Fundamental British SMSC	Religion and belief education
	Are we a 'Christian country'?	Citizenship Politics Religion and belief education	History SMSC Fundamental British Values
	Should we have a state church?	Citizenship Politics Religion and belief education	SMSC Fundamental British Values
	Should religion influence government?	Citizenship Politics Religion and belief education	SMSC Fundamental British Values Philosophy
	What is secularisation?	Citizenship Religion and belief education	History Politics SMSC Fundamental British Values
	Should government ceremonies be Christian?	Citizenship Politics	Religion and belief education
	Should religions be exempt from animal welfare laws?	Citizenship Politics	Religion and belief education SMSC
	Should religions run public services?	Citizenship Politics	Religion and belief education SMSC
	What about social action by religious groups?	Citizenship Politics	Religion and belief education SMSC
	What role should religion have in schools?	Citizenship Politics	Religion and belief education SMSC
	What role should worship have in schools?	Citizenship Politics Religion and belief education	SMSC
	What are 'British Values'?	Fundamental British Values SMSC	Citizenship Politics Religion and belief education Philosophy
	What role should religion have in healthcare?	PSHE Citizenship Politics Religion and belief education	SMSC
	How should Religious Education be taught?	Citizenship Politics Religion and belief education	SMSC



<b>Theme 5. Secularism, art and literature</b>	How does art challenge religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?	Arts	Religion and belief education SMSC
	How does literature challenge religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?	English Literature	Religion and belief education SMSC
<b>Theme 6. Secularism and history</b>	What role has secularism played in British history?	History	Politics Geography Religion and belief education
	What has secularism looked like in different historical settings?	History	Politics Geography Religion and belief education



## Appendix 2: Exploring Secularism reading list

The following books may be of interest for a deeper background on secularism.

### How to Be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom, Jacques Berlinerblau

“Weary of religious conservatives urging “defence of marriage” and atheist polemicists decrying the crimes of religion? Sick of pundits who want only to recast American life in their own image? Americans are stuck in an all-or-nothing landscape for religion in public life. What are reasonable citizens to do?”

“Seen as godless by the religious and weak by the atheists, secularism mostly has been misunderstood. In *How to Be Secular*, Berlinerblau argues for a return to America’s hard-won secular tradition; the best way to protect religious diversity and freedom lies in keeping an eye on the encroachment of each into the other.

“Berlinerblau passionately defends the virtues of secularism, reminds us what it is and what it can protect, and urges us to mobilize around its cause, which is for all Americans to continue to enjoy freedom for – and from – religion. This is an urgent wake-up call for progressives in and out of all faiths.”

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/How-Be-Secular-Religious-Freedom/dp/0544105168>

### Secularism: Politics, Religion, and Freedom (Very Short Introductions), by Andrew Copson

“Today secularism is an increasingly hot topic in public, political, and religious debate across the globe. It is embodied in the conflict between secular republics – from the US to India – and the challenges they face from resurgent religious identity politics; in the challenges faced by religious states like those of the Arab world from insurgent secularists; and in states like China where calls for freedom of belief are challenging a state imposed non-religious worldview. In this short introduction Andrew Copson tells the story of secularism, taking in momentous episodes in world history, such as the great transition of Europe from religious orthodoxy to pluralism, the global struggle for human rights and democracy, and the origins of modernity. He also considers the role of secularism when engaging with some of the most contentious political and legal issues of our time: ‘blasphemy’, ‘apostasy’, religious persecution, religious discrimination, religious schools, and freedom of belief and thought in a divided world.”

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Secularism-Politics-Religion-Freedom-Introductions/dp/0198809131>

### Dare To Stand Alone: The Story of Charles Bradlaugh, by Bryan Niblett

Considered the definitive biography of the National Secular Society’s founder, the book gives an insight into the origins and early challenges of the British secularist movement. It tells the story of Bradlaugh’s trial for publishing a pamphlet on birth control and how he eventually took up the seat in Parliament to which he was elected.

Find a review and links to purchase at <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2011/02/dare-to-stand-alone--the-story-of-charles-bradlaugh1>

### Political Secularism, Religion, and the State (Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics), by Jonathan Fox

“This book examines 111 types of state religion policy in 177 countries between 1990 and 2008. Jonathan Fox argues that policy is largely a result of the competition between political secular actors and religious actors, both of which try to influence state religion policy. While there are other factors that influence state religion policy and both the secular and religious camps are divided.

Fox offers that the secular-religious competition perspective provides critical insight into the nature of religious politics across the globe. While many states have both increased and decreased their involvement in religion, Fox demonstrates that states which have become more involved in religion are far more common.”

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Political-Secularism-Religion-Cambridge-Politics/dp/1107433916>

### Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey (Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics), by Ahmet T. Kuru

“Why do secular states pursue different policies toward religion? This book provides a generalizable argument about the impact of ideological struggles on the public policy making process, as well as a state-religion regimes index of 197 countries. More specifically, it analyzes why American state policies are largely tolerant of religion, whereas French and Turkish policies generally prohibit its public visibility, as seen in their bans on Muslim headscarves. In the United States, the dominant ideology is ‘passive secularism’, which requires the state to play a passive role, by allowing public visibility of religion. Dominant ideology in France and Turkey is ‘assertive secularism’, which demands that the state play an assertive role in excluding religion from the public sphere. Passive and assertive secularism became dominant in these cases



through certain historical processes, particularly the presence or absence of an ancien régime based on the marriage between monarchy and hegemonic religion during state-building periods.”

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Secularism-State-Policies-toward-Religion/dp/0521741343>

### A Short History of Secularism (I.B.Tauris Short Histories), by Graeme Smith

“What does it mean to call Western society ‘secular’? What is ‘secularism’? And how should we understand the concept of ‘secularism’ in international relations, particularly the clash between radical Islam and the West? The Latin term from which the word ‘secular’ is derived - ‘saeculum’ - means ‘generation’ or ‘age’, and came to mean that which belongs to this life, to the here and now, in this world. It is widely used as a shorthand for the ideology which shapes contemporary society without reference to the divine. However, according to Graeme Smith, ‘secularism’ represents a great deal more. He offers a radical reappraisal of the notion of secularism and its history, beginning with the Greeks and proceeding to modernity and the contemporary period. The assumption that the West is becoming increasingly secular is often unquestioned. By contrast, Dr Smith discerns a different kind of society: one informed by a historical legacy which makes sense only when it is appreciated that it is religious. Secularism was born of Christianity. Daringly - and very originally - Smith argues that it is impossible to understand the idea of the secular without appreciating that, at root, it is Christian. ‘A Short History of Secularism’ will fundamentally reshape discussions of western culture, religion and politics. It will have strong appeal to students of religion, political philosophy, and the history of ideas.”

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Short-History-Secularism-I-B-Tauris-Histories/dp/1845115775>

## Appendix 3: Glossary

### Atheism

Atheism is the lack of a belief in gods, and therefore an atheist is someone who does not have a belief in any gods. They might or might not actively believe that particular gods don't exist. Atheists may follow the practices of a religion for cultural or spiritual reasons and some religions which do not include a belief in gods might have atheist members.

A theist is someone who believes in one god (monotheism) or multiple gods (polytheism). A theist might or might not regard themselves as part of a religion.

### Apostasy

Apostasy is the abandonment or renunciation of a religious or political belief, principle or identity. People can be labelled as apostates for holding alternative versions of religious or political beliefs. Apostasy and apostates are generally considered pejoratives and apostates suffer discrimination in many cases. Some people self-identify as apostates in order to celebrate its positive connotations for independent thinking or to rob the label of its power as an insult.

### Blasphemy

Blasphemy is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as “something that you say or do that shows you do not respect God or a religion”. Generally the term is applied by different groups to describe beliefs or statements they have a theological disagreement with, because either they differ on interpretations of a religion or criticise religious ideas and institutions.

### Humanism

Traditionally ‘humanist’ has been a label applied to people or worldviews that are primarily concerned with the ethical value and agency of human beings, or that emphasise reason over dogma or superstition in decision-making.

Although many religious traditions have strong histories of humanist thought, the label generally applies nowadays to people or worldviews which are non-religious. So a humanist is someone who believes humans are capable of being ethical and moral without religion or a god. The term ‘secular humanism’ may be used to emphasise the non-religious nature of modern day humanism.

Most forms of contemporary – and many forms of historic – humanism include support for some form of secularism.

### Privilege

Privilege exists when a group, ideology or identity is given special treatment because of differences in power related to other groups.

### Privilege blindness

Privilege blindness refers to being unaware of privilege because of being so accustomed to something being treated specially. When an advantage or special treatment is normalised, people who benefit from it (and others) start not to notice it, or think of it as normal, natural or the default.

### Religiopolitical

This is an adjective which refers to issues, worldviews or movements which combine religion and politics.

### Religious privilege

Religious privilege exists when a group, ideology or identity is treated specially for religious reasons. E.g. A law that treats two similar ideas or people differently because of the religious nature of one of them.

### Secular

‘Secular’ means religiously neutral or unrelated to religion, e.g. brushing your teeth is a secular activity. Beyond this simple definition, secular is a contested adjective. It comes from a Latin word *saecularis* or *saeculum* meaning ‘the world’, ‘generation’ or ‘age’. Many religious traditions draw a distinction between the temporal and the divine, or the worldly and the spiritual, considering that both have their place. In some contexts secular is used to mean non-religious.

### Secularisation

Secularisation is a label that has been applied to many historical and contemporary processes. It can refer to the transfer of religious assets to secular organisations, the trend of many western countries’ populations to become less religious, the decline in religious interest or ideas, the removal of religious ideas or symbols from certain spheres or the disentanglement of religious concerns from everyday life.

### Secularism

Secularism is a political approach which aims to balance freedom of and from religion with other human rights. Its main principles are that religion should not be privileged or discriminated against by the state. There are many different models of secularism. A secularist might or might not be personally religious or non-religious.






### Theocracy

Theocracy could refer to a worldview that believes religious rules should govern most areas of life, or a system of government where either authority derives from religious positions, or a religious ideology or organisation runs the state.

**Theocratic**

This is an adjective describing something as being related to theocracy. It may be applied to ideas, e.g. “the idea we should ban ‘blasphemy’ is theocratic”, or movements, e.g. “the ‘Ban Blasphemy Party’ is theocratic”.

Published by National Secular Society  
25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL  
Company limited by guarantee. Registered in England No. 1418145

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