

SECULARISM

‘Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief.’

ARTICLE 9, UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

‘One of our key aims is that the UK should be a secular state guaranteeing human rights, with no privilege or discrimination on grounds of religion or belief. This is not only because it is the fairest approach, but also because it reflects the diversity of Britain today.’

HUMANISTS UK

WHAT IS SECULARISM?

People sometimes get atheism, humanism, and secularism mixed up but they do not mean the same thing. The word ‘secularism’ was historically used to describe a non-religious worldview, and non-religious people and worldviews are still sometimes described as ‘secular’. However, the word ‘secularism’ today is normally used to describe a political position on how society and the state should be organised. Someone who supports secularism is a ‘**secularist**’.

Secularists believe the following:

1. There should be a **separation** between religious and state institutions
2. Individuals should have **freedom of religion or belief**, and be free to reject or change their beliefs
3. There should be **equal treatment** and no privilege or discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief

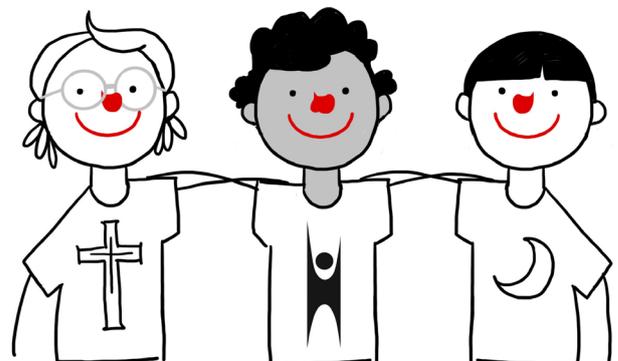


THE CASE FOR SECULARISM

The UK today is a **plural society**. A plural society is one in which there live people from different cultures and traditions with a range of worldviews. Half the population of the UK is non-religious and there are people with many different religious identities.

There are three common arguments for secularism:

1. **The argument for freedom:** We all want to be free to believe what we want and live our lives how we choose. Many people also want others to be free to form their own beliefs. Secularism is vital for guaranteeing the freedoms of those from minority religions and the non-religious.
2. **The argument for fairness:** We all want to be treated fairly and it is unfair to give special treatment to people from one religion or belief.
3. **The argument for peace:** Secularism is an effective way to avoid conflict between people from different groups. Everyone is treated equally and so should not feel the need to turn to anger or violence. Freedom of belief can also contribute to an individual’s inner peace.

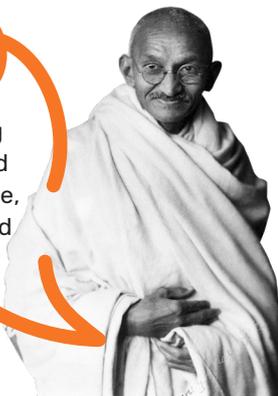


Opponents of secularism will often argue that it is impossible for the state to be completely ‘neutral’ when it comes to religion or belief. Supporters of secularism will typically reply that this doesn’t mean that we should not aim for equal treatment and as neutral a state as possible.

WHO ARE SECULARISTS?

Humanists will typically be secularists, but so will many religious people. The Founding Fathers of the United States were Christian but believed the country should be secular. Gandhi, who campaigned for Indian independence from the British Empire, was a devout Hindu but supported secularism.

'I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after your secular welfare, health, communications... and so on, but not your or my religion.'



MOHANDAS GANDHI

ARE THERE ANY SECULAR STATES?

When states are not secular, they privilege one religion or belief above the others. The UK is not a secular state. It has an established church: the Church of England. The Queen is its head, and bishops sit by right in the UK Parliament. Many humanists and other secularists campaign for the removal of these privileges. This is called disestablishment.

China has a policy of state atheism. This means it is not a secular state. Some states are secular, such as the USA, France, India, and Turkey. However, secularism is under threat in many places around the world today. Many humanists and other secularists see this as a threat to freedom, equality, and peace.

WHAT DO SECULARISTS CAMPAIGN FOR?

In the UK, secularists might campaign against the following:

- 26 Church of England bishops sit in the UK Parliament, in the House of Lords
- State-funded religious schools are free to discriminate in their admissions, employment, and curriculum
- Schools have to hold daily Christian acts of worship
- Religious marriages are legally recognised across the UK, but in England and Wales humanist marriages are not

In other countries, secularists may be campaigning simply for the rights of non-religious people or those from minority religions to be open about their beliefs. There are 13 countries in which being non-religious is punishable by death.

“What are the virtues of citizens required in a secular state? We have to accept that other people have views different from our own. We have to adopt a measure of tolerance in our dealings with others, be willing to extend freedom of speech, freedom of worship even to those we might disagree with. That can be very hard, but it's the most effective way to guarantee a stable, peaceful society.”

ANDREW COPSON,
Chief Executive, Humanists UK



QUESTIONS:

- What does a secularist believe should be the state's position on religion and belief?
- What arguments are put forward for secularism?
- Are all secularists humanists?
- What might a secularist campaign for?
- What do you think? Is secularism the fairest system for everyone? (Should the church have any powers over how a country is run? Is it OK to discriminate on grounds of religion and belief? Should you be allowed to believe whatever you want, and what would be the consequences if certain beliefs were banned?)