

Article: What is secularism?

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'Secularism' is an overloaded term – one upon which people have put too many different meanings. However, the most common meaning is equal treatment by the state of all its citizens, regardless of religion or belief. Someone who supports secularism is a 'secularist'.

Many states around the world are not secular, or are legally secular but still behave in ways that discriminate on the basis of religion or belief. Often this discrimination is against the non-religious, who are either in a minority, or, even where they are in a majority, are typically only recently so. They are also often less well organised than religious groups, and are less well funded.

Humanists often campaign for secularism, not just because the law often discriminates against them, but also because a secular state is the best way a state can maximise freedom whilst minimising harm – a key principle that humanists support. And secularism is not just good for the non-religious. When states are not secular, it is typically because they privilege one or maybe a few religions above others. Secularism is therefore vital for guaranteeing the freedoms of the religious as well.

Opponents of secularism will often argue that it is impossible to be 'neutral' when it comes to religion or belief, and therefore the notion that a state can treat different religions and beliefs equally is a fiction. Supporters will reply that while secularism is never perfect, this doesn't mean we shouldn't strive for equal treatment – and at any rate, even if perfect secularism is impossible, it does not follow that we should therefore support an established state religion.

Secularism underpins most of Humanists UK's campaigning work. The UK is not a secular state because England has an established church (the Church of England) and Scotland has what is billed as a 'national church' (the Church of Scotland). But formal establishment is not the only issue humanists in the UK focus on. Further issues include:

- The fact that a third of state-funded schools in England, a smaller number in Wales and Scotland, and almost all in Northern Ireland, are religious in character, and these schools are free to discriminate in their admissions, employment, and curriculum policies
- The fact that the rest of the schools have to hold Christian acts of worship – which in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland has to be every day
- The fact that there are 26 Church of England bishops who sit as of right in the UK Parliament's upper chamber, the House of Lords
- The fact that there is significant state funding for religious groups in providing public services, and those groups are in many ways free to discriminate on the basis of religion or belief whilst doing so
- The fact that religious marriages are legally recognised across the UK, but, in England and Wales, humanist marriages are not
- The fact that public service broadcasting includes many programmes for religious people or about religions but essentially no equivalent content for non-religious people or about humanism
- The fact that in hospitals, prisons, and the armed forces, there is significant state funding of religious chaplains, but little equivalent provision of non-religious pastoral support