

What is secularism?

Animation script

We are all different. We have different backgrounds and different worldviews – different answers to life’s biggest questions. Do our disagreements have to lead to conflict? Or can we live well together in spite of our differences? And, if so, how?

For many people, the answer is **secularism**. Secularism isn’t a worldview. It is a practical approach to organising society that can be shared by people with different worldviews.

Supporters of secularism think we should all have the **freedom** to believe different things, and that everybody should be treated **equally** whatever their identity or beliefs. No one should be discriminated against or punished on these grounds.

Secularism is about **fairness** and **inclusivity**. Everybody should have equal access to public services, such as schools and hospitals. No worldview should hold a privileged position or have any special power or influence over the state’s decision making. Instead, the state should aim to be impartial. Everyone should have a voice.

Secularism is about **freedom** of religion or belief, and the freedom to reject or change our religion or belief. That’s essential for human happiness. It isn’t about banning religion or religious practices. We should all be free to express ourselves and live how we wish, so long as we are not causing harm to others, or acting in ways that infringe their rights and freedoms.

And secularism is about **peace**. Freedom and fair treatment mean most people are less likely to turn to anger or violence to get what they want. We can also feel a sense of inner peace when our freedom is respected.

To work at its best, secularism is supported by **education** and **dialogue**. This means the opportunity to learn about different religions and beliefs, and children from different backgrounds growing up alongside each other, not separated. Education also supports our freedom to decide for ourselves what we believe.

Talking through dialogue means we can understand each other better and live together more peacefully. It also helps us to recognise what we share – which is often more than you might think. We can identify common ground, and work together on causes that support a better world.

Secularists believe that secularism benefits everyone, and it is supported by both religious and non-religious people.

Secularism – it’s about freedom, fairness, and peace. It’s about **living well together**.

Animation script with suggested questions for discussion

| Script | Questions for discussion |
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| <p>We are all different.</p> <p>We have different backgrounds and different worldviews – different answers to life’s biggest questions.</p> <p>Do our disagreements have to lead to conflict? Or can we live well together in spite of our differences? And, if so, how?</p> | <p>What challenges might diversity of belief create in society?</p> <p>What benefits does it bring?</p> <p>Given our differences, how can we all live well together?</p> |
| <p>For many people, the answer is secularism.</p> | |
| <p>Secularism isn’t a worldview.</p> <p>It is a practical approach to organising society that can be shared by people with different worldviews.</p> <p>Supporters of secularism think we should all have the freedom to believe different things and that everybody should be treated equally whatever their identity or beliefs. No one should be discriminated against or punished on these grounds.</p> | <p>What is a worldview and why does secularism not fit that definition?</p> <p>Should we all have the freedom to choose our own path in life?</p> <p>How might people be discriminated against on the basis of their identity or beliefs?</p> |
| <p>Secularism is about fairness and inclusivity.</p> <p>Everybody should have equal access to public services, such as schools and hospitals.</p> | <p>Should a school be allowed to discriminate on which children it admits based on the religion of their parents? Would we allow the same of other public services?</p> |
| <p>No worldview should hold a privileged position or have any special power or influence over the state’s decision making.</p> <p>Instead, the state should aim to be impartial. Everyone should have a voice.</p> | <p>Should we have a state church? Should representatives of that state church sit by right in our parliament?</p> |
| <p>Secularism is about freedom of religion or belief, and the freedom to reject or change our religion or belief.</p> <p>That’s essential for human happiness.</p> | <p>Should we all be free to believe what we want?</p> <p>Does freedom of belief support happiness? Is anything more important than happiness?</p> |

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| <p>It isn't about banning religion or religious practices. We should all be free to express ourselves and live how we wish, so long as we are not causing harm to others, or acting in ways that infringe their rights and freedoms.</p> | <p>How far should our freedom to manifest our beliefs extend? What should and shouldn't we be allowed to do? Can you think of examples?</p> |
| <p>And secularism is about peace.</p> <p>Freedom and fair treatment mean most people are less likely to turn to anger or violence to get what they want.</p> <p>We can also feel a sense of inner peace when our freedom is respected.</p> | <p>Can secularism support a more peaceful society?</p> |
| <p>To work at its best, secularism is supported by education and dialogue.</p> | <p>Why might education and dialogue be important?</p> |
| <p>This means the opportunity to learn about different religions and beliefs, and children from different backgrounds growing up alongside each other, not separated.</p> <p>Education also supports our freedom to decide for ourselves what we believe.</p> | <p>What value is there in learning about different worldviews?</p> <p>What are the risks of dividing people from different religions and beliefs into different schools and communities?</p> <p>Is a broad and balanced education essential for freedom of religion or belief?</p> |
| <p>Talking through dialogue means we can understand each other better and live together more peacefully.</p> <p>It also helps us to recognise what we share – which is often more than you might think.</p> <p>We can identify common ground, and work together on causes that support a better world.</p> | <p>Does understanding each other better mean we are more or less likely to get on with each other?</p> <p>What do most people share? Think about people's needs, beliefs, and values.</p> <p>Can you think of any examples of times when people have worked together on shared goals?</p> |
| <p>Secularists believe that secularism benefits everyone, and it is supported by both religious and non-religious people.</p> <p>Secularism – it's about freedom, fairness, and peace. It's about living well together.</p> | <p>Does secularism benefit everyone (or at least nearly everyone)?</p> <p>What is your view of secularism?</p> |

What is secularism?: Teachers' notes

Understanding Humanism's *What is secularism?* animation provides a short introduction to what secularism is, along with the case for secularism as it is presented by secularists. Watching the video should raise questions and support conversations about the benefits of secularism, the challenges it faces, and where opposition to secularism might be found. These notes are designed to expand on the content in the video to support further discussion. A set of slides and classroom activities are also available (see the links below).

Why has Humanists UK created this resource?

Humanists are generally strong supporters of secularism, believing in the right to freedom of religion or belief. Secularism lies behind many of their campaigning areas for equal treatment of the non-religious. However, secularism is not only supported by humanists. Many religious people also see secularism as a valuable principle.

'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

Learning questions

- 1) Where do we find diversity in society?
- 2) What are the core features of secularism?
- 3) What might a secularist campaign for?
- 4) What arguments are put forward for secularism?
- 5) Are all secularists non-religious?
- 6) Are there any secular states? Are they all the same?
- 7) What threats does secularism face?
- 8) What opposition is there to secularism?
- 9) How can education and dialogue support the goals of secularism?
- 10) What do you think? Is secularism the best system for everyone?
 - a) Should a religion have any power over how a country is run?
 - b) Is it OK to discriminate on the grounds of religion or belief?
 - c) Should you be allowed to believe whatever you want?
- 11) Given none of us can choose the religion or belief of the family into which we are born, what laws on religion and belief should the state impose and what freedoms should it guarantee?

Living in a pluralistic society

The UK today is a pluralistic society. That means one in which there live people with different cultures and traditions with a range of worldviews. The religion and belief landscape in the UK, like many countries in the West, is more complex and diverse than ever before.

In the 2021 census of England and Wales

- 46% of people described themselves as Christian
- 37% as having no religion
- 6.5% as Muslim
- 1.7% as Hindu
- With a wide variety of other religions and beliefs making up the rest

Diversity of belief gives rise to potential risks and challenges: possible prejudice and discrimination; uninformed misconceptions about those who are different; disagreement over values and goals; a breakdown in social cohesion; and even conflict between people with different worldviews.

How might humanists respond? Typically, humanists will highlight three main ways we can alleviate these risks and live well together:

- 1) They argue the case for **secularism**: a system in which the human right to freedom of thought and expression is guaranteed, where there is no religious privilege, and where everyone is treated equally regardless of religion or belief.
- 2) They campaign for a high-quality, inclusive **education** about religious and non-religious worldviews, available to all, so that young people are equipped for life in a pluralistic society.
- 3) They promote and engage in **dialogue** with people with different worldviews to build mutual understanding, identify common ground, and engage in shared action.

'We are committed to secularism – the principle that, in a plural, open society where people follow many different religious and non-religious ways of life, the communal institutions that we share (and together pay for) should provide a neutral public space where we can all meet on equal terms. State secularism, where state institutions are separate from religious institutions or the state is otherwise neutral on matters of religion or belief, guarantees the maximum freedom for all, including religious believers. In such a state, no one should be privileged nor disadvantaged on grounds of their religious or non-religious beliefs.'

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What is secularism?

People sometimes get atheism, humanism, and secularism mixed up, but they do not mean the same thing. Sometimes the word '**secular**' is used to mean something similar to 'not religious' (non-religious people and worldviews are still sometimes described as 'secular') but more often it means 'unconnected with religion or belief' (for example the Natural History Museum and the charity Oxfam are secular in this sense). Someone might say a society is becoming more secular, meaning it is becoming less religious or that the state is becoming less connected to one particular religion or worldview – this is sometimes called '**secularisation**'.

The word 'secularism', when it was first coined in the nineteenth century by the newspaper editor George Jacob Holyoake, was used to describe a worldly, non-religious worldview (one similar to humanism). However, the word '**secularism**' today does not describe a worldview. It is predominantly used to describe a political position on how society should be organised in relation to religion and belief, and on the responsibilities of the state on such matters. Someone who supports secularism is a '**secularist**'.

Secularists believe the following:

- 1) There should be a **separation** between religious institutions and state institutions: no single religious or non-religious institution should say how the country should be run or have any special influence over the law; nor should the government seek to influence citizens' religion or belief, say how they must live their private lives, or impose a state-sanctioned conception of the good life.
- 2) Individuals should have **freedom** of religion or belief, and be free to reject or change their beliefs, within the limits of public order and the rights of others.
- 3) There should be **equal treatment** and no privilege or discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.

A secular state defends the rights of individuals to express religious commitments, but it also protects their right both to reject any religious commitment and indeed to express views critical of religion or belief. Secularists believe people should be free to practice their religion or belief, so long as they are not causing harm to others, or acting in ways that infringe the rights and freedoms of others. Secularism does not mean denying the role religion has played in a country's history and culture. Religious art, music, architecture, stories, and influence can still be celebrated.

To function effectively, secularism requires the support of **education** and **dialogue**. In a pluralistic society people need to learn at least enough about each other's beliefs and practices to understand each other. Where young people from different backgrounds have the opportunity to grow up alongside each other, they are more likely to connect and form bonds than if they are kept separated. If freedom of religion or belief is truly to be realised, that also requires the opportunity to learn about the diversity of belief so that one is able to make up one's own mind what one believes.

This applies just as much to adults as it does to young people. Opportunities to talk to people with alternative worldviews can support connections and empathy. Common ground and shared interests can often be found that can bring people and communities together. While education and dialogue can often help, they are not guaranteed to. In the case of extreme differences of worldview, knowing more does not necessarily mean feeling closer. However, in many cases, we can discover that we have much in common.

What might secularists campaign for?

Secularists may differ on how actively they campaign for particular issues, but in the UK, secularists might campaign on the following:

- The disestablishment of the established state church (the Church of England)
- The removal of the automatic right of 26 Church of England bishops to sit in the UK Parliament in the House of Lords
- An end to state funding of religious schools that are free to discriminate in their admissions, employment, and curriculum
- The need for an education about religion and worldviews in schools that is objective, critical, and pluralistic
- The replacement of daily acts of worship with inclusive assemblies
- The end to state funding for special transport services for parents who want to send their children to religious schools (particularly because the same service is not available to the non-religious)
- The end to state funding for religious groups to provide public services, when those groups are free to discriminate on the basis of religion or belief and sexual orientation whilst doing so
- Legal recognition of humanist marriages so that they hold an equal status to religious marriages in England and Wales (they are already legal in Scotland and Northern Ireland)
- Equal access to non-religious pastoral support in hospitals, prisons, and the armed forces
- For national ceremonies such as remembrance ceremonies to be inclusive of all faiths and none
- More equal treatment of religious and non-religious perspectives in public broadcasting (e.g. including humanist voices on *Thought for the Day*)

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. In many countries not sharing the religion of the state is a crime and there are 12 countries in which blasphemy or apostasy is punishable by death.

The case for secularism

'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

Three arguments are commonly put forward to defend secularism. These are arguments which can be accepted by many religious and non-religious people. Each argument on its own may not convince everyone but, together, secularists believe they provide a powerful case. They are the argument for freedom, the argument for fairness, and the argument for peace:

1) **The argument for freedom**

- Secularism is supported on human rights grounds, particularly through respect for freedom of thought, expression, and choice over how we live our lives. We each want to be free to believe what we want and live our lives in accordance with our beliefs.
- Many people also want others to have the freedom to form their own beliefs – people often value personal autonomy.
- Diversity, rather than uniformity, of thought can also be valuable to society as it allows different perspectives to be explored.

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, or for one worldview to have any privileged powers over the state's decision making. Everyone wants equal opportunities. No one wants to feel oppressed or excluded.

3) **The argument for peace** (the pragmatic argument)

- When states allow one worldview to dominate, it can lead to persecution and conflict. A secular state tries to act in the interests of all groups. Secularism can therefore be 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. Secularism does not guarantee peace, but it supports it.
- Freedom of belief can also contribute to an individual's inner peace, happiness, and wellbeing.

Secularism is particularly important for guaranteeing the freedom and fair treatment of those from minority religions and the non-religious.

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

Article 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The veil of ignorance

'A just society is a society that if you knew everything about it, you'd be willing to enter it in a random place.'

John Rawls (1921-2002), political philosopher

The political philosopher John Rawls proposed a thought experiment. He asked us to imagine that we are responsible for designing a just society. However, we do not know what position we will hold in this society once it has been created. We do not know what our gender, race, or sexual orientation will be. We do not know whether we will be healthy or sick, or suffer from any disabilities. We do not know whether we will be rich or poor. We don't even know what our tastes, passions, and interests will be.

Rawls described this as being placed behind a '**veil of ignorance**'. He believed that such uncertainty provided the necessary motivation to consider what would make a truly just society. Through not wishing to disadvantage ourselves, we would need to ensure that no one in the society was disadvantaged. We would be required to empathise with those who, in the real world, hold a different position to ourselves and consider how we would wish to be treated in their situation. From behind the veil, Rawls believed we would opt for a much fairer society than we have in reality.

He argued that people behind the veil would be drawn to two principles: **individual freedom** and **equality of opportunity**. These would help to guarantee that no one would be penalised due to an accident of birth or circumstance.

Secularists are concerned about inequalities in society relating to religion or belief. They campaign against privilege or prejudice where it exists on such a basis. Rawls' thought experiment can support us to understand why this might be. If one did not know whether one was going to be born into a religious or non-religious family, or if one was unaware of what one's initial inclinations towards religious or non-religious beliefs would be (or how these might change throughout one's life), then one would likely wish to be born into a society in which there existed **freedom** of religion or belief and **fair** treatment of all. One would wish for a society in which one could live according to one's beliefs without fear of persecution or punishment. One would wish for a secular society.

'In a world where people will inevitably continue to disagree on matters of religious belief, and where religious believers will continue to feel strongly about their competing religious allegiances, a secular state in this sense – a neutral state – is the only kind of state which can plausibly be seen to be in the common interest and which all can accept without feeling themselves to be the victims of discrimination or exclusion.'

Richard Norman, *The Case for Secularism*

Who supports secularism?

Secularism is supported by both religious and non-religious people (including humanists). It is possible to hold strong religious beliefs but believe that secularism provides the best way of organising society.

Many of the Founding Fathers of the United States were Christian but believed the country should be secular. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru campaigned for Indian independence from the British Empire. Gandhi was a Hindu, while Nehru was a humanist. Both believed the new Indian state should be founded on the principles of 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 will look after your secular wealth, health, communications...'

Mahatma Gandhi

- 50% of Britons want the Church of England to be separate from the State, compared to only 21% who want them to continue to be linked.¹ (Even as far back as 1957 there was not strong support for continuing the connection between church and state, with the public split 37% to 37% on the matter.)
- Among Anglicans, 46% want to keep the connection between church and state, while 30% say it should be disestablished.
- 61% of the population (including 51% of Anglicans) believe bishops should no longer automatically be given seats in the House of Lords.
- 71% of British adults agree that 'religion and law should be kept strictly separate', with just 12% disagreeing.²

¹ yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50933-is-it-time-to-disestablish-the-church-of-england and ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/Internal_ChurchofEngland_241107_publish.pdf

² <https://iifl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/IIFL-Faith-Attitudes-Tracker-August-2024-Jewish-booster.pdf>

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 King 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.

Today just 10% of the UK population identify themselves as Church of England and only 1% of those under 25 years old³. Secularists believe these facts strengthen the case for disestablishment.

There are many other countries around the world that are **not secular**:

- **Denmark** has a Protestant state church.
- The constitution of **Myanmar** grants special preferences towards Buddhism
- Islam is the state religion of **Saudi Arabia**.
- In **Greece**, the Greek Orthodox Church is constitutionally recognized as the 'prevailing religion' of the country.
- **Israel** is defined in several of its laws as a 'Jewish state' (however, there is debate about whether 'Jewish' refers to an ethnic or religious group).
- **China** has a policy of official state Marxist-atheism – citizens are only allowed to practice particular state sanctioned religions, and members of the ruling party are strongly discouraged from holding religious faith.
- Catholicism is the state religion in **Costa Rica**.
- **Iran's** constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and specifies Shia Islam as the official state religion.

Some countries can have a state religion and be very secular in how they operate (Denmark, for example), and some still allow citizens freedom of religion or belief. However, in many non-secular countries, life can be very difficult for anyone who does not share the state religion. One can find persecution of minorities and those speaking up for freedoms, as well as violence (and corresponding reactionary protest), such as has been witnessed in Iran, Myanmar, Israel, Sudan, and China. In some countries, being non-religious can be a criminal offence (in 12 countries around the world blasphemy or apostasy are punishable by death).

Many states are constitutionally **secular**, such as the **USA, France, India, and Turkey**. However, countries can be secular in name and not in practice if freedom and equal treatment are not respected, and secularism is under threat in many places around the world today. There have been rising tensions in states that are, on paper, secular, but have governments that have rejected secular principles and turned towards religious nationalism, for example in India and the USA.

³ British Social Attitudes Survey

Threats to secularism

Secularism is under threat in many parts of the world today, including in countries that are secular states.

Many countries in the Arab world are far from secular, as are countries with a significant global influence such as Russia or China.

Rising **religious nationalism** in several secular countries has seen the dominant religion become entangled with the operations of the state. We can see examples of this in the USA, India, and Turkey.

Secularists, however, can be found all over the world, pushing for more secularism and speaking out against the threats it faces. This is a core area of work for many humanist organisations from Nigeria to Nepal, and Poland to Puerto Rico.

Many secularists worry that, without constant campaigning, and speaking up for what they see as the benefits of secularism, past achievements may be washed away and that this will undermine freedom, equality, and peace.

Opposition to secularism / secularism in practice

Not everyone is in favour of secularism and various arguments are put forward against it, some based on a belief that secularism is wrong in principle, others that it cannot work in practice.

'We don't want neutrality'

Some people believe that one single religious or non-religious worldview *should* hold a privileged position in society. One might think that alternative worldviews are inferior or harmful and so should be prohibited. Why should we be fair to those people who have 'got it wrong'? The values of secularism, such as tolerance and respect for diversity, are specifically liberal values. Not everyone supports them. Some people might argue that faith is more important than freedom and peace. The difficulty with such a view is how, in a pluralistic society, does the state decide who has got it right.

In many autocratic states, where notions of unity and loyalty can be in the interests of those in power, those in charge may reject secularism, liberal values, and individual autonomy (other than their own). Ensuring the dominant position of one worldview can support one's grip over society, particularly when blasphemy laws can be used to imprison those who speak out against the state.

'Secularism means no morality'

Perhaps one believes that without a state religion, our values would all evaporate. Some people argue that society needs common values which go beyond freedom and tolerance, and that we require a shared vision of what makes a worthwhile life. Secularists would argue that there are many other shared human values that are not the preserve of one single worldview and a secular state can and should be built on such public values. Everyone is still free to apply their personal values in their private lives and to seek to influence public goals – a secular state simply means that everyone else is just as free to do so. Many secularists would also argue that there is no evidence that secularisation makes citizens any less moral.

Alternatively, it could be argued that creating a society in which everyone shares one particular worldview is likely to be more peaceful and prosperous. Again we need to look at the evidence and that appears to point to secular states generally being more stable and places where citizens have a higher quality of life.

'Secularism is just enforced atheism'

Some argue that secularism imposes a 'non-religiousness' on society. However, secularism can be thought of as neither religious nor non-religious. It tries to adopt a position outside the religious/non-religious frame. Secularists speak out against state systems like that in atheist China just as they do religious theocracies. Secular states are generally more likely to respect the rights of people of all different religions, while non-secular states can often discriminate against minority religions as well as the non-religious.

‘Secularism doesn’t work in practice - the state can’t be impartial’

Criticism can be targeted at countries that claim to be secular but restrict individual freedoms. In France, for example, secularism is called *laïcité*. It allows freedom of religion or belief in citizens’ private lives, but says religion or belief has no place in the public sphere (this is sometimes described as programmatic secularism). Politicians are supposed to keep religious beliefs out of their political arguments. Conspicuous religious clothing and jewellery is not allowed in public schools. Following an armed robbery in a post office by two people wearing burqas, a law was passed making it illegal to hide one’s face in public spaces. The wearing of burkinis in public swimming pools and on beaches was also banned in some parts of the country.

Some secularists think this goes too far. They argue that faith and belief can have a place in public discourse, as long as no one view is privileged over others. (They may, however, argue that people should try to frame their views and arguments in terms that others can understand.) Valuing freedom, fairness, and peace, many secularists also believe that people should be free to manifest their religion in public, including wearing religious clothing. They may accept that workplaces can introduce certain rules on clothing and jewelry for reasons of health and safety. However, generally, secularists argue that the only limits that should be placed on one’s freedom to practice a religion are that we should not be free to cause harm to others or act in ways that infringe other people’s rights and freedoms.

‘Women should be free to wear bikinis in Iran and Saudi Arabia and burkinis in Europe.’

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive, Humanists UK

In other secular countries, religion still holds an enormous amount of power. In the United States, for example, the First Amendment prevents the government from establishing a national religion or favouring one faith over another. However, Christianity still has enormous influence over American politics and religious lobbies spend millions of dollars to influence government policy. The Pledge of Allegiance includes the line ‘One nation under God’, and the phrase ‘In God We Trust’ is the country’s official motto and appears on US bank notes. The key questions are whether this gives Christianity a privileged position and whether the rights and freedoms of non-Christians (e.g. Muslims, Jews, humanists) are in any way harmed.

Opponents of secularism argue that it is impossible for the state to be completely ‘impartial’ in practice when it comes to religion or belief. Some secularists accept that this can be difficult. However, supporters of secularism would typically reply that this does not mean that impartiality and the equal treatment of people should not be an aim. Secularism does work effectively in many countries, such as those in Scandinavia. The fact that secularism does not always work perfectly in practice is not necessarily a reason to abandon it and its goals. The key question is whether it is better than the alternatives.

'Secularism can be undemocratic'

If the majority of people in a country hold a particular religious or non-religious worldview, why should that worldview not be enforced upon others, or at least have power over the state's decision making? In practice, of course, such a worldview will have an oversized influence even if the state is secular (as Christianity does in the US and Hinduism in India). People of that worldview will have a comparatively larger democratic voice and therefore influence over the laws and customs of a country.

However, typically many people support there being something of a balance between democracy and individual human rights and freedoms. They reject a 'tyranny of the majority' in which the many can have total say over the lives of the few. There are plenty of examples in human history of the exploitation and slavery of minorities. Secularists believe individual liberty is still important, particularly when it comes to freedom of belief, freedom of expression, and freedom of choice over how we live.

There are also pragmatic issues. The UK has significant diversity of belief with no one worldview being held by an overwhelming majority. In addition our current political system and processes mean that a third of the population's votes can give you two thirds of the seats in parliament, meaning a minority of people can end up with more than their fair share of power. People's and societies' worldviews can also change over time. Enabling freedom of religion and belief means that is possible,

'Secularism harms people without their knowing it'

'The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.'

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), *On Liberty*

Mill wrote his 'harm principle' as an expression of the idea that the right to self-determination is not unlimited. An action which results in doing harm to another is not only wrong, but wrong enough that the state *can* intervene to prevent that harm from occurring.

There may be disagreement about what counts as harm. Physical forms of harm can be easier to diagnose and quantify than some other forms, like emotional harm, or harm due to neglect. One particularly contested issue relates to questions around freedom of speech and offence. And what of self-harm? People may legally damage themselves with alcohol, drugs, or by playing dangerous sports. Many of us feel protective tendencies, which arise from a proper moral concern for another person (it would be callous not to feel any concern at the sight of people harming themselves). These instincts may compel some individuals to attempt to stop the self-harm being done, but it does not follow that interference is the only morally acceptable course of action or that there are no long term benefits from such action, such as learning from our own mistakes.

What does thinking about harm mean when it comes to questions around freedom of religion and belief? Mill wrote that:

'If [anyone] saw a person attempting to cross a bridge, which had been ascertained to be unsafe, and there was no time to warn him of the danger, they might seize him and turn him back around without any real infringement of his liberty, for liberty consists in doing what one desires, and he does not desire to fall into the river.'

The theologian St Augustine used a very similar argument about protecting somebody from a collapsing bridge to defend the case for restricting freedom of belief and the persecution of heretics. Forcing a person to change their blasphemous beliefs by any means necessary, he argued, would be a form of mercy. It would save them from the harm of eternal punishment. We have a right, indeed a duty, to prevent that. The question, then, is whether it is as acceptable to deny somebody freedom of religion or belief as it is to pull them back from a collapsing bridge. One might argue that we have better evidence and more agreement about what will happen in the bridge case, but this is unlikely to persuade the convinced believer.

The key question is 'What should the state be allowed to do?' Secularists might recognise that it is acceptable for individuals to try to *persuade* each other to change their beliefs. However, it is not the role of the state in a pluralistic society to interfere.

Disestablishment

Secularists generally want to see the UK become a secular state, so that everyone can live in a fair and equal society regardless of their religion or belief. Currently, the **Church of England** remains the state church in England, and the King holds the title 'Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England'.

Disestablishment is the process of removing a church or other similar organisation from its official position. It does not mean the church ceases to exist, just that its special status is removed, as are any privileges.

What is the problem with having an established church?

Establishment grants advantages to one particular worldview and causes discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. It supports arguments that one form of Christianity should have a privileged status. Establishment is often used to claim the UK is a 'Christian country' despite the fact the most recent census (2021) showed that a majority of the country do not identify as Christians.

One way that establishment creates an inequality is that 26 Bishops are automatically awarded seats in the House of Lords (they are known as 'The Lords Spiritual'). The UK is the only democratic state in the world to do this. These bishops can vote on and amend legislation, giving the Church of England unfair access to the state's decision making. Bishops in the Lords also enjoy speaking rights over their peers. This means that when they stand up to take part in a debate, they always get precedence over any other individual, who must give way to them.

The wider public supports the removal of bishops from the House of Lords. 62% of respondents to a [survey by The Times](#) conducted by YouGov said that religious leaders should not have 'an automatic right to seats' in Parliament, compared to 20% who wanted to keep the bishops in some sense or other (just 8% of respondents said the bishops should retain their present right, while 12% said that other religious leaders should gain the same automatic rights as the bishops).

Secularists call for an end to bishops automatically being granted seats in the House of Lords. They do not call for bishops, and other faith leaders, to be excluded from the chamber, but argue that they must seek to gain representation through the same channels as everyone else. They should not receive special treatment.

One other element of religious discrimination in the Houses of Parliament is that prayers take place at the beginning of each day in the House of Lords and the House of Commons. This matters, as members who attend prayers are able to reserve seats and are therefore more able than their peers to secure seats for popular debates, and in turn more likely to be selected to speak.

Establishment also lies behind arguments that justify discrimination in education (for example, through religious schools and daily Christian worship in other schools); in the provision of pastoral care in prisons, hospitals, and the armed forces; and in public service broadcasting. Secularists argue that none of this is fair in today's modern, diverse society.

Education

Faith schools

Secularists tend to oppose the existence of state-funded faith schools and their exemption from equalities legislation. They generally disapprove of schools being able to present one particular worldview as the truth and of schools being able to select pupils according to the religion of their parents. Secularist arguments against faith schools fall into three categories (similar to the common arguments for secularism): arguments grounded on fairness, freedom, and peace.

For more on the arguments against faith schools, see the humanist perspectives resource and the video interviews with humanist campaigners:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/perspectives

Religion and worldviews education

Many secularists support high-quality education about religion and worldviews (Humanists UK is an active member of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales). Learning about the beliefs and practices of an increasingly diverse population is essential to support mutual understanding and ensure social cohesion. To fully succeed in this goal, religious education needs to cover teaching about the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews.

Freedom of religion or belief requires the freedom to form those beliefs. It requires that our beliefs are the result of our own decision-making capacities and are not simply the product of limited educational provision. Secularists therefore believe education about beliefs and values needs to be objective, critical, and pluralistic. It should aim to present ideas about contested subject matter from as neutral a standpoint as possible, allow the opportunity for beliefs and claims to be criticised and disagreed with, and ensure a broad range of perspectives are explored.

Dialogue

Dialogue is not the same as debate. Debate is adversarial, with each side trying to persuade an audience to adopt one rival view and ultimately to win. It has its place, but it is not the only way to engage. Dialogue is not about winners and losers. The aim isn't to convince anyone that you're right and they're wrong, but to listen, question, and understand their position and help them understand yours.

Secularists believe that good dialogue can support us to live well together in a pluralistic society. It can build connections, and support social cohesion and the recognition of shared values and goals.

For more on the value of dialogue, see the interviews with Humanists UK's Dialogue Officer Jeremy Rodell, and Dialogue Network volunteer Hannah McKerchar:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/perspectives

Additional resources

What is secularism? animation:

understandinghumanism.org.uk/secularism

Secularism information handout:

understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Secularism.pdf

Presentation slides

understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Secularism.pptx

Activities

- Is this secularism?:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Is-this-secularism_.pdf
- What might secularists think about...?
understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/What-might-secularists-think-about.pdf
- Religious beliefs and political beliefs
- understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Secularism-religious-beliefs-and-political-beliefs.pdf

Short videos with Andrew Copson, author of *Secularism: A Very Short Introduction*:

understandinghumanism.org.uk/films-category/?rescat=3685

Including

- What is secularism?:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/res_films/what-is-secularism
- The case for secularism:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/res_films/the-case-for-secularism
- The state of secularism:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/res_films/the-state-of-secularism
- Ten things to know about secularism:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMNfhLivKIQ

Digging deeper

Humanists UK's campaigning page on secularism:

humanists.uk/campaigns/secularism

Humanist Heritage on the history of campaigning for secularism:

heritage.humanists.uk/secularism/

Articles

- *What is secularism?*, by Richy Thompson
- understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Article_-_What-is-secularism-Richy-Thompson.pdf
- *The case for secularism*, by philosopher Richard Norman (12 pages):
understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/The-Case-for-Secularism.docx
- *What do secularists mean by secularism?*:
blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/01/what-do-secularists-mean-by-secularism/

Faith schools

- Humanist perspective on faith schools:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Faith-schools-humanist-perspective.pdf
- Video interviews with humanist campaigners on faith schools:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/res_films/the-case-against-faith-schools

Dialogue

- Interview with Humanists UK dialogue officer Jeremy Rodell:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/res_films/the-importance-of-dialogue
- Interview with Dialogue Network volunteer Hannah McKerchar:
humanists.uk/2025/02/13/bridging-communities-through-dialogue-an-interview-with-volunteer-hannah-mc-kerchar

The veil of ignorance

- *A fair society* information handout:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A-fair-society.pdf
- Activity:
understandinghumanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Veil-of-ignorance.pdf
- BBC radio 4 animation:
youtube.com/watch?v=A8GDEaJtbq4&list=PLLiycLlICgPE0q9BiMexLFi-1rq9GUwX&index=30

Freedom of Thought report:

humanists.international/what-we-do/freedom-of-thought-report

For further information on secularism, we recommend [Secularism: Politics, Religion, and Freedom](#) (OUP) by Andrew Copson.