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A SECURALIST FRAMEWORK FOR AN INCLUSIVE AND EQUAL SOCIETY

About this briefing

The last few decades have seen significant changes to the landscape of religion and belief in Britain. According to British Social Attitude surveys, the proportion of British adults describing themselves as having 'no religion' rose from 31% in 1983 to 48.9% in 2014.

The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB) was established in 2013 by the Woolf Institute to consider the role of religion in contemporary Britain and examine ways of developing an inclusive sense of national identity. Its report, published in December 2015, made 37 recommendations for policy and public life divided into six themes: vision, education, media, dialogue, action and law.

This briefing summarises a response to the Commission's report supported by secularists from a range of spheres, including academics, activists and representatives from Britain's leading campaign groups. The response aims to provide a critical counterweight to the CORAB recommendations and ensure a secular viewpoint can be heard in the ongoing debate about the role of religion in British public life. It emphasises an alternative secularist framework to ensure that the rights and freedoms of all citizens are afforded equal weight and protection.

Policy implications

- The CORAB recommendations promote a defence of religion's importance and influence that is at odds with the realities of modern British society.
- With a growing proportion of Britons now identifying as non-religious, and with levels of cultural pluralism and diversity on the rise, the need for a political and legal system capable of giving equal weight and recognition to all citizens has never been greater.
- Fostering social cohesion and promoting a sense of collective identity requires public discourse to be based on shared values and not founded in religious identities that are often a source of social tension.
- A secular state, impartial to all systems of religion, provides the most effective framework for guaranteeing equality for all citizens and offers the best means of fostering a free, inclusive and democratic society.



Key recommendations for a secularist framework

Vision

- Efforts to establish the fundamental values underlying public life in Britain should be inclusive of the non-religious population.
- National and civil events should be conducted on secular lines to include all members of society.
- No religious organisation should have an automatic right to representation in Parliament.
- Publicly funded pastoral care posts in the NHS, prisons, armed forces and higher education should not be ring-fenced for people of certain religious beliefs.

Education and media

- Given its declining cultural standing, religion should not be accorded the same status in schools as core subjects such as reading and maths.
- Faith schools should be ended; they foster segregation and have a negative impact on social cohesion.
- Attempts to dictate the way that religion is reported by the press should be resisted and there should be no guidelines on minimum hours for religious broadcasts in the BBC charter.

Dialogue, action and law

- Public funds should not be used to promote religious viewpoints and should only be used to support interfaith dialogue where there is a clear social purpose.
- Existing exemptions from equalities legislation allowing discrimination by religious bodies on the grounds of belief should be repealed.
- Citizens who use religious tribunals should be made fully aware of their rights in civil law.

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Further information

Report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life: [Living with difference: community, diversity and the common good](#) (Chair: The Rt Hon Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss GBE), December 2015.

[A Secularist Response to the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life](#) (Chair: Dr Steven Kettell, University of Warwick), November 2016.

The response is based on the deliberations of an expert panel convened at the University of Warwick on 8 March 2016. A full list of signatories can be found in the appendix.

The views contained in the response or this briefing do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Warwick.

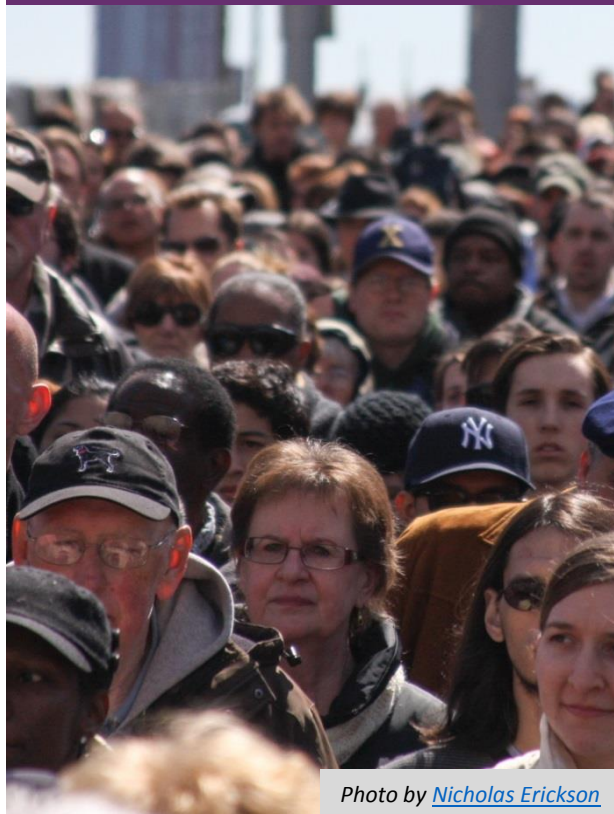


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