

# Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill: Compulsory atheism lessons



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## OVERVIEW

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- Religious Education to be absorbed into “Religion, Values and Ethics”
- Compulsory atheism lessons for all pupils, with no right of withdrawal
- Christianity could be marginalised with no limit on atheistic teaching
- ‘Humanists’ set to hijack RE across Wales with their veto power

There are good laws covering Religious Education in Wales. This framework is to be scrapped and replaced by arrangements which can be controlled by atheists and those personally opposed to religious faith.

The Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, is pushing an education Bill which requires all pupils to study atheism or “non-religious” views such as Humanism. The subject of Religious Education (RE) is to be absorbed into Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE). Parents currently have a right of withdrawal on

RE. But now that atheism is to go on the syllabus, the right of withdrawal is to be ended! The new subject is mandatory. Under the Bill, it will be argued that Humanism and atheism must occupy a minimum of half the time. The Bill sets no upper limit.

A committee of “non-religious” representatives is to be set up in each area that will have the power of veto over any religious teaching in schools in their council area. In practice, humanists will be handed control over religious teaching in schools. They even want the legal power for humanist parents to be able to force church schools to teach the local authority syllabus instead of denominational RE.

Many schools do not give adequate time to RE or appoint teachers with adequate qualifications. Consequently, young people fail to understand the basics of Christianity, let alone the leading non-Christian faiths. This legislation will make this problem far worse.

### HOW THE BILL NEEDS TO BE CHANGED

- **Reinstate the right of withdrawal;**
- **Put a cap on the amount of RVE time that can be spent on non-religious beliefs;**
- **Remove the veto given to non-religious beliefs over religious content.**

# THE SCRAPPING OF THE RIGHT OF WITHDRAWAL

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Currently any parent unhappy with a school's RE teaching can withdraw their children from the lessons. But under the proposals, now the new subject includes atheism, that right of withdrawal is to be scrapped.

There will be compulsory lessons in atheistic Humanism for all children.

It is particularly concerning that the right of withdrawal is being removed from RVE because the new subject is likely to be far more problematic than RE. RVE could include worldviews such as Marxism (see page 9). Non-religious views could also dominate the subject (see page 7). Parents with religious beliefs are likely to feel that a right of withdrawal is more necessary than ever. It is fundamentally unjust that the right of withdrawal is being abolished at the very time that humanists are being given effective veto over what is taught in RVE, including the religious content.

## HOW WILL HUMANISTS GAIN CONTROL OF WHAT'S TAUGHT?

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The answer is simple. The legislation hands them a veto on religious teaching across every area of Wales. No church or religious group, not even the Church in Wales, will have the power that Humanists UK will have under the new arrangements.

Since 1944 the Religious Education syllabus for schools in Wales has been decided at a local level. Local authorities constitute an 'Agreed Syllabus Conference' (ASC) to draw up the RE syllabus. Currently, there are three groups that must unanimously agree a syllabus:

- local religious faiths
- teachers
- the local authority

Under Kirsty Williams's Bill, another group is added so that now all four groups must agree an RVE syllabus:

- local religious faiths
- non-religious philosophical convictions
- teachers
- the local authority

Kirsty Williams already issued legally dubious guidance in 2018 allowing humanists to help draw up Religious Education syllabuses. She says they can participate as part of the group representing religious faiths. She even claimed that the laws permit "*the appointment of persons who represent holders of non-religious beliefs in the same way as they permit the appointment of*

persons who represent holders of religious beliefs".<sup>1</sup> Williams seems to agree with everything that Humanists UK says.

This decision followed a legal challenge brought by a humanist against a local authority in Wales that had refused to appoint her to its Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE).<sup>2</sup> These bodies advise local councils on RE and collective worship.

But now humanists will be a group of their own ("the non-religious"), which has powers equal to all the Christian and non-Christian religious faiths put together. The requirement for unanimity means the non-religious group can veto the decisions of others. And humanists will dominate this group.

In 2019 the British Humanist Association, (now known as Humanists UK) had a turnover of £2.67 million and a staff of 29 with 528 volunteers.<sup>3</sup> It is by far the largest non-religious philosophical group in the UK.

There are a tiny number of organisations representing non-religious philosophical views, and fewer still who have members in the local area with time and expertise to give to working on a syllabus for schools.

Humanists UK is the one secular group which has campaigned for many years for its beliefs to be included in Religious Education. In most local authorities they will dominate the non-religious group. This Bill therefore gives them a wholly disproportionate influence on the teaching of religious education, despite their opposition to religion.

Concerns about the "balance and fairness of the composition" of ASCs and Standing Advisory Committees were raised in evidence to the Children, Young People and Education Committee. Its report recommends that the Welsh Government addresses these (Recommendation 31).

## RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

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According to research carried out in 2014, one in three British children aged eight to fifteen don't know why Good Friday is celebrated. A quarter think the Golden Goose may feature in the Easter story.<sup>4</sup> Some 43% say they have never read, seen or heard the story of the crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Religious Education in schools is clearly not working well, with problems over the quality of teaching and constant pressure on its timetable allocation. Extending the subject to also include non-religious philosophical convictions can only make matters worse, with even more pressure on curriculum time to cover the additional material and on teachers to deliver it well.

## HUMANISTS WANT 50% MINIMUM TIME

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The legislation has no upper limit on the amount of time devoted to Humanism. A local authority could have 90% of the time devoted to Humanism within RVE.

Given the wording of the Bill, humanists must want at least 50% of time devoted to their beliefs. Every local authority will have to adopt an “agreed syllabus” of Religion, Values and Ethics for schools in their area to use.

As at the moment, this “*must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain*”.

But, in a radical shift from the current framework, the RVE syllabus “*must also reflect the fact that a range of non-religious philosophical convictions are held in Great Britain*”.

The syllabus—

- (a) *must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain;*
- (b) *must also reflect the fact that a range of non-religious philosophical convictions are held in Great Britain.*

Both limbs are given equal status. The humanists will argue this is a natural reading of the Bill. So what has been taught up until now within RE, will have to be taught in half the time to make way for the study of Humanism.

Half the time for non-religious philosophies. Perhaps this is how humanists are already interpreting it when they rejoice in a press release that Humanism is being put on an equal footing with all religions:

“Changes to the law clarifying that humanism must be taught on an equal footing to the major religions in religious education are vital to ensure the rights of non-religious children and their families are respected, Wales Humanists has told a Senedd committee.”<sup>6</sup>

Humanists claim this will make Wales a world leader and hope the rest of the UK will follow:

“Religious education will be renamed ‘Religion, Values, and Ethics’ (RVE) ... these world-leading changes will hopefully lay the groundwork for the rest of the UK to follow.”<sup>7</sup>

# HOW MANY HUMANISTS AND NON-RELIGIOUS PEOPLE ARE THERE IN WALES?

The most recent census found there were 815 humanists in Wales. These are dwarfed by 8,259 self-declared “Jedi Knights”, yet as a religious group we are not aware of any Jedi Knights being appointed to syllabus conferences or SACREs.

**The 2011 Census broke religion in Wales down as follows:**

Religion	Total
Buddhist	9,117
Christian	1,763,299
Hindu	10,434
Jewish	2,064
Muslim	45,950
Sikh	815
‘Any other religion’	12,705

**The following numbers of people in Wales declared their adherence to various non-religious philosophies:**

Non-religious groups	Total
No religion	970,288
Agnostic	1,810
Atheist	1,506
Free Thinker	23
Heavy Metal	268
Humanist	815
Realist	28

It would be a complete distortion to portray the 970,288 ‘non-religious’ as signed up humanists or atheists! They may not identify with any organised religion, but studies have shown many have ‘a sense of God’ or ‘the spiritual’. For example, one piece of research found that at least 16.5% of those identifying as non-religious think there probably or definitely is a god or ‘some higher power’.<sup>8</sup> It is clear from this that ‘non-religious’ is not a category of people aligning themselves with atheist or humanist beliefs.

Yet Humanists UK claim to speak for the millions of people who are non-religious.<sup>9</sup> Reporting on figures showing an increase in people saying they have no religion, the group described itself as: “*Humanists UK, the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people*”.<sup>10</sup>

## WHAT OTHER NON-RELIGIOUS VIEWS COULD BE TAUGHT AS PART OF RVE?

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Aside from atheism and Humanism, there are highly contentious, fringe views which could find their way onto the curriculum. Such views could include Stoicism.

More seriously, the most likely course is that RVE will become a vehicle for teaching radical political views that are held to constitute a complete world and life view.

The idea of teaching Marxism in RE is not at all far-fetched. It has been tried before in England. There was national controversy in the 1970s when attempts were made to introduce Communism into the agreed syllabus for Religious Education in Birmingham.<sup>11</sup> This was attacked in the press and within Parliament.<sup>12</sup> The proposals were influenced by intellectuals like John Hull (1935-2015), who had been involved in the development of the syllabus.<sup>13</sup> Hull would go on to become a Professor of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham in 1989 and later be appointed Dean of the Faculty

of Education in 1990.<sup>14</sup> He argued in the 1980s that although Marxism should be taught within RE, capitalism probably should not be as it failed to pass the test of being a worldview.<sup>15</sup>

This idea was taken up in the London Borough of Brent:

The 1985 Brent syllabus, *Brent Religious Education Now and Tomorrow*, stated:

*"In the syllabus the word faith is understood to mean any consistent, coherent and ethical religion or life stance whether theistic or non-theistic."*<sup>16</sup>

The Brent syllabus paved the way for any political life stance to be examined, including militant atheistic world views like Marxism and Leninism.

So attempts were made to put Marxism/Communism on the syllabus in both Birmingham and Brent, even though it was unlawful to do so. But in Wales, under the Bill, it will become legal.

## PLANS REJECTED IN THE PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS

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The Education Minister, Kirsty Williams, is pushing ahead despite the RE plans being rejected in her own public consultation, ending on 25 March 2019, attracting over 1,700 responses.

Do you agree with the proposed approach to RE?		Should the right to withdraw from RE and RSE (relationships and sexuality education) be retained?	
Yes	22.0%	Yes	86.9%
No	62.2%	No	9.1%
Don't know; no response	15.9%	Don't know; No response	4.0%
Total	1,101	Total	1,635

The second consultation, asking very similar questions again, closed on 28 November 2019. There were over 1,600 responses, but the published analysis did not report how many people agreed or disagreed.

A third consultation was launched during lockdown (opened 5th May, closed 28th July). Consequently comparatively few people (n=462) responded. There was one question on whether RVE should include non-religious beliefs that are philosophical convictions (in line with the European Convention on Human Rights).

Another question about national guidance for the syllabus conferences which draw up the RVE curriculum at a local level. Most of the remaining questions concerned the plans for church schools.

# THE HUMANIST ANTI-FAITH AGENDA

The stated objective of the British Humanist Association (“Humanists UK”) until July 2011 was:

*“the mental and moral improvement of the human race by means of the advancement of humanism, that is to say, the moral and social development of the community free from theistic or dogmatic beliefs and doctrines; and the advancement of education and in particular the study of Humanism and the dissemination of knowledge of its principles.”* [Emphasis added]

So the BHA wanted to eliminate religious faith from the community.

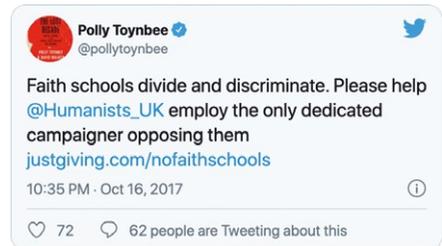
In 2011 the BHA had a makeover. Their charitable objectives became palatable. In came “*the promotion of equality and non-discrimination*” and “*understanding between people holding religious and non-religious beliefs so as to advance harmonious co-operation in society*”.<sup>17</sup> Later, they moved to using the name “Humanists UK”.<sup>18</sup>

But has the leopard changed its spots? They still seem very committed to reducing Christian influence in education and closing down all state-funded faith schools, which obviously includes all Church in Wales or Roman Catholic Schools.

They are open about this agenda: “we campaign against faith schools, and for an inclusive, secular schools system”. They object to the protections faith schools

have, and their “*admissions, employment and curriculum policies*”. The Humanist UK manifesto targets how Christian schools teach Relationships and Sex Education, Religious Education, and the schools’ ability to discriminate on grounds of religion or belief. As well as calling for no new faith schools to be established, the group seeks to replace the current system and “want to see an end to the proliferation of state-funded faith schools. We want a progressive withdrawal of their privileges and exemptions so that religious schools are eventually absorbed back into the wider schools sector”.<sup>19</sup>

Humanists UK has fundraised for a post specifically to achieve their goal, advertised by high profile supporters:



👤 Polly Toynbee, Vice-President, Humanists UK<sup>20</sup>



👤 Stephen Fry, Patron of Humanists UK<sup>21</sup>

The charge is that church schools indoctrinate children. Ironically,

humanists are the ones seeking to indoctrinate. Humanists UK are backing RVE plans from which parents have no right of withdrawal. And they have their own veto on the new subject of RVE in every local authority in Wales. As if that was not enough, they also want the right for humanist parents to demand that church schools teach their children the local authority syllabus (see below).

Wendy Roberts, mother of UK Humanists President, Alice Roberts, wrote:

*“Some humanists complaining about, and campaigning against, the ‘indoctrination’ of children in our church schools seem to be unaware that they are doing almost exactly that about which they are objecting.”<sup>22</sup>*

## THE SECULAR HIJACKING OF ‘HUMANISM’

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Until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, humanists had a Christian faith or at least a generally Christian worldview. Proper teaching of Humanism would have to reflect this. Teaching secular Humanism as the sum total of Humanism misrepresents history. Historian Alan Bullock says that the claim that secularism represents humanism is “a travesty”.<sup>23</sup>

Biblical scholar Erasmus is also known as ‘Prince of the Humanists’. He shaped Humanism into a positive programme for the reform of society. He championed education and wanted children to be given a good humanist education in Greek, Latin, the classics and the New Testament. His emphasis on the humanist conviction *Ad Fontes* (“back to the sources”) underpinned his translation of the New Testament from ancient Greek, resulting in a translation that was far more accurate than the Vulgate.<sup>24</sup>

Diarmaid MacCulloch says that during the Renaissance “*the vast majority of humanists were patently sincere Christians who wished to apply their*

*enthusiasm to the exploration and proclamation of their faith*”.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, Bullock highlights Revd Dr Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ as a key document of “twentieth-century humanism”.<sup>26</sup> Bullock sees this as perfectly compatible with King’s profession of Christian faith.

Andrew Copson, the Chief Executive of Humanists UK, concedes that Humanism as it exists today was only formulated in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The ‘secular’ description only gained prominence in the 1960s.<sup>27</sup>

Yet humanists claim that their views go back 2,500 years and that various historical figures were humanists. Copson openly admits that this is retrospective labelling: “post hoc coinage”.<sup>28</sup> He says that deists such as Voltaire would have been atheists today.<sup>29</sup> Redefining historic figures in this way is fundamentally anti-educational. Schools cannot be expected to teach things that are not historically true.

## HOW IS HUMANISM DEFINED?

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Andrew Copson says that Humanism covers a spectrum of views. These views are not dogmatic, and humanists need not agree with each position. In fact, it is possible to define Humanism as “merely common sense”.<sup>30</sup>

A 2016 Humanists UK poll of religious beliefs in the UK found that scores of people who disagreed that they were humanists met the definition of humanist used in the poll. This included religious people.<sup>31</sup>

Antagonism towards religion is a pervasive feature of modern Humanism. Copson admits that introductions to Humanism usually emphasise “debunking religion”.<sup>32</sup> But this was not the case even in much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first Humanist Manifesto, published in 1933, was openly seeking to establish a new religion and had many religious signatories. By 1973, Humanist Manifesto II was more anti-religious. But even one of the leading figures behind it wrote at the time:

*“there seem to be as many different varieties of Humanism as there are grades of wine and cheese... The term Humanism has been used in many senses. There are scientific, religious, atheistic and ethical Humanists. Indeed, many Marxists, existentialists, liberals, naturalists, experimentalists – even Christians – today claim to be Humanists.”<sup>33</sup>*

It is completely unreasonable to expect teachers to teach something that defies definition.



# HUMANISTS UK'S TEACHING MATERIALS MAKE OUTRAGEOUS CLAIMS

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Humanists UK has produced teaching materials for all age groups. These clearly show what it thinks should be taught in RVE about Humanism. These ready-made resources will undoubtedly be used by schools, so it is crucial to assess their content. It does not take long to establish that they consist of indoctrination, not education. European case law is clear: there must be a right of withdrawal unless teaching is objective, critical and pluralistic and properly reflects the views in society. The myths included in these materials demonstrate that a right of withdrawal must be included.

## MYTH 1: 'HUMANISTS' SHAPED THE MODERN WORLD

Despite secular Humanism being such a recent development, the materials give it unwarranted credit for shaping the modern world:

*"From the first millennium BCE in ancient China, India, and Greece; through the scientific revolution and the enlightenment; to modern secularisation and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, humanist ideas have helped to shape the world in which we now live."*<sup>34</sup>

This bold claim is only true to the extent that the "humanist ideas" in view were held by Christians. Historian Tom Holland argues that Humanism is a "Christ-less riff on Christianity".<sup>35</sup> He says that people in the West 'swim in Christian waters', and that "even those who may imagine that they have emancipated themselves

*from Christian belief, in fact, are shot through with Christian assumptions about almost everything".*<sup>36</sup>

In giving an example of humanist influence, the materials claim that Eleanor Roosevelt was a humanist:

*"After the Second World War, humanists helped to set up the UN, including Eleanor Roosevelt..."*<sup>37</sup>

Eleanor Roosevelt openly wrote about her religious beliefs in Christian terms. She said that the standard she tried to live her life according to was the life of Christ.<sup>38</sup> She attended church regularly, prayed and sought to read her Bible every day.<sup>39</sup> It is a distortion to say that Eleanor Roosevelt would sign up to the secular platform promoted by Humanists UK.

## MYTH 2: 'HUMANISTS' ARE THE GUARANTORS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The materials consistently represent human rights as an achievement of those who hold Humanists UK's beliefs. In one video linked to a lesson plan, Andrew Copson states that "constant active campaigning" is the only way to prevent past achievements on human rights being "washed away".<sup>40</sup> This resource gives the impression that only campaigning humanists, of the kind who back Humanists UK, can secure human rights.

The Christian belief that all people are made in the image of God is the true basis for human rights. One author writes that John Locke "grounded his influential argument for human rights... in the concept of the imago Dei".<sup>41</sup>

On the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one historian says that "in different ways, Christianity primarily defined the world views of all three of the

main framers... John Humphrey, Charles Malik, and Roosevelt herself".<sup>42</sup>

Another writer argues:

*"Christian thinkers were instrumental also in post-war revival of human rights and at the birth of the United Nations. The influence of the Catholic Jacques Maritain through the revival of natural law on the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is well-documented, for example".<sup>43</sup>*

And another says:

*"Christians were central players in the development of human rights after the Second World War, most notably the French Catholic personalist philosopher, Jacques Maritain, and the Lebanese Greek Orthodox philosopher and diplomat, Charles Malik."<sup>44</sup>*

## MYTH 3: RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS ARE ILLOGICAL AND DO NOT ACCEPT EVIDENCE

A lesson plan on atheism and agnosticism states:

*"There have been many gods throughout history that we cannot prove don't exist (Zeus, Thor, Osiris), but we recognise that it is perfectly reasonable to doubt their existence. Many humanists feel that it is equally reasonable to doubt the existence of any of the gods people believe in today."<sup>45</sup>*

The resource sheet for a connected 'invisible pencil-eating monster' activity says:

*"Humanists accept it would be impossible to prove that the invisible pencil-eating monster does not exist but believe it would be perfectly reasonable to doubt it and to be suspicious of those who claimed it existed."<sup>46</sup> [Emphasis added]*

The 'pencil-eating monster' is obviously supposed to stand in for God. It casts those who believe in God as people who should be regarded with suspicion.

Another resource says:

*"...humanists, by definition, are prepared to adapt or change their beliefs according to the evidence. A humanist would always look first for a natural rather than a supernatural explanation, but if the evidence were strong enough, then they would be willing to change their minds. This is one of the key differences between Humanism and religions. Humanists are not dogmatically committed to atheism, but they are committed to using evidence to inform their beliefs."<sup>47</sup> [Emphasis added]*

The text here plainly says that religious believers are not responsive to evidence, or are unwilling to change their minds. This has the effect of painting all religious believers as intellectually inferior to humanists.

These attacks on religious believers are unacceptable for any purported educational resource, and are also completely false. Christians with brilliant minds, like Griffith Jones of Llanddowror, Robert Maynard Jones and David Davies of Llandinam, have made an inestimable contribution to Wales.

Religious believers, and Christians in particular, have been heavily involved in pioneering science. These include Robert Boyle, Michael Faraday, James Clerk Maxwell and Lord Kelvin, to name just a few.

Charles Townes, co-inventor of the laser and winner of the Nobel Prize for physics, described himself as a Christian.<sup>48</sup> He saw science as being dependent on a creator: *"Monotheism indicated a consistent and reliable universe and the creation an interesting one that should be examined. These were viewpoints out of which Western science could grow."*<sup>49</sup>

Francis Collins is a Christian and geneticist, the former leader of the Human Genome Project. He believes that faith gives answers to questions *"not well suited to science, like 'Why is there something instead of nothing?'"*<sup>50</sup>

## HUMANIST PLANS FOR CHURCH SCHOOLS IN THE BILL

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Humanists will be disappointed that the Curriculum and Assessment Bill permits church schools to remain open. But the Bill does legislate for a Humanists UK approach which could severely impede the work of church schools.

Currently, church voluntary aided schools, such as Church in Wales schools, teach denominational RE, not the locally agreed syllabus. These schools were mostly set up by the churches to provide free education before state schools were established.

Education about other religions is included, but there is an emphasis in these schools on teaching Christian belief.

Under Kirsty Williams' proposals, these schools will have to teach the locally agreed syllabus on request from just one parent. Humanists UK have worked with parents of children in Church of England schools to oppose Christian teaching. Many small voluntary aided schools will find it almost impossible to deliver two different sets of RVE lessons for different pupils, so may be forced to abandon denominational teaching.

It is common practice for local authorities to provide transport to a church school where parents choose it, even where there is a more local non-church school. Humanists UK has long objected to parents being helped in this way to send their children to a school that accords with their beliefs. But now, so that children of humanists do not have to receive denominational RVE, they want a single humanist parent to be able to scupper the denominational teaching of RVE in a church school.

The better solution is to continue the right of withdrawal, so that humanists are able to withdraw from denominational RVE rather than being empowered to put an end to it. A further measure could allow humanists to have transportation provided to a non-church school, where the agreed syllabus would be taught.

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# Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill: Compulsory atheism lessons

**There are good laws covering Religious Education in Wales. This framework is to be scrapped and replaced by arrangements which can be controlled by atheists and those personally opposed to religious faith.**

The Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, is pushing an education Bill which requires all pupils to study atheism or “non-religious” views such as Humanism. The subject of Religious Education (RE) is to be absorbed into Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE).



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