



Debating religion in society: Question Time 2019 teachers' notes

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Follow-up questions

- Can you think of other examples of medical ethics up for debate in Parliament that might meet resistance from religious voices in the House of Lords? Do you think that these voices should always be secondary to the secular majority*?
- How might the advance of Artificial Intelligence give rise to new debates around personhood and community, where both religion and science seem to have something to say?
- Talk about ways in which faith traditions have changed as society has changed and why traditionalists might resist change.

*British Social Attitudes Survey 2019 reported that in 2018 52% of respondents do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion.

Featured panellists' biographies

The Reverend Laura Jørgensen is the Rector of St Botolph without Aldgate, a Church of England parish church at the eastern boundary of the City of London, looking west towards the financial heart of the country, and east to Petticoat Lane and Brick Lane markets. In addition to leading the worshipping community there, she is also active in the local resident and business community, and is a trustee of a number of charities, mainly with an educational focus. She is a co-opted member of the City of London Corporation's Community and Children's Services Committee. St Botolph's is an inclusive church, particularly known for its welcome to LGBT people and Laura is passionate in advocating for change in the church on issues relating to sexuality. Prior to her current role, she was a Minor Canon at St Paul's Cathedral responsible for ensuring the day-to-day services ran smoothly, and for organising larger scale services. Laura has rhyming degrees: Geology, which she read for at Imperial College, and Theology, which she undertook as part of her training for ministry.

Qari Asim MBE is a senior Imam at Makkah Mosque in Leeds and Legal Director at global law firm, DLA Piper. Qari is passionate about fostering relations between communities and is a trustee of Christian Muslim Forum. He is an executive board member of National Council of Imams & Rabbis, deputy chair of Government's Anti-Muslim Hatred/ Islamophobia Working Group and a faith advisor to the Near Neighbours programme. He also acts as a consultant to a number of mosques, institutions, public bodies and agencies, including Mosaic, founded by HRH Prince of Wales, to

inspire young people to realise their talents and potential. He is interested in issues related to government policy, education, business, leadership, youth empowerment, gender equity, environment and social welfare. He is a blogger and columns or comments from him appear in *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *Yorkshire Post* and *Huffington Post*.

The Rt Hon. Lord Willetts FRS is the Executive Chair of the Resolution Foundation. He served as the Member of Parliament for Havant (1992-2015), as Minister for Universities and Science (2010-2014) and previously worked at HM Treasury and the No. 10 Policy Unit. Lord Willetts is a visiting Professor at King's College London, a Board member of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), a Board member of Surrey Satellites and of the Biotech Growth Trust. He is the Chair of the Sanger Institute and the Chair of Foundation for Science and Technology. He is an Honorary Fellow of Nuffield College, an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society and the Chancellor of the University of Leicester. Lord Willetts has written widely on economic and social policy. His book *The Pinch* about fairness between the generations was published in 2010. His latest book *A University Education* is published by Oxford University Press.

Context of the event

The Westminster Abbey Learning Department's largest 16+ event is the annual Question Time, following the format of the popular TV show. Over 250 students took the opportunity to engage with public figures from a variety of backgrounds on issues of their own choosing. For the Abbey, this is an opportunity to discuss the religious perspective on current affairs as on the panel each year are voices from the major UK faiths. Questions from students this year included the role of religion in the public space, the climate crisis, gender inequality and Islamophobia and led to passionate and articulate contributions from the floor, as well as from the distinguished panel.

This year's event was chaired by **Samira Ahmed** and our panel comprised of:

- Qari Asim MBE - Senior Imam and Inter-Faith Advisor
- The Reverend Laura Jørgensen - Rector of St Botolph without Aldgate, in the City
- Agamemnon Otero MBE - Co-founding director of community energy company Repowering
- The Rt Hon. Lord Willetts FRS - Executive Chair of the Resolution Foundation

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Transcript

Student 1: Do you think religion still has a part to play in modern British society? If so, what positive impacts can it have?

LJ: Religion still is very much part of everyday life for many, many people in our country. For me, it gives you a community, a sense of belonging. The church that I work in has been there since the 12th century and the church has grown and changed with all the different changes that have happened

there. So in terms of positive impacts, the Church of England has got 33,000 social action projects, from debt counselling, it has night shelters, it has lunch clubs. If there's a need in the community, the church is often there responding to it. For me, one of them really positive impact for religion is the way that it allows people to help others.

QA: As a person of faith I believe that religion is very important to many people's lives in this country. And also but it's not about just religion being an abstract, being relevant to peoples' lives. The people of faith and religious communities also need to make faith relevant to people. Let's take the example of phones, when we didn't have phones and now we cannot live without them because they become relevant to us. In my palm I can work and find out everything but it was the same with the religion. If places of worship, if religious institutions are not offering anything to their communities, to their neighbourhoods then people will wonder why should I go to the institution.

DW: There's more to society than the individual and on top of the individual, government and parliament. Everything in between from our family through to our church is crucial for our identity and it makes life worth living. One of the last debates I was involved in the House of Commons before I stood down in 2015 was on whether you could replace some of the DNA of a foetus in the womb so that when that foetus was born the baby did not go on to get mitochondrial disease which is a terrible disease that kills you at the age of 20. But it did involve changing a bit of that embryos' DNA, bringing in the DNA from a third person hence the inevitable *Daily Mail* headline, the child with three parents. And they were that was a body of opinion in the House of Commons of people with devout religious beliefs who thought this was fundamentally immoral and it should wouldn't be allowed to happen. My view is that there have to be limits on the extent to which people can apply their religious beliefs in public policy which were then applied to other people who don't share those religious beliefs. That's when it all gets difficult and by and large what has happened in Britain in the last 150 years is we have gradually pushed back, we've created space for public policy and politics which makes it something different from simply being the instrument whereby people, however sincere and devoutly held their religious beliefs are, use national legislation to impose them on everyone else. And it remains a tricky hot topic in politics to this day.

Student 2: I do think that religion it definitely has a place and a role in society. However that role is constantly changing and many institutions, especially I feel in churches or I don't know I don't go to mosque but many churches they feel that in order to retain their sort of belief in Jesus they have to stay in that old mould. And when society and its people are constantly changing and evolving and growing, they have to grow and evolve with it. I don't think they understand that that doesn't mean that they are less Christian or they're suddenly becoming more worldly and I feel like there's something that needs to be discussed both in churches and in Britain today.

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