

Who should have the last word on assisted dying in a secular Britain?

By Kenan Malik, *The Guardian*, December 1st, 2024

For many years, I used to give an annual lecture to theology students on “Why I am an atheist”. One perennial response from the students was that “without belief in God, atheists can simply pick and choose which values to accept and which to reject”. To which I would reply: “Yes, that’s true, though we don’t pick and choose values simply as individuals, but rather as part of communities.” But, I would add, “you as believers have to pick and choose your values, too”.

In the past, thousands of witches were burned and millions of people enslaved because it was believed that God had sanctified such practices. Today, virtually no Christian thinks that. The shift has come about not because God has changed his mind but because humans have.

I was reminded of those students as the row developed last week over justice secretary’s Shabana Mahmood’s opposition to Kim Leadbeater’s assisted dying bill and the former lord chancellor Lord Falconer’s curt dismissal of it. “As a Muslim, I have an unshakeable belief in the sanctity and the value of human life”, Mahmood had told the *Times* in October, adding: “I don’t think that death is a service that the state should be offering.”

“I respect... [the] religious and spiritual reasons why she believes completely in the sanctity of life,” Falconer told Sky News. “But I do not think it should be imposed on everybody else.”

Falconer’s comments expressed a deeper unease about the role of religion in public life and the boundaries of a secular society. For many of its advocates, secularism requires religion to be excluded from the public sphere and from political debate.

Certainly, the “as a” prefix to an argument (“as a Muslim”, “as a woman”, I believe that...) is one of the abominations of contemporary politics. Not only does it shut off debate by insisting that one’s identity or faith defines the limits of one’s views, it also suggests that every identity group should have a particular set of values by virtue of their identity, a crass and reactionary sentiment.

Insisting that God mandates particular political and moral views, and so makes them unchallengeable, is equally to close off political debate. Yet, rather than one’s faith determining one’s values and politics, it is often the case that one’s moral and political outlook shape how one interprets religious texts. The same God can speak to many moral perspectives. Mahmood is wrong to suggest that “as a Muslim” she can hold only one view on this or any other debate. Falconer is wrong to suggest that for Mahmood to express her faith-based view in a democratic debate is to “impose it on everyone else”.

Secularism is not a space from which religion must be excluded but one in which the state neither affirms nor denies any religion, and so one in which no religion is granted privilege over any other, nor over any secular philosophy or ideology.

A truly secular Britain would have no issue with religious believers expressing their views in the public sphere. We need to defend secular space from religions demanding privileges. We need also to protect freedom of conscience and religious expression from an over-zealous secular state.