

Atheists Find Warm Welcome With Britain's Boy Scouts

The British Scouting movement will soon welcome atheists who are reluctant to join the worldwide organization because they must take an oath to serve God.

Trustees from the Scouting Association, whose patron is Queen Elizabeth II, are preparing to meet next week to approve a new Scouting oath for atheists—thus putting them on par with Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs and Hindus.

While those with religious affiliations will continue to promise to do their duty to both God and the queen, the new “Atheist Promise” (as it’s being called) will say something different—although the exact words have not yet been released.

This comes only a week after Girl Guides announced that they would give up their promise to “love [their] God.” Beginning in September, the 500,000 Brownies and Guides will instead promise to be “true to [themselves] and develop [their] beliefs.”

The British wing of the Scouting organization founded by Lord Robert Baden-Powell in 1907 at Brownsea Island in southern England has agreed to bow to pressure from an increasing number of atheists. It comes at a time when British Scouting has experienced buoyant growth—membership increased to 525,000 last year, up from 445,000 in 2005.

Alternative versions of the words “duty to God” have existed for different religious groups for more than 40 years. But this is the first time the British Scouting leaders have consulted on an alternative version to accommodate the wishes of nonbelievers.

“We do not plan to change the core promise but to offer an

option for those who are without faith but who wish to be part of the Scout Movement and are keen to support the movement's values and developmental work with young people who are drawn from the widest range of cultures, belief systems and communities," says Chris Foster, media relations officer for the Scouting Association in London.

The original oath is:

On my honour, I promise that I will do my best.

To do my duty to God and the Queen

To help other people

And to obey the Scout Law.

In recent years, Scouting groups have reached out to young men and women in new immigrant communities. Today, dozens of troops are made up mainly of Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs.

The new wording for atheists will be devised by the trustees of the Scouting Association and approved by the worldwide movement before they are announced.